

ABSTRACT

When You Finally See Us: A Narrative Inquiry of The Rare Sighting of Black Females in Officer Ranks and Positions in the United States Air Force

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As one looks at the top leadership positions and officer ranks in the United States Air Force, it becomes challenging to locate faces of Black females. Black women represent one-third of all women in the U.S. armed forces and their enlistment rates are higher than any other racial minority group (Melin, 2016). However, racial diversity diminishes at the officer ranks and positions of the military. In 2018, 25% of the officer corps was comprised of minorities. Out of that 25%, only 9% of the service members were of Black race (2018 Military OneSource, 2020). With statistics showing minorities making up a large percentage of the military demographics, the statistics related to minorities should also encompass a proportional amount of the officers. Yet Black females disproportionately do not pursue or obtain officer ranks and are underrepresented in officer ranks in the military.

To further investigate the underrepresentation of Black female officers in the Air Force, this narrative study described and gained an understanding of the lived work experiences of African American women in the U.S Air Force who joined as enlisted

members and then became officers. The conducted research targeted four Black female officers' perspectives through semi-structured interviews utilizing open-ended questions. The narrative inquiry design provided a framework to explore how Black female military members who were once enlisted became an officer. The researcher described the results through the lens of Self Identity Theory, a theoretical framework used to interpret the way individuals view themselves and their distinctive characteristics and association in different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This study also supplements the research on the barriers and challenges faced by Black female military members due to their social identity. Additionally, the study informs future stakeholders on the lack of mentoring and networking programs specifically for African American females that is essential to raise their success in the military ranks and leadership positions. Furthermore, the findings of the study provide insight on retention and increasing the number of Black females in the Air Force's officer corps and leadership positions.

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When You Finally See Us: A Narrative Inquiry of the Rare Sighting of Black Females in
Officer Ranks and Positions in the United States Air Force

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease of 2019

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

HBCU: Historically Black College and Universities

HPSP: Health Professions Scholarship Program

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

PWI: Predominately White Institution

ROTC: Reserve Officers Training Corps

SOS: Squadron Officer School

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Laura Taylor

Watching how strong you were while fighting your fight with ovarian cancer taught me the true meaning of being resilient. You never once gave up, remained in good spirits, and kept going despite what came your way. I pray you are smiling down from heaven and proud of me.

Psalm 30:5

CHAPTER ONE

Background and Needs Assessment

Introduction

Black women represent one-third of all women in the U.S. military and their enlistment rates are higher than any other racial minority group (Melin, 2016). Unfortunately, their presence in the officer ranks and higher positions has received limited attention. Currently, the United States armed forces are more ethnically and racially diverse than any prior generations. Between the years 1990 and 2015, the ethnic and racial minority groups making up the active-duty component of the U.S. military branches increased by 25% (Parker et al., 2017). However, racial variety diminishes at the officer ranks and positions of the military. In 2018, 25% of the officer corps was comprised of minorities. Out of that 25%, only 9% were Black (2018 Military OneSource, 2020). With statistics showing minorities making up a large percentage of the military demographics, the minorities statistics should also encompass a proportional amount of the officers.

The present research study focused on the lack of Black females pursuing and serving in the officer ranks in the United States military while focusing specifically on the Air Force branch. The central focus identified and highlighted unknown barriers that prevent Black women from advancing from the enlisted ranks to the officer corps. The present chapter stated the problem and gives background information. Also, it contained existing research to bring focus and clarity to the problem, identify a need for further

research, explains the theoretical framework, and gives the overall purpose of the study. Throughout this study I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably.

Statement of the Problem

Statistics and previous research show that African American military service members are underrepresented in the officer corps. In the year 2020, African American military members made up 17% of the active-duty population (CFR.org Editors, 2020). Only 9% of the 17% were officers (CFR.org Editors, 2020). African American females who are active-duty make up 28.92% in U.S. military (Cohen, 2021). The Air Force branch specifically has 4% of its active-duty population comprised as African American females (Cohen, 2021). However, less than 1% of that 4 % is comprised of commissioned officers (Cohen, 2021). These statistics show how stationary African American military members become while trying to become an officer. They mirror the statistics discussed previously from the year 2018 (Military OneSource, 2020). Baldwin (1996) investigated women and minorities' representation in the U.S Army's promotion record and promotion rates of women and minorities in the Army compared to men and Caucasians. The findings from the investigation revealed that Black female officers when compared to White officers had a higher attrition rate and lower promotion rate (Baldwin, 1996). Segal and Segal (2004) compared the number of Black service members in the enlisted corps and officer corps across all branches and found Black service members underrepresented in the officer corps.

Black females disproportionately do not pursue or obtain officer ranks. Gilroy et al. (1999) concluded Black female officers did not believe equal opportunities for promotion were available for their racial group. Black enlisted females find it difficult to

see the possibility of moving to the officer corps when current Black female officers do not witness fair chances at promotions. Penn (2017) argued that the low number of minorities and women in higher officer ranks and a high number in lower-ranking roles should be alarming. Further investigation is needed on deciding who is responsible for the career development of military members.

Mentorship is important for moving into officer ranks. Mentoring provides the professional and personal development of the mentee. Air Force Policy Directive 36-34 states: "Mentoring is a fundamental responsibility of all Air Force supervisors." (Air Force Material Command, 2018). Smith (2010) determined the lack of mentorship contributed to the disproportion of promotion of Black female officers. Lack of mentorship opportunities for Black females poses a barrier to their advancement to officer status. The U.S armed forces is a predominantly all-male environment, and women are in lesser roles (CFR.org Editors, 2020). Thus, finding a mentor when this perception exists prevents military women from asserting themselves.

In conclusion, I present the problem of not having Black females advance to the officer corps. Statistics show Black females' underrepresentation in officer ranks in the military. Statistics also show Black females disproportionately do not pursue officer ranks. Mentorship is vital for the professional development of military members. However, the lack of mentorship opportunities for Black females poses a threat to help advance women to the officer corps. Therefore, it is imperative to address the issues to determine if the United States military, specifically the Air Force branch, is an egalitarian society.

Literature Review

The literature review focused on how Black women in the U.S. Air Force have successfully become officers in a male-dominated organizations. Joining the United States military has not been a profession women have ordinarily decided to seek. However, women have volunteered to serve in all branches of the military and still actively fight alongside their male counterparts in wars the United States has participated in throughout history.

In this literature review I examined different aspects of women in the military. First, I explored literature giving historical and current information on women in the male-centric armed forces, specifically in combat operations by exploring the historical roles women could take and the signs of progress that have been made to allow women to fulfill traditional male roles. Second, by using corresponding literature from different disciplines on intersectionality, I examined how race and gender intersect causing a barrier for Black women in the armed forces. Third, I highlighted the glass ceiling concept as a mock barrier for minorities' progression of top leadership and executive positions by discovering the theme of mentoring and how it relates to Black women in corporate America. Finally, I examined literature supporting the argument that Black women need to have role models of the same race and gender in the positions in which they aspire to be.

Women in the Male-centric Armed Forces

The U.S. military was initially designed to be a men-only organization with male-centric roles and structures. Even as women advanced in the military, they continually had to operate in and within these male-centric roles and structures. Even though women

had made many advances, they did so despite a system that was not initially designed for them which means that these advances do not reveal substantive progress. From present-day conflicts to the Revolutionary War, women have proudly served in the Marines, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force. According to Kamarck (2015), women faced many job constraints in the past that only allowed them to serve in medical and administration roles within the military. By the 1980s, the U.S. military started making progress with diminishing the selective roles and had less work-related gender segregation when compared to the civilian job force (Firestone, 1992).

Few pieces of literature exist investigating women in male-centric roles in the U.S. military; however, research surrounding the topic of women serving in combat roles in the U.S. military includes public studies and surveys. In 2013, the Combat Exclusion Policy which prevents women from serving in the front line of combat and complete combat operations lifted (Roulo, 2013). Most front-line jobs are leadership positions.

Controversy currently surrounds the topic of allowing women to serve on the front line. Some arguments are for and against women serving in combat. Before the Combat Exclusion Policy ended, Simon (2001) presented five different arguments that could surface about opening combat roles and positions to women. The five arguments were:

1. New post-Cold War missions require finesse, not brawn.
2. Twenty-first-century technologies are gender-neutral.
3. An equal opportunity to serve is every American citizen's right.
4. Cohesion does not require that soldiers bond socially, only that they accomplish their tasks effectively.

5. Our European allies are opening their combat units to women, therefore so should we. (Simon, 2001, para.1)

Each argument formed the central question of how allowing women into combat roles and positions would help defend the U.S (Simon, 2001). Simon (2001) answered this question by stating allowing women into these roles helps to knock down the last wall of all-male areas within the military. In return, the military gain more variety of talent and better innovation. However, research conducted by Patten and Parker (2020) suggested there are other stationary areas within the military considered male-dominated other than combat. In 2010, statistics showed women occupied many of the administrators and medical jobs within the military. Patten and Parker (2020) utilized different data sources to explore the shifting roles of women in the military. Job-related roles in the electrical field were the only jobs other than infantry traditionally led by men. Both infantry and electrical jobs have over a 10% difference of men compared to women serving the same roles (Patten & Parker, 2020).

Wilcox (1992) also examined shared community attitudes and beliefs about women serving in the military. Wilcox (1992) surveyed data derived from the 1982 General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The survey presented questions on the proper roles of women in the military and asked 2,422 participants to decide if women should have certain jobs within the military. The results from the survey showed that majority of the respondents were in favor of women occupying roles as typists and combat nurses. The support was less common for women in combat and other nontraditional roles (Wilcox, 1992). Shockingly a large percentage of the respondents approved of women having mechanic roles within the military. On the contrary, less than 60% agreed for women to be commanders (Wilcox, 1992). Wilcox

(1992) stated it is vital to examine the survey data due to it being collected when the U.S. had initially been aware of the military drafting women.

The examination of previous research collected gave a comparison on incorporating women in male roles such as combat. Pew Research Center (2013) surveyed the public's views of combat roles for women. A total of 1,005 respondents participated. The survey revealed a wide-ranging amount of support for women occupying the roles. The survey showed that 66% of the respondents supported lifting the Combat Exclusion Policy that banned women from combat operations, while 26% were against. Over 50% felt that the ban will make opportunities better for men. However, 50% of respondents felt that military effectiveness will not change.

Demographic information such as age, gender, geographic location, and veteran status lacked in both Wilcox' (1992) examination of previous survey data and Pew Research Center (2013) survey results. Revealing the participants' demographics is vital if research results represent public opinions. Further quantitative research is warranted. Samples need to represent an equal number of participants from the larger population to avoid sampling bias.

In conclusion, despite the measures of the public opinions showing continuous support for women in male-centric roles within the military, statistics indicate that static barriers of sex and race still exist. It is important for society and military members to stand by constant integration efforts to dismiss any cultural conflict. Military integration efforts seek to improve counterinsurgency by providing a vast number of talents and abilities.

Intersectionality: Barriers to Black Women

Not only are Black women underrepresented in the Armed Forces officer corps, but there is also a lack of resources designed for their advancement. The literature on Black women officers in the Air Force specifically is scarce. The shortage of research is significant since Black women joining the military across all branches has increased over the past decade. Research existing on intersectionality spreads across different disciplines, making it difficult to use the findings to advance research on Black women in the military. However, the data analyzed can develop new themes and understanding of how women of different minority groups experience their workplaces.

Minority women and their activist efforts for gender equality are parallel with their activist efforts against racism and other threats for equal opportunities and social justice (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). According to Symington (2020), intersectionality is a means for analyzing and tackling multiple discriminations, such as race and gender, and for recognizing how the different groups of individualities influence access to equal opportunities. Intersectionality challenges scholars to be more specific when analyzing women and defining feminists (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

A definition for the term intersectionality was not developed until the late 1900s and has since evolved. Crenshaw (1989) generated a definition for the term intersectionality in her influential essay: “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 140). The *Degraffenreid v. General Motors* (1976) case involved five Black women suing the General Motors company for discriminating against Black women for both their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). However, laws and policies in

place prevented women in combining gender and race into a single category (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) presents the argument that laws and policies during the 1970s should allow for both race and gender discrimination to be addressed, and Black women should not have to choose between the two.

Race and gender under the intersectionality lens within a leadership aspect has not produced a significant amount of research. Therefore, very little information on how intersectionality of race and gender fosters the marginalization of minority groups exists (Price et al., 2017). According to Price et al. (2017), race and gender continue to act as a barrier of Black women receiving proper mentorship, leadership guidance, and professional development that leads to leadership roles and opportunities. Livingston et al. (2012) stated that in-group theories have constantly portrayed Black women as being in the out-group and not having the skills and abilities necessary for the leadership positions they desire. Organizations refuse to acknowledge the issue of intersectionality discrimination, particularly with Black women. Furthermore, organizations are not recognizing that Black women are the sentry for other women of color who may feel invisible (Cook & Glass, 2013; Price et al., 2017). Black women mentoring other minorities in organizations can relieve the heavy physical and mental load that Black women frequently experience in the workplace (Goosby et al., 2017). Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) found that Black women stressed the importance of mentoring other Black women to uphold hegemony and contribute to developing future leaders in high positions in the organization.

Ong et al. (2018) and Hall et al. (2012) conducted studies exploring Black women underrepresentation and work-related stressors of intersectionality. Both studies revealed

isolation and mentoring as themes. However, similar themes counter each other. Ong et al.'s (2018) findings suggest mentoring relationships are a safe place for Black women when feeling isolated. Mentoring is used as a tool and a recommendation to stay in the STEM field. On the contrary, Hall et al. (2012) findings suggest having the lack of mentors was a work-related stressor related to race and contributed to the women of color having minimal contact with others. The participants' way of coping in this study was "letting things go", because they felt nothing would change (Hall et al., 2012, p. 218).

Ong et al. (2018) explored the underrepresentation of women of color in science, technology, and mathematics (STEM) by interviewing 39 women of color via phone and in person. Each interview conducted covered topics of the participants' interest in STEM, factors that helped them stay in the field, defiant times and how they got through them, recommendations for other women of color to be successful in STEM, and finally, a recommendation for organizations to promote women of color in STEM (Ong et al., 2018). The research questions that guided the interview focused around social factors that influenced the participants decision to continue in the STEM field and their social identity roles.

The findings from the interviews revealed a total of five themes concerning women of color seeking their safe spaces when feeling marginalized: peer-to-peer relationships, mentor interactions, diversity STEM conferences, STEM and non-STEM campus student groups, and other STEM departments that had someone in the same racial group (Ong et al., 2018, pp. 216–228). Isolation was a sub-theme that occurred frequently in the participants' responses.

Hall et al. (2012) conducted a study to explore work-related stressors of sexism and racism that affected Black women's lives and how they handled them. A total of 41 Black women from multiple sites participated in six different focus groups. Each participant had an occupation that had a defined career path to include but not limited to college professors and government jobs. The analysis from Hall et al. (2012) interviews also revealed five themes:

1. Being hired or promoted in the workplace.
2. Defending one's race and lack of mentorship.
3. Shifting or code-switching to overcome barriers to employment,
4. Coping with racism and discrimination.
5. Being isolated and/or excluded (p. 213).

The existing literature covered shows that barriers exist in other sectors of society. Additionally, the literature poses the argument for the under-representation of Black women in the armed forces and other senior level positions in the civilian sector continues to demonstrate gender and racial injustices (Price et al., 2017). Black women can seek employment in the military due to underrepresentation in other places of employment (Armor, 1996).

In conclusion, it is important for future research conducted to capture the experiences of Black female leaders. Researchers can use the concepts of intersectionality theory to create suggestions for women of color aspiring to become leaders in their organization and the military. Further research on the existence of Black women leaders is needed in multiple fields to understand and reduce the damaging views and opinions that associates with intersectionality. Furthermore, if the lack of research continues to

exist, a glass ceiling remains present for future promotion of Black female military personnel.

Glass and Concrete Ceilings

Few studies of Black women advancing in military ranks exist. The present section in this literature review looks at Black women's advancement in corporate America and identifies key parallels. Few African Americans hold the top positions in private and governmental organizations. According to Bush (2000), this implies the occurrence of a glass ceiling. The glass ceiling effect suggests that African Americans experience shortcomings and hindrances as they rise to their organizations' top levels (Cotter et al., 2001). In 1986, two Wall Street journalists created the term "glass ceiling" by wanting it to signify a barrier to upward progress in corporations (Baker & Lightle, 2001). The glass ceiling is a mock barrier for minorities' progression of leadership, top, and executive positions (Kerr et al., 2008). The glass ceiling is the invisible barrier that hinders African Americans, regardless of their education, qualifications, or achievements, from moving up to organizations' top levels (Kerr et al., 2008). According to Jackson and Stewart (2003), many African Americans feel their race prevents them from getting higher.

While the concept of glass ceiling applies to perceived racial barriers to promotion, the concept often specifically applies to barriers related to women and promotions. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), the glass ceiling or concrete ceiling describes the barriers to women's progression in several organizations and highlights women's diverse challenges. The term "concrete ceiling" is defined as thicker barriers for women of color due to racial prejudice and sexism (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis,

2010). The glass ceilings concept carries the brand for women placed in a situation that can do them more harm than good in their career (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010)

Black women working within corporate America face barriers such as lack of mentorship, support from other executives, and advocacy for Black women. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission investigated barriers in organizations that obstructed minorities from moving up in the chain (Geisler et al., 2007). The commission members that conducted the research explained the barriers and obstacles in the glass ceiling effect as a concrete wall for African Americans (Reed, 1996). Other barriers identified by the commission included a lack of mentors, lack of acceptance, presumed incompetence, and lack of organizational support (Baker & Lightle, 2001). Coughlin's (2002) findings similarly revealed that Black women who were successful in obtaining top-level corporate positions credited the success to positive mentoring relationships, sponsorship, and purposeful career progress.

Opposing views of common barriers within the glass ceiling experience exist. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggests there are no barriers that exist for women to progress in their organization. Men progress more due to women lacking leadership skills and having more family burdens and responsibilities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Due to the multiple burdens and responsibilities, organizations tend to choose men over women to prevent personal life factors such as childcare affecting work (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Prejudices and long-standing biases causes glass ceilings to remain present. Kerr et al. (2008) used the glass ceiling theory to evaluate ethnic minorities in government positions. The findings prompted Kerr et al. (2008) to suggest more research on applying the glass ceiling as related minorities at top executive levels. Additional research is

significant for understanding the margins of affirmative action and promotion opportunity procedures.

In conclusion, several elements such as lack of mentorship, gender discrimination, and opposing views of women's roles existed concerning the glass ceiling effect.

Corporate America encompasses big business within the U.S. Therefore, the literature on Corporate America was parallel to Black women within the military. To provide literature specifically on Black women in the U.S. military, further research is needed.

Role Models and Mentoring

A major theme in the previous literature about Black women advancing in corporate America focused on the importance of seeing Black role models in those roles and the importance of mentoring. Another argument for the underrepresentation of Black women at certain levels within their occupations that the organization lacks the same gender and race mentors to help members in their careers.

There are several definitions of mentoring. Wu et al. (2012) defined mentoring as an open-minded connection needing safe and continuous communication between the mentor and mentee. Klauss (1981) hypothesized mentoring as a collaborative relationship when one person receives guidance and leadership for their personal and career needs. Most of the time, a reciprocal relationship forms during the initial phase of starting a job (Klaus, 1981). Ncube and Wasburn (2010) labeled a mentor as someone who is there to prepare and guide someone of lower-ranking or position within the organization.

Formal and informal comprise the two types of mentoring (Harriss & Witwicka, 2012). Formal mentoring includes a more formalized and distinct atmosphere used for professional development and promotion development. Informal mentoring is more

unstructured than coaching and supporting a person. Informal mentoring is not tied to organizational objectives and have no defined timelines for the mentee to obtain a goal. An informal mentoring relationship occurs when both the mentor and mentee have many similarities (Harriss & Witwicka, 2012). In both types, mentors are responsible for performing many tasks, such as providing feedback and leading by example (Harriss & Witwicka, 2012; Klauss, 1981).

Black women are frequently faced with stereotypical views of behavior and work performance associated with being unapproachable and indifferent. Cultural differences could be a possible reason why some miscommunication exists between employers and Black women employees. Therefore, Black women prefer to have mentors that look like them and can be their advocates (Patton, 2009). Many research studies and articles cover different aspects of mentoring and having role models. However, there is a gap in research examining the mentoring aspect in Black women's under-representation in high positions.

The effect of mentoring on Black women varies as the environment differs. Literature regarding the mentoring of women and women of color in the U.S. Air Force environment is limited. However, highlighting existing research from different professional backgrounds helps to understand the importance of mentoring for the advancement of Black women's careers.

Mentoring is a significant factor in academic success, and researchers have found women benefit from mentoring to help with career advancement as well (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Ragins, 1989). Holmes (2007) examined the mentoring relationships and experiences of Black women faculty working at predominantly white institutions (PWI).

The need for the study stemmed from Black women being invisible even though their presence in numbers have increased. All 11 participants were Black women who attended the same PWI for their graduate and doctoral studies and were working at the same PWI at the time the researcher conducted the study. The semi-structured interview revealed most of the participants did have a mentoring relationship while actively pursuing their degrees. Much of the success was due to the mentoring received, and mentoring played a part in their becoming mentors as staff at a PWI. A common theme that emerged showed that participants felt they could have been in a higher-level position than what they are currently in if they had a mentor of the same race, ethnicity, and gender (Holmes, 2007). Also, navigating through a White environment as a Black woman would have been easier (Holmes, 2007). Patton (2003) stated Black women who are in graduate and professional programs find it difficult to find a mentor to build a meaningful connection with. After conducting semi-structured interviews with Black female students in programs such as law, education, business, and the humanities at a PWI, Patton (2003) also discovered the value of having a Black female mentor, as well as the significance of same-sex mentoring among Black women.

The mentoring relationship becomes useless when the mentor does not consider the relationship beneficial. Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey (2010) directed a survey that measured mentoring effects when the mentor is verbally assertive and the impact on employee morale and organizational obligation. The author contributed to the knowledge of mentoring by focusing on communication efforts by supervisors towards mentees. The study verified that workers' behaviors negatively correlate with verbal aggression and a positive correlation with mentoring. Buzzanell et al. (2015) found Black women in

engineering became frustrated with their mentor experiences. The frustration stemmed from their mentors chosen for them without their input at their organizations. The Black women engineers partnered with mentors that had no similar cultural backgrounds or aspirations as their mentees. Levinson (1996) suggested that age difference and cross-gender mentoring may do more harm than good for mentoring relationships. Having a mentor of the opposite gender will cause distraction (Levinson, 1996). Older male mentors tend to not respect young females' career goals (Levinson, 1996).

In conclusion, Black women benefit greatly when developing a meaningful mentoring connection with someone of the same race and gender. A suggestion would be for organizations to provide mentoring programs. Although mentoring relationships are not always positive, the literature shows the significance of mentoring for career mobility of Black women in PWI.

Conclusion

The literature covered provided the relationship between previous examinations contributing to the study topic and identified a need for additional research. Black women occur at an intersection in their military career, and there is a lack of resources designed for their advancement and empowerment to the rank of officers. Looking to corporate America to see what has been tried shows many parallels in the situations and barriers that Black women face between corporate America and the military. Experiences in corporate America support the importance of role modeling and mentoring. Therefore, for the military to move forward on the issue of advancing more women into leadership roles, mentoring and role modeling should be two items of focus for research. With so few Black women advancing to the rank of officer, it is imperative to capture the

experiences of those who have made it to determine what unique factors contributed to their success.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that supported this qualitative narrative inquiry was social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory deals with the way individuals view themselves and their distinctive characteristics and association in different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) it is a normal cognitive process to stereotype and place people into groups based on the differences between groups and the similarities of the same group. There are two groups for placement: in-group or out-group. The central assumption of social identity theory is that a member of an in-group will pursue to discover negative qualities about a member of an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity has affected growth and development and strongly influenced how individuals work together within an organization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals categorize themselves into specific groups to get a better knowledge of who they are. Figure 1.1 gives an illustration of the social identity theory.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested three cognitive processes takes place when someone assess themselves or others as either the in-group or out-group. First, a person categorizes people, including themselves, to begin identifying them. The social categories identification is in accordance with are race, rank, ethnicity, occupation, and many others. Second, a person then assumes the identity of the group they have categorized themselves and others in. Third, social comparison take place between both groups. People perceived to be in the in-group will acknowledge and involve individuals they consider to be like

them, while simultaneously discriminating and barring against those in the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

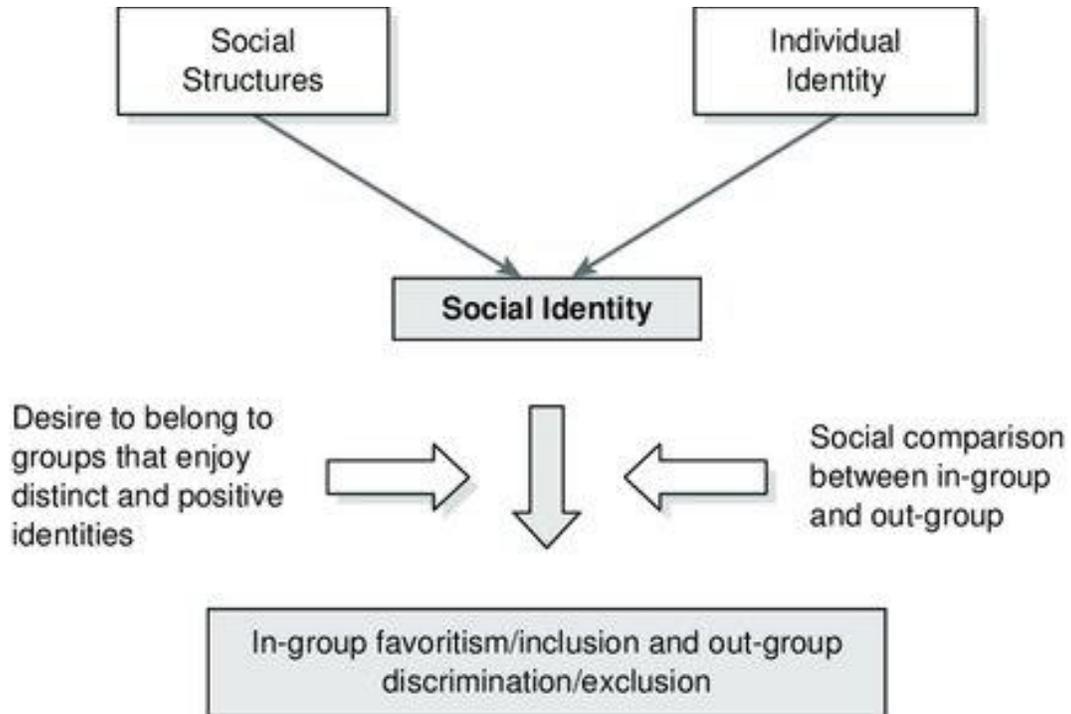


Figure 1.1. A Schematic Diagram of Social Identity Theory's Basic Principles. Reprinted from *Social Psychological Perspectives of Workforce Diversity and Inclusion in National and Global Contexts* by M. Mor Barak, 2009. Copyright 2009 by M.Mor Barak. Reprinted with permission.

The social identity framework was most appropriate for expanding the concepts of career development and progression for Black females in the U.S. Air Force. The topics addressed in this study included social and gender roles in the military. A person's belief about their ethnicity is vital to the mental being of an individual who exists in a culture in which that group's culture is represented poorly in an economic and political aspect (Phinney, 1990). According to Atske et al. (2019) the belief is essential in the Black community where there is a lack of or negative representation in the media and politics regardless of their presence in the U.S. for more than 400 years.

Group involvement and the connection with peers is a vital component of success for organizations within Air Force. The Air Force is very mission focused. To carry out the different missions, the group dynamic and camaraderie among the service members are essential. How Black women within the Air Force perceive themselves as leaders within the group dynamic and camaraderie among other service members is likely to have meaningful suggestions for how to develop their leadership, aspirations, affiliations, and the different choices they encounter as they try to climb the leadership ladder (Humberd et al., 2015). Social identity theory offers a level of transparency and lens for this research.

Conclusion: Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study was to describe and gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of Black women in the U.S Air Force that joined as enlisted members and then became officers. The goal was not to develop a theory, but to report on the lived experiences of the Black female officers and to solicit their interpretation of how their work experiences affected their military career. Narrative inquiry is an approach appropriate for this sort of examination since it fits understanding the encounters of individuals inside a particular time setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). A narrative inquiry method collects, explores, and represents the participants' stories as told by them.

The conducted research targeted primarily Black female officers' perspectives through semi-structured interviews. The narrative inquiry design provided a framework to explore how Black female military members who were once enlisted became an officer. I developed the following research question to achieve the previously stated

purpose: What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions identify that played a role in their selection? The research identified and addressed unknown barriers and gained an in-depth exploration of the meanings these participants assigned to their experiences and explained why very few Black women are in the U.S Air Force's officer ranks.

Definitions of Key Terms

The definition of terms distinguishes commonly used words within the research study associated with the topic and military culture to remove bias and give a clear understanding to use of the key terms.

Active Duty: An active-duty member of the military is one who works full time and can be deployed at any time (“Active Duty vs. Reserve or National Guard”, 2012).

Armed Forces: Armed forces the United States military forces. This includes the army, navy, air force, marines, and coast guard (Vergun, 2019).

Combat roles: Combat roles are roles taken to be exposed to war and be in direct physical and mental harm by fighting the enemy (Moore, 2020).

Corporate America: Corporate America is the phrase used in this study to refer to large businesses and corporations within the United States

Enlisted Corps: Enlisted Corps is comprised of military members with the ranks of E1 through E9. All enlisted corps members were required to have at minimum a high school diploma, with certain exceptions a GED is acceptable.

Good ol' boy network: describes a system of social networking and outlooks alleged to exist commonly among White males in organizations such as the government (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007).

Mentee: Mentee will be defined for this study as someone who receives guidance and for their personal and career needs (Klauss, 1981). In this research, the mentee is commonly referred to as a Black female.

Mentor: Mentor will be defined for this study as someone who is there to prepare and guide someone of lower-ranking or position within the organization (Ncube & Wasburn, 2010).

Military ranks: Military ranks are a badge of leadership and differs from pay grades and scales (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

Military Training Leader: Military Training Leader is responsible for constantly enforcing the Air Force core values and discipline for Airmen after basic military training and while completing technical training (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2012).

Non-Commissioned Officer Academy: The Thomas N. Barnes Center of Enlisted Education defined the Non-Commissioned Officer Academy (NCOA) as “the second level of enlisted professional military education and prepares Technical Sergeants with the enlisted rank of E5 to be professional, war-fighting Airmen and Space Professionals who can manage and lead units in the employment of Air and Space Power.” (Air University, 2021)

Officer Corps: Officer Corps is comprised of military members with the ranks of O1 through O11. Officer positions require a four-year degree or advance degrees in medical professions or law. Members in the officer corps also act in leadership roles and making critical decisions concerning the security of the U.S. (“Active Duty vs. Reserve or National Guard,” 2012)

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Introduction: Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to describe and gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of African American women in the U.S Air Force. The women in this study were those who joined the service as enlisted members and then became officers. The first chapter provided an overview of the need for this study and what it provides to current knowledge of Black females in the U.S. Air Force currently seeking to become officers. Chapter Two includes an overview of how the narrative approach best captured pertinent information vital for the revolution of enlisted Black females in the U.S. Air Force who aspire to become officers. The chapter also contains the processes to preserve the internal and external validity of the data collection and analysis for this research.

According to Creswell (2007), researchers develop and use research questions to outline their understanding. The following research question helped achieve the previously stated purpose for this study: What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions in the military identify as factors that played a role in their selection? I developed the following secondary questions to tackle the primary question:

1. What work experiences contribute to African American females' success in the military?
2. What type of working relationships do African American females identify that contribute to the success of becoming an officer?

3. What are some of the challenges African American females in officer ranks, and leadership positions have had to overcome in their military career?
4. What recommendations would participants offer to African American females that are enlisted and in lower-ranking positions aspiring to advance to officer leadership positions in the military?

To address the research questions, I developed corresponding interview questions to utilize in the interviews.

Researcher Perspective and Positionality

I served in the U.S. military for over 15 years and started in the career field as a military dental assistant. During the initial phase of basic military training, I never saw any minority military training instructors, also known as “drill sergeants.” As time progressed, I did not see the dental career field as challenging. As a result, I sought out to become a military training leader. Military training leaders are slightly different from instructors. They are responsible for ensuring a smooth transition of non-prior service airmen in the Air Force into a change to military life after basic training and technical training. I applied for military training leader twice, and the Air Force hired me after denied the first time. During their four-year duty tour, I could only account for three minority females, including myself that worked in her unit. Also, it took me three tries to finally make the rank of technical sergeant. After four years, I went back to the dental career field. I instantly started applying the tools I obtained as a military training leader to the dental field. Two years ago, in my primary career, I earned a spot on the leadership team. Shortly after the Air Force notified me that I would be going to Non-Commissioned Officer Academy, which is a mandatory professional development course that trains technical sergeants to be professional, war-fighting Airmen, and space

professionals who can lead people and manage resources. I was the only African American person in my class. I was also the only African American to win an award upon graduation. Furthermore, I had my first sighting of a Black female officer that was prior enlisted in my organization since I first joined the military. Considering I was enlisted but had an advanced degree, I was inspired to take the necessary steps to pursue the officer rank. My coworkers suggested many times that I should consider becoming an officer. I always thought about trying to become one. However, I had a defeated mindset because I could not think of a time that I had seen an African American female officer. However, I finally seen someone who “looks like me” that had become an officer. Thus, I became inspired and wanted to explore this phenomenon of rarely seeing African American females in the officer ranks and positions of the United States Air Force.

I hold a transformative worldview. According to Mertens (2009), my examination links with politics and plans to challenge social oppression with this worldview. The transformative worldview concentrates specifically on those who may be marginalized in society (Creswell, 2014). The study also has a plan for a change that may transform the participants, researcher, and their organizations (Creswell, 2014). My agenda for this study was to address empowerment and oppression, specifically. The focus was to bring about change and eliminating constraints for Black women in the U.S. Air Force.

Researchers need to position themselves within their study’s connection and disclose any bias issues that may be present before conducting the research. Therefore, I was the prime research instrument in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005). My experiences and identity in the study may result in bias. I reflected upon her own lived

experiences as a Black woman enlisted in the United States Air Force to become an officer.

According to Palaganas et al. (2017), reflexivity occurs when the researcher recognizes the changes in themselves as an outcome of the research process and how these changes have affected the research development. Therefore, I provided my forgoing awareness and experiences to deliver transparency about my connection to the research topic. I also took the necessary steps to sustain the self-awareness of my position and potential biases. To maintain reflexivity, I used an electronic journal to document and track my inner thoughts on the data gathered. I applied all methods to ensure only participants' experiences and ideas were accurately represented.

Theoretical Framework Application

The theory applied to construct a framework for this study was the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory aligns with how people view themselves and their association in different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The framework provided expanded knowledge on the concepts for career growth of Black females in the U.S. Air Force and the meaningful relationships developed with their leaders or other influencers during their careers.

Social identity theory helped shape the primary and secondary research questions and guided the research design and analysis for this study. For the participants to provide rich information, they reflected on their sense of who they are based on their self-identities and membership identities in the military and society. Considering the military finds leadership to be crucial, it was also imperative to reflect on the meaningful relationships and how they contributed to the success of becoming an officer. Social

identity theory helped to inform how to collect meaningful data. The study utilized open-ended questions shown in Table 2.1 to collect the data through interviews. The questions connected to different factors of the social identity theory.

Table 2.1

Open Ended Interview Questions

| Interview Questions | Social Identity Theory Element |
|---|---|
| 1. What factors contributed to you being selected for commission when you applied as an enlisted member in the United States Air Force? | Social categorization Social identity |
| 2. What factors have contributed to you being in a leadership role? | Social categorization Social identity |
| 3. What are some of your current and past work experiences that has contributed to your success in becoming and being officer? | Social categorization Social identity |
| 4. What working experiences are essential for a Black female to become and be an officer in the United States Air Force? | Social categorization Social comparison Social identity |
| 5. How have your relationship with other African American female officers contributed to your success? | Social categorization, Social comparison |
| 6. How have your relationship with others within the military such as mentors contributed to your success? | Social categorization, Social comparison |
| 7. What challenges have you faced while becoming and being an officer? | Social categorization Social comparison |
| 8. How did you overcome challenges faced? | Social identity |
| 9. What are your recommendations to African American females who are enlisted and want to become officers? | Social identity |
| 10. What are your recommendations to the United States Air Force for increasing the number of African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions? | Social categorization Social comparison Social identity |

Questions relating to each aspect of the theory allowed the participants to reflect on their personal experiences without certain concepts from the ideas knowingly mentioned. I chose social identity theory to explore how the African American female officers self-identified and how others placed them in categories that results in discrimination.

My theoretical framework established an understanding of theories and concepts that were relevant to my research, and it related to the wider areas of knowledge. I selected the social identity theory due to its suitability, ease of application, and explanatory power. Additionally, the social identity theory allowed me to transition from simply describing the phenomenon that I have observed to generalizing about several aspects of it.

Research Design and Rationale

According to Patton (2002), before selecting a research design such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, reflecting occurs on the purpose of the study and the research questions. For this study, I explored the primary research question through a qualitative approach. Qualitative approaches seek to understand a problem and then give meaning to the problem itself or experiences (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research also permits me to conduct a thorough study by collecting data often using open-ended questions which results in gathering an abundance of detailed data from a small number of participants (Creswell, 2014).

After I reflected on the purpose of the study and research questions, I chose qualitative narrative inquiry as the best approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). I wanted to gain in-depth knowledge about the experiences that contributed to Black female

officers' success. Qualitative methods get the participants to answer questions about their experience and meaning (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The data that I gathered is not responsive to measuring numerically (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Choy (2014) stated that comparing the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies for research can help determine the better approach and provide better results. The major strength of using a qualitative approach is investigating views, assumptions, and core values (Choy, 2014). Also, it allows me to discover the views of similar participants to help deliver different viewpoints (Choy, 2014). On the contrary, this method could be time-consuming and present a narrow analysis (Choy, 2014).

The primary strengths of using a quantitative approach are the ability to distribute and explore rapidly and application for large sample sizes (Choy, 2014). It is also strong for comparing organizations or different groups of people (Choy, 2014). However, it cannot numerically represent the perceptions and beliefs of participants (Choy, 2014). A quantitative study was not appropriate for exploring what work experiences contributed to Black females' success in the military for several reasons. First, the purpose of this study was not to try to prove a theory or hypothesis. Secondly, the sample size for this study was four participants, and I was not comparing or contrasting a group of people. Finally, a quantitative study uses an unbiased voice and is more systematized, where qualitative methods use a personal voice when it comes to the experience and takes a holistic view (Park & Park, 2016).

After I determined qualitative methodology was best suited for this study, I chose the narrative approach. Researchers can present a participant's experiences holistically

through narratives (Bell, 2002). While research tends to focus more on outcomes than the impact of experiences, but the narrative approach brings awareness to the unknown and unexpected (Bell, 2002). Narrative inquiry gives a voice to marginalized population whose voice not often heard and unveil rare perspectives and deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Liamputtong, 2019). Advantages of narrative research designs also includes the following:

- Gives thick-rich detail of an issue or life experiences.
- Uncovers historical issues that has limited or no research.
- Democratize the lived experiences and documentation of a broader breadth of society (Liamputtong, 2019, pp. 9–14).

To conclude, a qualitative narrative approach allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge about the experiences that contributed to Black female officers' success.

Site Selection and Participant Sampling

The geographical location covered Black female officers in the U.S. Air Force stationed at different military installations. Two out of the four participants were located at Air Force installations overseas. The remaining two participants were located at Air Force installations in the states of Texas and New Jersey. I did not mention specific Air Force bases to protect the participants' identity and ensure their confidentiality. Participants at different sites ensured capturing data holistically.

One or more participants is appropriate to sample size for a narrative study if I can gather all-inclusive data about the phenomenon through individual or reciprocated stories (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, sample selection has a meaningful impact on the quality of the study. Sampling in qualitative research is both selective and purposeful (Etikan, 2017). According to Creswell (2007), narrative studies are well-

known for only having a small number of participants giving their experiences. I then chose to select only four participants using a purposeful sampling technique. By keeping the number of participants in the study limited, I was able to dive deep into each participant's stories to restructure and investigate their experiences.

The importance of availability and willingness of the participant to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in a coherent, open, and thoughtful manner was imperative to note. Purposive sampling supported my overall research goals. Purposeful selection is based on the theory that I want to recognize and obtain valuable insight by selecting a sample from which the greatest can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Black female officers who initially entered the U.S. Air Force as enlisted personnel received an invitation to participate in the study. Also, they had access to Zoom on a computer. Utilizing the Zoom application gave I easy access to the participants. I gave a copy of the informed consent during the recruitment stage. The authorization contained an explanation of the research study to include the video recording of the interviews via Zoom. I also made the participants aware of the possible risks related to the interview process in that questions of an intimate nature could challenge them in their responses. It is essential to protect participants' identities in qualitative research. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. However, I reminded the participants they can cease their participation at any time.

Table 2.2 displays each participant's demographics. All participants were Black females between the ages of 34 and 49 who had served at least 10 years in the U.S. Air Force. Furthermore, I listed the participants in Table 2.2 by the order of the highest

military service by years. The most years of military experience was 30 years and 14 years being the least. The participants' each had different military jobs, were prior enlisted, and all are in the officer corps at the time of the study. By choosing participants with different military jobs, I guaranteed capturing a variety of experiences and stories of Black female officers serving in the Air Force.

Table 2.2

Participants Demographics

| Participant | Age | Race/ Gender | Military Job | Active or Retired | Years of Military Experience | Rank |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| Carmen | 49 | Black Female | Squadron Commander/ Nurse | Active | 30 | Lt Col |
| Erica | 40 | Black Female | Dentist | Active | 23 | Captain |
| Samantha | 37 | Black Female | Logistics Readiness Officer | Active | 15 | Major |
| Mary | 34 | Black Female | Physical Therapist | Active | 14 | Captain |

Note: Pseudonyms used to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Qualitative Data Collection Procedures

I went through three phases of collecting data: pre-interview, one-on-one interviews with each participant, and follow-up correspondence. The primary method of collecting data in this current study was interviews. Interview questions contributed to the best information based on the research questions. I derived interview questions out of the research questions. Interviews are the primary resources for collecting data in a narrative inquiry study (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (2009) suggested that interviews are the best

choice to capture past events that cannot repeat. Creswell (1998) recommended I use at minimum five open-ended interview questions to ensure the participants provide significant data. Table 2.3 illustrates each interview question (see Appendix B) corresponding with the research questions.

Table 2.3

Correspondence of Interview Questions (Appendix B) and Research Questions

| Research Questions | Interview Questions that answer the research questions |
|--|--|
| Primary: What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions in the military identify as factors that played a role in their selection? | 1 & 2 |
| RQ1. What work experiences contribute to African American females' success in the military? | 3 & 4 |
| RQ2. What type of working relationships do African American females identify that contribute to the success of becoming an officer? | 5 & 6 |
| RQ3. What are some of the challenges African American females in officer ranks, and leadership positions have had to overcome in their military career? | 7 & 8 |
| RQ4. What recommendations would participants offer to African American females that are enlisted and in lower-ranking positions aspiring to advance to officer leadership positions in the military? | 9 & 10 |

As mentioned previously in this chapter, I chose the participants using the technique of purposeful sampling. The type of purposeful sampling I used was the snowball sampling method. This method involved the process of the initial research

participant giving the name of other participants, and the technique continued like a snowball (Cohen, 2011). The snowball sample method is an effective method when doubt occurs in the research study (Cohen, 2011). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a preliminary e-mail went to known comrades seeking a voluntary presence in this research. The e-mail sent incorporated the snowball technique to increase the sample size from one to four. After four participants joined the study, I sent a letter to inform the participants of the interview protocols (see Appendix B). The protocols contained a notice of the use of video and audio recordings, transcripts, how I maintained confidentiality, and their participation was strictly voluntary. Once the participants agreed to continue, I conducted one-on-one interviews. No interview duration was set to ensure the gathering of thick and rich information.

The data collection consisted of three phases as shown in Figure 2.1.

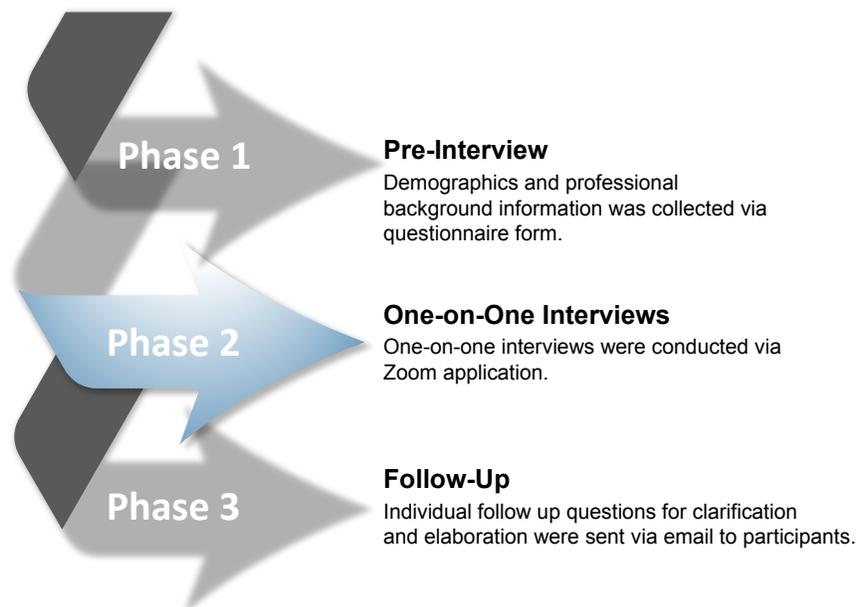


Figure 2.1. Data collection phases.

The first phase involved sending a questionnaire to the participants gathering demographic and professional background information. This background information was necessary to gather to understand the background of participants' lived experiences. The second phase consisted of one-on-one interviews that covered questions regarding lived experiences as a Black female officer who initially enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. The third phase entailed sending follow up questions via email and asking for clarification and more elaboration on answers. The next section explained the procedures for analyzing the data gathered.

Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to reduce large amounts of data gathered into smaller portions, which makes sense. I analyzed the data gathered from the interviews by conducting thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis enables the researcher to recognize familiar patterns and connections to meaningfully answer the research questions. Thematic analysis involved six important phases as shown in Figure 2.2 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

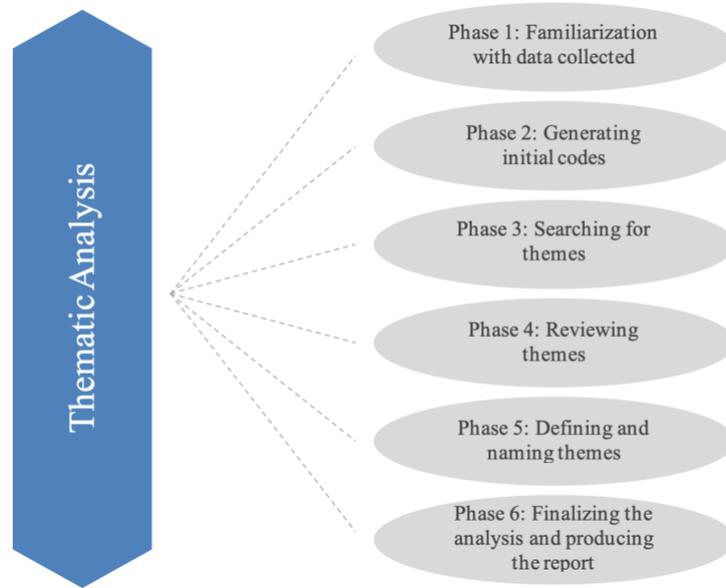


Figure 2.2. Phases of thematic analysis.

Next, I give a thorough explanation of how I engaged in each phase of thematic analysis.

The overall goal of analyzing data was to find answers to the research questions, which occurred as meaning emerged out of the data (Merriam, 2009). Following completion of the interviews, I acquired a collection of data, including recorded interviews, field notes, and recollections of the data collection process. According to Creswell (2007), data analysis typically involves taking raw data, placing them in themes by coding, and representing the complete data.

The first phase in analyzing the data was transcribing it into a format that enables analysis. Therefore, I transcribed the audio and video recordings of the interviews verbatim utilizing the web applications Zoom and Otter.ai. I read the transcripts multiple times, referencing field notes, and making notations on the transcripts that helped fill in the gaps derived between the interviews and their transcriptions. Including this information in the analysis helped present a more robust, richer story. Once I re-storied

the participants' stories, they performed member checks to authenticate the content of the narratives before I continued with the analysis (Birt et al., 2016).

During the second phase, I re-read the transcripts again after member checking and began to write down initial codes. The process of coding was essential to make sense of all the data collected (Daiute, 2013). Coding is the heart of the research because it involves making meaning of all data collected (Willig, 2017).

In the third phase, I reviewed the interview notes, audio and video recordings, transcriptions, and codes for potential patterns of themes. In the fourth phase, I identified themes using color-coding on a Microsoft Excel document (Daiute, 2013). During the fifth phase, I conducted an analysis to enhance the details of each theme. Additionally, I developed clear names and descriptions of theme to explain the experiences for Black female officers in the Air Force who was once prior enlisted. The names developed for the themes were: Race and Gender, Facing Barriers and Challenges, Mentoring, and Keys to Success. Finally in the sixth phase, I selected appropriate extracts and related them to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory and previous literature, and I answered the primary and secondary research questions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness involves validating and ensuring accuracy in the data collected during the research process. Amankwaa (2016) stated there are four aspects of trustworthiness a researcher must establish in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I established trustworthiness in each aspect.

First, I confirmed credibility to show the truth to the research findings. I performed one-on-one interviews and transcribed the audio and video verbatim using Zoom and the web application Otter ai. Next, I emailed transcripts to the participants to perform member checking. I instructed the participants to check for accuracy, credibility, and validity to ensure their response depicted their stories correctly. Afterwards, I instructed them to make changes if needed. Upon completion, only two participants made minor grammar changes. Additionally, each participant did not want to disclose their specific names and military locations.

Then, I demonstrated the study's dependability. Researchers establish dependability by allowing other researchers to reproduce the research study, and the data yields similar results and interpretation (Amankwaa, 2016). I chose a qualitative narrative inquiry to capture the participants' lived experiences by means of semi-structured interviews. I coded the data. After coding a section of data, I waited two weeks and recoded the same data and evaluate the results. By recoding two weeks later, I prevented misinterpretation and guaranteed the information obtain was precise in the results.

Next , I established transferability through literature review by providing evidence of underrepresentation of Black women in other sectors. Additionally, I provided thick rich descriptions of each participant. By providing thick rich description, I enable the reader to assess if the findings from the results are transferrable. Additionally, the findings from the study can transfer to other branches of the U.S. military.

Finally, I attained confirmability. Confirmability involves excluding researcher biases and helps validates findings (Connelly, 2016). To eliminate my bias and authenticate the findings, I engaged in reflexivity that involves journaling at the start of

the data collection and continued through the end of data collection. Journaling involved writing down thoughts after each interview and a rationale for codes constructed.

Ethical Considerations

I warranted that none of the research participants experienced any type of harm due to participation in the study (Pelz, 2005). Before starting data collection, I acquired approval from the United States Air Force and Baylor University. I sent an email to Baylor University's Institutional Review Board to inquire if the study would be exempt from IRB approval. The study did not qualify as human subjects' research because the results of the study were not generalizable to a broader population due to only having four participants. Since this study involved consenting adults who were telling their story, harming would not be an issue to the participants.

To ensure that the participants suffered no repercussions due to their military obligations, I not only emailed a copy of the purpose of the study and the consent form (see Appendix A) to each participant before the interview, but I also carefully discoursed the purpose as well as the process with each participant individually. Once each participant understood the study and had asked any questions they had, they signed the consent form. I reminded the participants of terminating participation at any time without penalty. Furthermore, all hard copies of interviews, field notes, and the memory card that contained the interviews were in a locked location. I had sole access to all information. To protect the identities of the participants, I assigned each participant a pseudonym. I placed the list of participants and their assigned pseudonyms in a separate filing cabinet from the other documents. Only I knew the pseudonyms assigned to each participant and assigned identification numbers to identify documents provided by each participant.

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Polkinghorne (2005), most narrative studies have the limitation of relying heavily on the memory and storytelling of participants past that is not observable. A major limitation was my resemblance to the research participants. I am Black female enlisted in the Air Force currently trying to become an officer who could lead to bias in relating to the participants. I attempted to keep bias out of the study by using journaling and member checking methods to ensure the accuracy of data.

The focus of the research was on Black female officers in the U.S. Air Force, located at various bases. The number of participants obtained was small due to the shortage of Black women serving in the officer ranks that were previously enlisted, which resulted in becoming a delimitation. The final number of participants were four.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I sent a preliminary e-mail to known comrades seeking a voluntary presence in this research. The e-mail sent incorporated the snowball technique to increase the sample size from one to four. After I chose four participants, they received a letter explaining the interview protocols. The protocols contained a notice of the use of video and audio recordings, transcripts, how I maintained confidentiality, and their participation were strictly voluntary. Once the participants agreed to continue, I established a Zoom meeting time for a one-on-one interview. There was no time constraint established for the talks to gather thick and rich information. The purpose of the thick description does not involve the amount collected but the quality. Researchers should look at the thick story to gather relevant information from different perspectives (Schwandt, 2001).

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter detailed the methodological approach for this study. The theoretical framework constructed research questions and determined which approach was best suited. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, a qualitative method, specifically narrative, was the best approach. The Black female officers who participated in this study shared specific details of their experiences of their military career, while going in depth on becoming an officer. The results of this study had suggestions for addressing the racial and gender barriers when it comes to Black females aspiring to become officers within the United States Air Force and can also apply to all military branches. The results discussed in the next chapter offer information that can educate all military members, especially military leaders, on the pressing issue.

CHAPTER THREE

Results and Implications

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to gain an understanding and describe the lived work experiences of African American women in the U.S Air Force that joined as enlisted members and then became officers by answering the primary research question: What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions identify that played a role in their selection? I used a qualitative narrative research design to become an interpreter of four individuals' stories by conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews.

This study produced four themes that answered the primary research question and the following secondary research questions:

1. What work experiences contribute to African American females' success in the military?
2. What type of working relationships do African American females identify that contribute to the success of becoming an officer?
3. What are some of the challenges African American females in officer ranks, and leadership positions have had to overcome in their military career?
4. What recommendations would participants offer to African American females that are enlisted and in lower-ranking positions aspiring to advance to officer leadership positions in the military?

The four themes produced were race and gender, facing barriers and challenges, mentoring, and keys to success.

As previously mentioned, this study utilizes the social identity theory to provide meaning on how Black females within the Air Force officer corps view themselves and their association in different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The framework provided expanded knowledge on the concepts for career growth of African American females in the U.S. Air Force and the meaningful relationships developed with their leaders or other influencers during their careers.

Throughout this chapter, I present the results from an inductive thematic analysis and corresponded the results to previous literature explored and theoretical framework in Chapter One. First, I give individual descriptions and narratives for each participant. Second, I examine the wider group analysis and synthesis of the emergent themes across the individual narratives. After exploration of the emergent themes, I conducted a framework analysis of participants' stories and experiences by means of the social identity theory. Thereafter, I produced answers for each research question while connecting the findings to the theoretical framework and literature review discussed in Chapter One. Finally, I gave implications relevant to the field of interest of the study.

Participant Descriptions and Narratives

The participants in this study consisted of four Black female officers in the United States Air Force. Two out of the four participants were located at overseas Air Force installations. The remaining two participants were located at Air Force installations in the state of Texas and New Jersey. Each participant requested to not have the name of their exact military installation disclosed. I conducted all interviews one-on-one via the Zoom application. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. I sent follow up questions to two of the participants (Erica and Mary) for further clarification of data collected

during their interviews. Table 3.1, previously presented in Chapter Two as Table 2.2, provides a summary of the participants' demographics.

Table 3.1

Participants Demographics Re-Cap

| Participant | Age | Race/ Gender | Military Job | Active or Retired | Years of Military Experience | Rank |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| Carmen | 46 | Black Female | Squadron Commander/ Nurse | Active | 30 | Lt Col |
| Erica | 40 | Black Female | Dentist | Active | 23 | Captain |
| Samantha | 37 | Black Female | Logistics Readiness Officer | Active | 15 | Major |
| Mary | 34 | Black Female | Physical Therapist | Active | 14 | Captain |

Note: Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Next, I present the following descriptions and narratives of each Black female officer. I present each participant's narrative in the order of the most years of military service. Each description and narrative include the participants' individual stories and experiences on initially joining the military as an enlisted member and then later becoming an officer in the Air Force.

Participant 1: Carmen

At the time of this study, Carmen was 46 years old and had been serving in the military for a little over 30 years. She worked as a nurse, currently fulfilling the leadership role as a squadron commander. As a squadron commander she oversees

leading people, ensures the unit's members accomplishes the mission, manages different resources, and maintains the unit's morale.

Carmen grew up in North Carolina and was the youngest of two girls. Her dad served in the Army and retired. She stated she had no choice but to join the military. She furthered explained,

I did not go right off to college at 18 years old. So, my family at the time, my oldest sister was also in college. And we really couldn't afford to have two people in college. So, I told myself, I need to do something different in order to help support my family and getting kids through school. So, I joined the Army Reserve at the time. So, I joined at 18 years old. About six days before I turned 19.

Initially, Carmen enlisted in the United States Army. She was in the Army Reserves for nine years. She had two different jobs while in the reserves: combat medic and licensed practical nurse. She initially wanted to become a nurse and officer in the Army. She did not have intentions on becoming an officer in the Air Force. She explained,

Well, here's the deal. I wasn't going to join the Air Force. I was going to eventually become a registered nurse and officer in the Army. So what ended up happening was I did the physical for the Army, which is required to apply to become an officer. But I found out about flight nursing. And I was like, Oh, that's cool. So I said, well, I might want to join the Air Force.

She decided to speak with an Air Force nursing recruiter specifically. The Air Force recruiter explained flight nursing to her. Flight nurses administers life-sustaining care in a high-pressure environment, such as a battlefield or deployment location. In the majority of the time, flight nurses in the Air Force help in medical evacuations to treat wounded service members. Once Carmen received the details of flight nursing, the recruiters guaranteed she placement near her home town as an incentive. She elaborated,

And so they told me they can hook me up with an assignment in Charleston, South Carolina, which was just a couple of hours from home. So now I'm all hyped up and excited about joining the Air Force or being a flight nurse in general. And so, I started that paperwork. So, when the Army found out they were

mad, so the Air Force actually had to battle the Army to get my physical, because the Army said, well, she took the physical for us. But of course, I became an officer in the Air Force.

Carmen continued to explain that at the time she was interested in becoming a flight nurse, the career was critically manned in the Air Force. She was fearful about applying for the officer position due to assumption of being over worked due to the low manning. However, being able to be close to family helped lessen the fear.

Carmen also stated that she did not want to be on active-duty status but wanted to be in the Air Force Reserves. However, she faced many obstacles in her personal life at the time. She decided to go active duty to escape from some of the problems she faced.

She has been very successful in her career as an officer. Additionally, she tries to pay it forward by being the guest speaker at different engagements, forming her own mentoring program, and getting involved with different ROTC programs. Although she has been very successful in her career, she has still faced some barriers and challenges. Her shared experiences bring awareness to help others feel empowered and inspired.

Participant 2: Erica

At the time of this study Erica was 40 years old and had been serving in the military for 23 years. She was currently active duty and working as a dentist. She was the first female in her family to join the military. Her grandfathers and uncles all served prior. She grew up in New Jersey, but stated she always wanted to get away from her hometown due to the drugs and violence present. After high school she applied to different colleges. She always wanted to attend an HBCU. She explained,

I didn't think I was going to get into college, even though I was applying to many of them. I wanted to be a mechanical engineer. And as a cocky young 18-year-old who thought I was God's gift to the world because I was so smart. I applied to three colleges, and they put me on a waitlist. So I said instead of waiting for the

third one, I'll just get a waitlist or not get accepted. I said to myself, I'll just join the military.

The military is normally an alternative to college. Erica felt it was the best option so she can still move away from her hometown.

After seeing an Air Force recruiter and doing the necessary requirements to become an enlisted member, the recruiter placed her in the delayed entry program. The delayed entry program grants a member up to a year to either complete high school, graduate from college, or any other tasks prior to attending basic military training. However, it was when she entered the delayed entry program that she received a college acceptance letter,

I got accepted to my school that I really wanted to go to. It was North Carolina A&T. But I stayed in the military. I didn't know that once you do your delayed enlistment, it doesn't really count until you get to basic training. I didn't know that. My recruiters lied to me. I was like, hey, I got accepted to my school. I'm ready to not do this Air Force thing. I'm going to go to North Carolina A&T, and he was like oh no, you're resigning paperwork. You can't do that.

Erica explained that she used to hear rumors about recruiters lying to their recruits, so they can meet their monthly quotas. However, looking back she was glad her recruiter was not honest with her. She stated, "Looking back, this is the best decision, or it was the best decision ever. Had I gone to college at that age the way I was I would have failed out of college because I wasn't ready for it." Her Air Force career started shortly afterwards.

Erica initially entered the Air Force as enlisted working in the communication field. When she was a child, she knew she wanted to be a doctor. Initially, she did not know what type of doctor. Eventually, Erica grew tired of being enlisted and decided to pursue her childhood dream of being a doctor. Her family always told her she was

fascinated with teeth as a child. She started shadowing doctors, nurses, and physician's assistants. However, she decided those career fields were not for her. She recalled,

So, I did not always want to be a dentist when I was a kid, I wanted to be a doctor. Always I didn't know which type of doctor, which is weird, because I was going to be mechanical engineer. I got tired of being in the communication career field as enlisted. My mother told me go back to the basics of what I wanted to do. I was always fascinated with teeth when I was a kid. And I remember my grandma, she had dentures. And one day, they gave her the wrong kind of dentures. The palate was too narrow. So she put him into like a horse. And I remember my mother, and my grandma sisters was in a circle, just laughing at her and saying, how hard is it to make some teeth? It can't be that hard. So that conversation I had with my mom kind of led me to becoming an officer.

Erica did not pursue her first passion of becoming a doctor because she rarely saw Black women in those roles, especially in the Air Force.

Her mother told her to shadow a dentist. She took her mother's advice and fell in love with the career field. She earned her commission by applying for the Air Force's Health Professions Scholarship Program that covers all tuition and fees for the dental corps. She expressed,

And then for the Air Force, I was going to get out. I said to myself, once I got accepted to dental school, if the Air Force didn't pick me up for the HPSP program, I was going to get out and just do it that way. The only thing was, I had to bet on myself, because when I got accepted, my enlistment was almost up. So I had to re-enlist or get out. But I knew with the HPSP you had to be active duty. So I was like, you know what? I'm that girl. Let me just reenlist. So I reenlisted and luckily, I got the scholarship.

She furthered explained her selection into the officer program was very difficult because her leadership did not want to help her, even after seeking their assistance repeatedly.

Since being an officer, Erica stated she has promoted yet. She is hoping to promote to the next rank within the next year.

Participant 3: Samantha

At the time of her interview Samantha was 37 years old and had been serving in the military for 15 years. She was currently working as a logistics readiness officer in the Air Force. Samantha was born and raised in a small-town named Indianola located in the Mississippi Delta. She considered her hometown to be very small and family oriented. She went into detail when describing Indianola,

Well, I am from the “Sipp” as they call it. Often when I tell people, I am from Indianola, Mississippi, they be like “Huh, where is that?”. I always just state it is located in the Delta. Everyone knows each other around here. I call everyone my aunt or uncle even if they are not blood related. That is because we are truly a village and help take care one of another. I still go back home every change I get to visit. You cannot forget where you come from. It will always be a part of who you are.

She continued to explain that majority of her friends who left their hometown after high school or college do not come back to visit often. She also mentioned that Mississippi has a stigma of being a place where growth and success is not frequent. Mississippi is often the ranked last in many things including education, healthcare, and economy.

Samantha grew up as the only child. Her mother was a public-school teacher at a local middle school where she has been teaching over the past 40 years. Her father was an Army officer, where he retired with the rank of Major. Samantha described her childhood as if she grew up in a single parent home, because her father was always absent. She elaborated,

When I look back on my childhood, my mother really was a married single parent. My father was always gone on an assignment or deployment. My mother refused to move me around, because she did not want me jumping from school to school. So, when I was young, I told myself I will not join the Army. I could not see myself moving around like that so much. My mother was a very strong individual. I think that is where I get my determination and patience from.

Samantha felt it was important to stay local in the area, even after her high school. She

did not want her mother to be completely alone due her dad's constant absence. However, she revealed that decision changed as her high school years continued.

Although Samantha's mother taught at a public school, she attended a private school from kindergarten through ninth grade. She mentioned that some of her friends used to give her hard time about attending a private school formerly known as a segregation academy. She stated, "I had to beg my mom to let me attend the public high school in my hometown. I felt I was not experiencing some of the Black culture because the private school I was attending was 99% White students." She furthered explained that her town Indianola had always had history of having separate schools for Black and White students,

If you look up Indianola's school history you would see what I am talking about with the segregation. My mom used to always voice her frustrations on how the public school system were lacking resources which she believes causes the schools to fail. Looking back on me going to school, I can see how that is true. I mean, I can count on one hand how many other Black students attended the academy with me. I just had to get away. I was receiving a great education, but I just felt I was lacking in the social aspect of my life. My mom finally let me go to public school at the start of my high school years.

It was when Samantha's mother allowed her to attend public school that she begun to see that in order for her to become successful she needed to leave her hometown.

Samantha further described how her mother always hassled her about getting a college education. She was unsure of what she wanted her future career to be; she just knew she wanted to be away from home. She felt that there was no room for growth in her hometown unless you came from generational wealth. At the start of her senior year, she had many acceptance letters for colleges nearby. Even though she wanted to be away from home, she ended up attending college not too far away from home. She explained,

I really wanted to get out of Mississippi. However, I ended up attending Alcorn State University. It is a HBCU. I majored in Business Administration. Attending a HBCU gave me so much cultural experiences. I absolutely loved it! However, I really just felt I needed to get out of Mississippi. Also my student loans were just piling up. And that's how it all started — me joining the Air Force.

By attending a HBCU in Mississippi, Samantha was able to leave her hometown.

However, she was still within driving distance of her mother. However, she did not want student loan debt. Many military service members primary reason for joining is due to military tuition assistance.

Samantha was having a conversation with a friend one day who was in the Army officer corps. Her friend was trying to convince her to join the Army. However, Samantha's father told her to go to the Air Force. She said, "I was so shocked at my dad telling me to go to the Air Force and not the Army. Especially considering he is retired Army." She continued to explain that she went to speak with a recruiter, and he told her to join the Air Force as enlisted, and she can always become an officer later down the road. She expressed that when the recruiter mentioned free tuition and traveling, she had made her decision,

The recruiter told me to go ahead and join as an enlisted member. The Air Force will pay my tuition to finish college, and then I can apply to become an officer. What really got me is when he told me I will travel a lot. I mean, I have traveled a little bit—not too much. But hey, the Air Force got me up out of Mississippi. When I did join and finished my degree while enlisted, trying to become an officer was so difficult.

She applied to become an officer a total of three times. She stated she already had a defeated mind set because she rarely saw any Black female officers:

I never saw any Black female officers. I used to always wonder why. So before applying, I was already telling myself that I was not going to get chosen up for the opportunity. My leadership would not even help me apply.

She continued to explain that she had to seek outside resources to help her with

her application of becoming an officer.

Understanding Samantha's experience trying to become an officer successfully gives perception on what it takes to become successful in joining the Air Force officer corps. Additionally, her experience gives insight on what resources are lacking to attract more Black females as officers.

Participant 4: Mary

At the time of the study Mary was 34 years old and had been serving in the military for 14 years. She was currently active duty and is a Doctor of Physical Therapy. She was born and raised in Albany, Georgia, and is the oldest sibling between two girls. Her father was retired Army. She stated that she had a normal childhood upbringing and furthered described what led up to her joining the military,

My dad was a retired Army Sergeant First Class. Class And most of my family has either retired from the military or served in some capacity of the military. So joining the military, I knew it was always something that I wanted to do when I was a little kid. I initially wanted to join as an officer but joined as enlisted first.

Mary continued to explain that is considered tradition to serve in the military if your family has a history of prior service members.

One day, Mary decided to go speak with a recruiter after graduating from Georgia Southern University. She felt the Air Force recruiter deceived her into going enlisted first versus as an officer. The recruiter mentioned to her that it was easier to become an officer from the enlisted side. Mary explained,

So, the recruiter was saying, you know, well, you should enlist, because it's easier to commission from enlisted, because it's kind of like corporate America where they want to promote from within easier, first before they promote from the outside or recruit from the outside. So, I enlisted and got to my first duty station overseas. And at that time, I couldn't commission because you had to have at least four years at your first duty station. However, I ended up only having one before moving to my next.

When Mary arrived at her first next duty station, the Air Force decided to eliminate her administration career field. She had to make the decision of cross training into another Air Force career field or getting out of the military completely. She didn't feel comfortable enough at that time getting out because she didn't have a plan.

However, Mary eventually got out of the Air Force as enlisted to attend physical therapy school. She experienced a lot of negativities regarding her decision to separate from the military. There were many people who were trying to convince her that she was making a bad decision. She stated,

I had people tell me, oh, what are you going to do? There's no jobs on the outside that equal to the military. And I actually had one person Tell me, oh, well, don't let me hear about you swinging from a pole in a year. And I'm like, What? And yes, this person actually said that to me. But they added the ha-ha with it, but they were serious. I'm over here like, why would you think I'm going to end up stripping and swinging from a pole? Would you tell someone else that?

Mary expressed that it was at this moment when she first experienced stereotyping in the military. Every stereotyped comment in regards to her decision were from males in her organization.

Although Mary left the military as enlisted, once she became a Doctor of Physical Therapy, she later rejoined the Air Force as an officer. She did not face many obstacles while becoming an officer due to her going through the HPSP program like Erica. She stated "I would not say that I regretted enlisting first at all. Because again, like I said, I feel like being enlisted has helped shape some of the views that I have." She further explained that if it was not for some of the connections she made while enlisted, she would not have become an officer.

Mary's experience with leaving the military as enlisted, and then returning as an officer offers insight on a nontraditional way of joining the officer corps. Additionally,

her experience brings awareness on the different stereotypes she received while deciding to depart the military. While being an officer, she has faced an abundance of things that I further dissected in the next section.

Conclusion

Each of the participants' narratives revealed connections and points of difference in their experiences of being prior enlisted, trying to become an officer in the Air Force, and now being apart of the officer corps. I coded and analyzed each of the participants interview transcripts manually using Microsoft Excel. After identifying similarities and differences, four emergent themes developed from the data analysis related to factors that played a role in the participants' experiences. In the next section, I explore the emergent themes.

Emergent Themes

The social identity theoretical framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) hypothesizes that members of an in-group will seek to find undesirable aspects of an out-group. It also hypothesizes that association with the in-group is a necessary condition for discrimination and inequitable opportunities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, people considered to be in the in-group will show favoritism of in-group members as they want to make their in-group more progressive than out-groups. Based upon the primary research question, "What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions identify that played a role in their selection?" four themes developed in alignment with the social identity theory in which the participants did not feel as if they were a part of the in-group despite successfully becoming an officer. The themes were as follows: Race and Gender, Facing Barriers and Challenges, Mentoring, and Keys

to Success. Table 3.2 displays the identified themes based on the analysis of the identified codes.

Table 3.2

Identified Themes Based on Analysis of the Identified Codes

| Race and Gender | Facing Barriers and Challenges | Mentoring | Keys to Success |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female • Minority • Being a Black woman and a female • Self-identity • Stereotype • Social norms • White males | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good ol’ boy network • Identity • Fear of unknown • Pressure • Stereotypes of black women • Black female • Out-group • Sexism • Push-back • Lack of mentorship • Representation • Leadership that does not support you • Reprisal • Overlooked for opportunities well qualified for • Invisible ceiling • Corporate America | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of mentors • Being a mentor • Representation • Negative experiences with mentors • Developing people for future roles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afforded opportunities • Mentorship is vital • Keep going until you get a “yes” • Play the part • Have a plan • HBCUs • Be present • Be authentic • Don’t be afraid, be brave • Networking |

Theme 1: Race and Gender

The first emergent theme was race and gender. Each of the participants’ stories interconnected race and gender multiple times. Therefore, I combined both race and gender as one theme. All four participants expressed their experiences in relation to their own and others’ gender, race, and gender and race intersecting. Collectively, they initially

expressed that the military has always been a male dominating society, particularly with White males. Next, I explore this theme from each individual participant's narrative.

Carmen expressed she felt there were multiple stereotypes about being a woman, being Black, and being a Black woman. Often she felt that these stereotypes were present in the Air Force and causes other military members to categorize Black women. She explained,

As a Black woman in society alone, we are constantly being stereotyped. We are stereotyped on two things—race and gender of course. Then you know what else comes with the stereotypes. It seems like Black women are outcasted sometimes and put into this group and seen as too aggressive.

However, Carmen described that she eventually embraced the perception of people seeing her as aggressive. She did not feel she was necessarily aggressive, but rather outspoken and authentic. Additionally, she felt a majority of the time people will mistake being outspoken or calling out any unfair treatment as being aggressive. Eventually, as her career progressed as an officer, her leaders, mostly White males accepted it.

However, often she still felt she was not a part of the in-group. She conveyed,

On my end the White leaders, they love it, too. They're like, we love it don't change. It might be in my feedback. They say, you're so honest. They said, people gravitate to you, please do not change who you are. I'm like, I'm not. I don't plan on changing. But thank you. Again, 30 years of service, I've learned what I've kind of learned what works and what doesn't work. But sometimes, I still feel left out of things even as a leader. Not every single one of them love it but those who have known me the longest.

She went on to explain that it is vital for Black women to know they must remain their authentic selves and stay true to themselves regardless of judgement.

Carmen explained that you also have to do self-reflection daily to ensure you are being authentic. She stated,

And I'm going to tell you right now, every day all day, you got to be yourself at the end of the day, because when you go home at night, you got to ask yourself, was that the right decision I made? Was that in the likes of me? Or was I thinking like somebody else?

She continued to express that every decision she has made was purely her decision. She never thought about what her leaders would want her to do, but she based her leadership decisions off her best judgement.

Another participant, Erica, disclosed that it was hard being your authentic self while having a stereotype of being aggressive associated with yourself. She also went into detail about how males come into the military ahead of females. Therefore, Black women will always feel like they are in last place.

Erica expressed gender plays a big part in how gender impacts Black female officers workwise. She felt the military place males in the hierarchy automatically. Additionally, the society and the military automatically view males as leaders. She stated,

I think gender is a big part. I think in the military, if you are a man, you already seen as you already got a leg up, no matter what. I think it plays a significant role. When you are trying to get something done, especially in an expedited amount of time, or there is something coming up that is a hard task—I think if a gentleman or a male can do it, and he's hard charging about it then he's a leader.

Like Carmen, Erica continued to identify that military members, particularly White males, view Black women in the Air Force military as too aggressive when speaking up for themselves or calling out things they see being unequal. At times she had been afraid to speak on anything due to reprisal. The first thing that would come to her mind was that anything she say or comment on is coming from a Black woman. No matter how she said it, it would still be coming from a Black woman. She further went into detail,

But as a Black female, you are going to have that pushback, you're considered too aggressive, which is unfair. So I think males or when it comes to gender, have a better advantage than females. No matter what I say or how I say it, it is

automatically assumed that I have an attitude when I don't. I am just doing my due diligence and calling out the wrong or correcting people. That is my duty.

Erica being a Black female and having others assume she is aggressive is what caused her too rarely to speak up on mistreatment. Fear of reprisal was on the forefront.

Erica also mentioned the officer corps is comprised of 84% males with a total of 71% of them being White males. Given the statistics, she felt that Black women would always be lower in the chain of command when it comes to rank and leadership positions. She also felt social norms about Black women will always be present within the military. She recognized that is the norm for women not occupying leadership positions.

During Samantha's interview she reflected upon how race and gender intersected prior to her becoming an officer and after she became an officer. She felt that overtime she began to adopt the perception her peers formed about her. Several of her leaders in the officer corps appreciated the fact that she was outspoken and aggressive.

Samantha revealed as time progressed in her Air Force career, she got tired of how her peers and coworkers viewed her as confrontational every time she spoke on any topic. While enlisted she felt like she was "walking on eggshells" due to her race and gender. However, when she became an officer, she adopted a different attitude. She explained,

At first, I was not aggressive or confrontational. However, I felt by being this way helped me progress and has hindered me at the same time. Being a Black woman, I am automatically considered not in the circle. My other counterparts, and I am talking White males, already think I have an attitude and confrontational. Sometimes I am afraid of voicing concerns or giving any type of feedback because I am then aggressive or the angry Black woman. Overtime, I adopted that identity.

Samantha felt that it was easier to own the identity others have formed of her just from being a Black female. She felt that it is important to voice concerns in a constructive way. This enables the stereotypes to slowly diminish.

Samantha continued to explain that she owned that identity because some of her male leaders liked the fact that she spoke up. However, like in Carmen's experience, others held it against her. She continued,

I now sometimes just voice any concern. I think to myself: they already got this thought of me so what is the worst that can happen. Now that I am an officer, I feel that I have a little more wiggle room. It just seems that over time as a Black woman you get so used to being stereotyped or become the social norm society has—you eventually identify with it. You adopt that identity unknowingly.

Samantha continued to express that while enlisted she could not adopt the identity of being aggressive or voice any concerns. She felt that if did she would have not successfully become an officer. She furthered explained that as enlisted she was proving the stereotypes about Black women wrong, but as an officer she was adopting the identity. Often, she questioned if she was truly being herself.

In Mary's interview, she revealed slightly different experiences of being a Black woman than the other participants. She felt informal understandings of Black people is the main reason Black women must work twice as hard in the military to become successful. It was as if Black women have a point to prove.

Mary detailed that it was impossible for her to dissociate herself from the norm's society has placed on African Americans. She felt that how society viewed Black people, is the same way military leaders viewed Black women. She explained,

I can go into my work center right now and there will only be one Black person in the leadership chain. Out of those who are considered the majority or White, whole family might have some history of leadership positions in the military or corporate America. They will then look at that one black person and assume it is

the norm that they come from the projects or not educated beyond high school. That right there is the social norm of black people in general. We are tangled up with other people of color who are in those negative aspects.

Mary's view supports the idea that due to history, it is normal for African Americans to have defeated mindsets.

Mary gave an example of how she encountered certain beliefs and attitudes towards Black women. She recalled,

I remember prior to me becoming an officer, another officer stated that he could not believe I was interested in becoming a physical therapist because you do not normally see that. I then remembered asking him what he meant by you do not normally see that. He could never answer my question.

Mary continued stating that she believed he meant it is not normal to see Black women in the physical therapy career. She vowed to break what society considered the norm for Black women ever since that encounter.

The emergent theme of race and gender presents as congruent with the literature review on intersectionality. According to Crenshaw (2015), women of color are left in the shadows constantly. Therefore many people do not fully understand intersectionality. As mentioned in Chapter One, Livingston et al. (2012) stated that in-group theories have constantly portrayed Black women as being in the out-group and not having the skills and abilities necessary for the leadership positions they desire. Organizations refuse to acknowledge the issue of intersectionality discrimination, particularly with Black women. Bridging intersectionality literature and the participants' stories on social norms, Black women will continue to be in the out-group. Therefore, they adopt the out-group norms as their identity. Self-identity is also an important component of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory explains in-group behavior and out-group interactions grounded on the intrinsic value people place on social group associations, and them wanting to view their specific social groups in a positive or negative light. This leads to group discrimination and conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Each participant’s narrative moved through each of the three phases of social identity theory as shown in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Social Identity Theory as a Lens for Each Participants’ Experience

| Social Categorization | Social Identification | Social Comparison |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carmen’s leaders place her in the category of being aggressive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carmen identified herself as being outspoken and authentic. Her leaders viewed her as being aggressive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though Carmen’s leaders appreciated her being outspoken she still felt displaced because of it. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erica’s leaders felt women should not be in leadership positions and men are placed in the hierarchy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erica identified that by being a Black woman, she assumes she do not belong in a leadership position and her being outspoken will prevent it from happening. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erica feels her group (Black women) is placed in the out-group despite qualifications. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samantha’s leaders, particular White males, placed her in the category of being aggressive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samantha eventually started adopting being aggressive due to her leaders’ perceptions over a long period of time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samantha stated she often compares herself to her White male leaders and feels she is often competing in a competition she will never win. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary stated her coworker did not believe Black women occupied careers such as physical therapist. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary felt a negative identity and it served the need for meaning. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary became motivated to obtain a positive social identity through her in-group counterparts. |

The first phase of the social identity theory is social categorization. This phase involves placing individuals in categories to identify and understand them. Social categorization is the foundation for social identity. The second phase is social identification. It involves individuals adopting and conforming to the identity of their categorized group. The third and final stage is social comparison. Individuals tend to compare their categorized to other groups. Additionally within this phase recognition takes place of being favorable as in-group or out-group.

Theme 2: Facing Barriers and Challenges

Facing Barriers and Challenges emerged as the second theme. I defined barriers in this context as obstacles that prevent different opportunities. The term challenges indicates the participants' successes and milestones they wanted to achieve but which required additional effort.

Three out of the four participants voiced their understandings and experiences of barriers and challenges they have faced. Mary did not give thick-rich data for this theme. When asked the question "What challenges have you faced while becoming and being an officer?" and "How did you overcome challenges faced?," each participant mentioned that there were many challenges that they have faced when they were enlisted members. Additionally, each participant mentioned that they were still facing certain barriers and challenges while being in the officer corps. Next, I explore the emergent theme facing barriers and challenges through each participant's narrative.

Corporate America. During Carmen's interview she repeatedly compared the Air Force to corporate America. Corporate America is an informal phrase that has many meanings. However, for this study "corporate America" refers to large businesses that are

well known within the United States. Specifically, she compared the barriers and challenges Black women faced in the Air Force to Black women working in corporate America. She stated,

I've learned that the Air Force is like corporate America. If you are not a part of the in-club then it's going to be hell for you to try and break that invisible ceiling we have as Black women. Black women are majority seen as being a part of the out-group and we become stagnant in where we are in our organizations even after making it to the officer corps. This could be a reason it is so rare that you see us because we do not stay in, or we are stuck.

Carmen continued to explain that people rarely see Black women in leadership positions in officer ranks due to half of them leaving the military mid-point in their career. However, she felt not all women have a glass ceiling to break. Additionally, race contributes to what type of ceiling a woman encounters. She elaborated,

As a woman we face barriers. However, when I speak on breaking a glass ceiling, not all women have to. Not all women are equal, and we all don't face the same struggles. Some women have the privilege of not having that invisible glass ceiling. If you look at these major corporate companies, the women that are CEOs or directors are not women of color. It is the same with the Air Force. Majority of the top officer positions are held by White males.

Carmen presented a few facts to go along with her statement. She stated the Air Force just hired the first minority, General Charles Q. Brown, Jr, as Chief of Staff of the Air Force in 2020. However, General Brown is a Black male. The CSAF is the highest-ranking officer in the Air Force and advises the secretary of the Air Force on any issues dealing with the military branch. The Air Force established the position in 1947, and there has never been a woman or woman of color to fulfill the role.

Good ol' boy network. Erica gave insight on systems, such as the good ol' boy network, that are in place that prevent Black women from breaking the glass ceiling. She also expressed the good ol' boy network is not just a phrase or a myth, and it is indeed

present in the Air Force. She felt the network is visible to people of color but invisible to mostly White males, who benefit from the system.

From a military perspective, the definition of the good ol' boy network is a group of individuals, mostly White males, who get special treatment such as promotions and positions due to their relationships with other leaders within the organization (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007). The leaders blatantly show favoritism towards certain individuals. The use of the good ol' boy proverb usually has double connotations such as affirmation and exclusion. Additional examples of the good ol' boy network are:

- Two individuals from the same unit apply for the same job. However, the hiring authority chose the individual with less work experience and less qualified due to their close relationship one another.
- Hiring authority did not select highly qualified candidate for a leadership position due to a close friend of the hiring authority dislike of the candidate.
- Leadership only recognizes and gives an award to an individual based off their close relationship versus actual achievements (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007).

Erica stated, "I have seen and experience my fair share of the good ol' boy network. It does exist. I think the problem is that leaders refuse to acknowledge that it does." She also mentioned there has been opportunities she was well qualified for but people less qualified received them instead. She further explained,

Well, even during my dental residency, and then those same people worked at my first duty station, they would not afford me the opportunity to take continuing education courses, it was something I needed to keep my dental license, they did not afford me those opportunities. They would not allow me to do what I'm supposed to do as me as a captain, my rank, those opportunities were not afforded to me. They were afforded to my counterparts who will lateral as far as the same time and grade and rank. And then also those same opportunities were afforded to individuals who were not at my level, who had been in less time to me, they were afforded those opportunities.

Erica experience as an officer, shows that at an officer level there are still challenges faced by Black females and perceived unequal opportunities.

She continued to explain that not being able to have the same opportunities as her counterparts was a big obstacle. Erica also mentioned that she had to file many formal complaints against her chain of command. She expressed, “Yeah, and it could have hurt my career had I stayed in my first duty station, it could have hurt my career really badly”. Erica also clarified the opportunities her leaders did afford did not just go to White males, but also White females. For the majority of the time she had to utilize outside resources and people to find out about opportunities.

Like Erica, Samantha also mentioned the good ol’ boy network during the interview. Corresponding to her experiences, Erica mentioned that she did not receive the same treatment as her counterparts. She often felt left out and isolated at times and found herself also seeking outside resources.

While Samantha reflected on her challenges of becoming and being an officer, she too explained that she felt the good ol’ boy network was both a challenge and barrier during both moments in her Air Force career. Furthermore, she expressed how she often asked for guidance but never received it like her counterparts. Nevertheless, she saw the good ol’ boy network in action mostly during her time in the officer corps. She stated,

There are so many challenges that I have faced while trying to become an officer. The challenges I faced the most was the lack of leadership not wanting to support me. It seems when you are enlisted, especially a Black female who’s enlisted, leadership does not help you cross over into becoming an officer. When I tried to become an officer, I was literally begging for guidance and help. It seemed only those who were in the good ole’ boy club got all the help from leadership. As long as the good ol’ boy network exists, anyone outside that group will always face challenges and obstacles.

Samantha elaborated by stating White males perceive Black women to be in the out-group. Therefore, Black women will not get the shared advice or resources as their White counterparts. She felt this also goes for Black women who are enlisted. She stated, “It was when I was enlisted that I knew the good ol’ boy network was somewhat real, because no one would help me apply to become an officer. It was almost as if some secret society existed, and you need a special pass to become a member.” Samantha further explained how she experienced other barriers and challenges from the good ol’ boy network, and they all intertwined.

Samantha’s experiences with the good ol’ boy network also correlated with Carmen’s observations on the invisible ceiling. Samantha went into detail about stating an invisible ceiling exists for all women as enlisted and as an officer. She gave two examples of situations she experienced: one from enlisted and the other as an officer. She felt that sexism was the reason the invisible ceiling exists,

I went through two similar experiences that I felt was sexism. The first one was when I was enlisted. Remember when I told you I applied to be an officer three times. Well, that is because no one in my leadership chain would help me with my application for the officer board. Instead they were helping this White male in my organization get his package together. His father was already a Colonel in the military. His father was also a previous commander of our organization. So that should tell you automatically how he got preference. Even my supervisor spoke out against what she saw as me being treated unfairly. Once she did that she started getting treated differently.

She continued to explain that normally no one speaks up about the good ol’ boy system, especially if you are not a part of it due to fear of reprisal. She had to seek outside resources to help her the third time she applied. Samantha went on to explain the second situation she experienced. This experience illuminated her claims of sexism

I will be honest, when I became an officer, I told myself that I made it...that this is it. I am successful, and I am a part of that you know...that in crowd. The cool

group. Well I was definitely wrong. There was a job opportunity that came up in our unit. It was seen as a leadership position. I heard about it through word of mouth. When I asked about it I was told “Well we did not think you would be interested, most females don’t fit in for the job.” I cannot say specifically what the job was. Just know that it was considered a front-line job. So I interviewed for the position only to find out they hired a male for the job. I asked for feedback. My supervisor told me flat out the hiring authorities stated they hired the male for the job because he did not have any family and was single.

Samantha’s supervisor told her she lost the job opportunity because she was a single parent. However, she heard from her coworkers the hiring authorities interviewed her just for formality. She stated, “The Air Force has a tendency of interviewing people for jobs with no intents of hiring them just so their process can seem fair. In actuality it’s not”. She felt this process will never become fair because the Air Force does not take diversity, equity, and inclusion seriously.

Family status. Samantha has two children and became a single parent after her divorce. She was married prior to joining the Air Force as enlisted. The military does not allow single parents to enter the military. However, if a service member become a single parent while serving, the military allows them to continue their service. The only limitation is having a family care plan. The purpose of the family care plan is to have advance care of the service member’s children in case of deployments, temporary duty assignments, or any other military duties that would cause the member to be away for extended amount of time. Samantha continued to vent her frustration about the situation,

Not one time did anyone ask me if I was able to be away for extended amount of time in relation to the job despite me being a single parent. As a black woman I feel that we have concrete ceilings. Because we have to deal with stereotypes due to our race and sexism at the same time. At least with invisible ceilings you can still see what is ahead. With concrete ceilings we cannot see anything and it’s a much harder barrier to break.

Samantha's experience is an example of how intersectionality occurs. Her social categorization of race and gender overlapped and creating discrimination and disadvantage.

She felt that a glass ceiling and concrete ceiling are present due to the history and tradition of women staying at home and being the primary caregiver of children.

Additionally, she felt Air Force leaders often stigmatized Black women on being single parents with their children's father being absent. She furthered explain Black women must start creating their own opportunities to break the concrete ceiling effect. In other words, they must put themselves in charge. Samantha expressed a Black woman putting herself in charge and becoming her own boss in the corporate world is possible.

However, it is impossible in the military, due to the Air Force appointing leaders. She stated that could be a reason Black female officers are so rare. They are leaving the military to become their own bosses. Next, I explore mentoring as an emergent theme.

Theme 3: Mentoring

The third emergent theme was Mentoring. Klauss (1981) defined mentoring as a collaborative relationship between two people, where one person receives guidance and leadership for their personal and career needs. During the interviews, I asked each participant, "How have your relationships with other African American female officers contributed to your success?", and "How have your relationships with others within the military such as mentors contributed to your success? Each participant expanded on their experiences with having mentors and themselves being a mentor. Unexpectedly, Erica, Mary, and Samantha stated they have always had a negative experience with having a mentor or trying to network with other Black females in the Air Force. Carmen did not go

in depth on her experiences of receiving mentorship; however, she did elaborate on her being a mentor for others. Next I explore mentoring experiences the participants shared.

Carmen briefly mentioned that she had received amazing mentorship in her career. However, she did not receive mentorship until she became a nurse in the Air Force's officer corps. She felt if it was not for other nurses guiding her at the beginning of her officer career, she would not have been successful in obtaining the leadership role of squadron commander. She recalled an experience she had with her first mentor,

I remember when I first became a nurse in the Air Force as an officer. My mentor at the time told me I should take a job teaching at a schoolhouse. She told me it was in Ohio. And I'm like, Oh, great. nobody wants to go to Ohio. Well, while rolling my eyes, I was like, Well, yes, ma'am. if that's what it is meant for me to do. That's what I'm gonna go do. We got off the phone. So I go take the job. I am on the job, literally two months as an instructor, they fire the director. And guess who gets that position. Yup me!

Carmen explained that after she got the director job, her mentor contacted her and asked her if she now saw the reason she wanted her in Ohio. Carmen's mentor told her she needed her in place, because she knew the job was going to open. Furthermore, she knew Carmen was well qualified for it. Carmen said, "My career skyrocketed from that job, and it really took off because of my mentor strategically placing me in that position. This experience also inspired Carmen to become a mentor for other women of color.

Since that time, Carmen has developed her own mentoring program. Her mentoring program is in a group format where she provides wisdom and knowledge primarily through a social media page. However, if a mentee needs more formal mentoring, she provides the traditional one-on-one mentoring with the individual. Carmen stated that the lack of Black female mentors is what additionally inspired her to become one herself. She further detailed,

Representation matters. Honestly the Air Force barely has that for women of color, Black women in particular. There are many who aspire to become a nurse in which you become an officer in the Air Force. But how are they guided if they do not see someone who looks like them in a predominately white male organization. That is why I started my own mentoring group. Initially, it started out helping those enlisted become officers, specifically a nurse. As it started growing it became just mentoring women of color in the military regardless of rank and status.

Carmen continued to explain that it is hard for Black women to connect with other Black women in the Air Force, because they barely see Black women in the positions they aspire to attain. She suggested that it is important for the few Black women in leadership positions within the officer corps to reach out and find individuals to mentor. By finding individuals to mentor, Black females in leadership positions will ensure Black women will continue to be their predecessors at the end of their terms.

Combating negative mentoring experiences. Although Black women benefit greatly from being mentored by other Black women, not all mentoring experiences are positive. Negative mentoring can be worse than having no mentor at all. Samantha, Erica and Mary had more negative experiences with mentoring. Additionally, they gave suggestions on what the Air Force needs to consider in order to prevent Black women from experiencing similar negative situations with mentoring. Overall, their negative experiences included cross-gender mentoring and mentoring from individuals of different backgrounds.

Samantha felt the Air Force mentorship program is not beneficial for service members. She also mentioned that even though the Air Force has a handbook titled “Air Force Handbook 36-2643, Air Force Mentoring Program,” there is no specific program. The handbook primarily goes over how Air Force leaders should provide mentoring. She

stated, “I have seen some leaders in the past try to establish a formal mentoring program, but they were not successful”. She continued to explain that most of the times leaders will set up a formal mentoring program only to look great for their bosses. The mentoring programs never move to the matching phase. The matching phase comes after participants are recruited. Many times participants are recruited before the formal program is launched, which could be a reason for being unsuccessful. Once information is gathered on mentors and mentees, the matching phase never occur due to many participants moving to a new base and the elapsed time.

Additionally, Samantha believed the Air Force decides that your supervisor is automatically your mentor. Mentorship is rarely successful for military members, especially for women of color due their mentors being prearranged. She also felt her experience of becoming an officer was difficult due to the mentor she had at the time. She stated,

I honestly and truly think Black women, then again women of color, have a disadvantage when it comes to mentoring. Every supervisor I had as enlisted was not helpful. My last supervisor that I had while enlisted almost cost me the chance of becoming an officer. He was a White male. He kept telling I was too young to be applying to become one. He was around seven years older than me. He always kept mentioning his job was to mentor and guide me. But he would always try to force what worked for him on to me. So he refused to help me with the process of trying to become an officer. Looking back on that relationship, it did more harm than good. Because now I do not trust anyone to be a mentor of mines.

Samantha continued to explain that she never had a female supervisor. Therefore, all her mentors were males. She also mentioned that none of her supervisors have been the same race as her. She never sought mentorship outside her supervisors because the Air Force gave them impression your mentor had to be your supervisor. It was not until she became an officer, when she began receiving guidance from other Black female officers.

The next participant, Erica also detailed her experience of having a male supervisor as her mentor. Like Samantha, she felt she always had negative mentoring experiences due to her mentors being the opposite gender and having no cultural or background connections. Erica recalled her first experience she had with her supervisor, who was also her mentor, prior to becoming an officer. He was a Black male, and they were both the same age. However, he was higher ranking than her and seemed to always be in competition. She stated,

Okay, it was my immediate supervisor. He was a master sergeant. He was higher ranking than me. We joined the Air Force at the same time, and we were the same age. He just outranked me. He seemed to always want to compete with me. He was always like, what are you doing? I'm doing this, I'm trying to do that. It was like a competition versus him mentoring me. And I'm like, you're in my supervisor, he already won, like, give me a break.

While her mentor tried to compete with her when it came to promotion, awards, or opportunities, she quickly began to lose trust. She felt that any guidance he was trying to provide her was not genuine. She also mentioned she felt the advice he gave would lead to her not progressing towards her personal and professional goals.

Erica revealed when it came time for her to apply to become a part of the officer corps he would not aid. She found herself always questioning her abilities and skills due to his inconsistent mentorship. However, she felt their being of similar ages is why their mentoring relationship was not successful. Erica said, "I think with us being so close in age is what caused our mentoring relationship to be toxic. He saw me more as a peer. If he was older than me, I think he would have been a great mentor". She continued to explain that there were times he gave great guidance. However, if there was an opportunity from which he felt he could benefit, he became a different person. Erica revealed tried to seek Black female officers for advice on joining the officer corps,

however, she could not find any. Therefore, she utilized outside resources and did research on her own to later become successful in becoming an officer.

Samantha's experience supports Levinson (1996) claim made in Chapter One that age difference and cross-gender mentoring may do more harm than good for mentoring relationships. Having a mentor of the opposite gender will cause distraction (Levinson, 1996). Older male mentors tend to not respect young females' career goals (Levinson, 1996).

The next participant, Mary, also had nothing but negative experiences as a mentee, however her negative experiences inspired her to become a mentor herself. Mary reflected on her seeking mentorship and the moment she decided to become a mentor. Mary explained the Air Force is all about mentoring. However, she felt the Air Force does not give the proper tools for a successful mentoring relationship to occur. Additionally, not every mentor has genuine intentions. She further explained and gave an example,

Trust me it isn't genuine all the time. It's like, oh, reach out to me if you need this today. And you reach out. And they are like why are you reaching out to me, or they just give you bits and pieces of things, or the person isn't trustworthy. For example, I had reached out to someone that I used to work with just asking for advice about a current situation that was going on at the place where I was working. Come to find out this person went and called the person that I was talking to them about and told them everything that I discussed with them. Yep. told them everything. And I'm like, how dare you?

Mary went into depth and explained that the person she reached out to for advice was a mentor. She was experiencing some unfair treatment at her current organization. She wanted to address the situation properly due to her fear of reprisal. However, Mary's asking for the advice backfired, and her leadership reprimanded her. Her leadership felt Mary was being unprofessional by contacting members outside the organization. She

stated she never trusted a soul after this situation. This experience among others inspired her to put herself out there as a mentor for others.

Mary also stressed that while enlisted, and even now as an officer, there were not enough mentors out there that looked like her. In other words, there were not enough Black females mentoring in the Air Force. “When I say someone who looks like me, I am meaning they are the same race, share the same experiences or stigma, have similar backgrounds, and have defined the odds”. She kept referring to the situation she shared about her bad experience with her mentor. Her mentor did not have anything in common with her. However, Mary initially trusted her only because she was in a leadership position Mary aspired to be in. She elaborated,

The mentor that betrayed my trust did not have anything in common with me. But I still went to her in confidence because I felt she would’ve given me an unbiased opinion on the situation I was going through. It is hard being a Black woman in the Air Force and being able to find someone to mentor you that can see where you are coming from when you are constantly stigmatized. She told me she saw where I was coming from, only to side with my leaders that I felt was mistreating me. This is why I advocate for more Black women to become mentors.

Mary continued declaring that the Air Force needs more Black women as mentors that fully understand the growth-related roles of their proteges’ career. Additionally, Black women mentoring other Black women in the military are more knowledgeable of the challenges race can present in one’s career growth and advancement. Only then can the mentor help their mentee develop a network of meaningful relationships with others that can guide them to leadership positions and higher ranks.

Summary of mentorship theme. In summary Erica, Samantha, and Mary shared their negative experiences with mentoring, but they also indicated their support for much needed positive mentoring experiences. Their experiences included mistrust, betrayal,

competition, and forced relationship. Each participant felt Black women should receive mentorship from other Black women, or women who share similar backgrounds, to progress in their career. Even though Carmen did not have any negative experiences with mentoring, she shared her story on how another Black woman officer helped her advance in her career. Additionally, she shared how she provides mentoring for others. Next, I explore the next emergent theme keys to success in which mentorship is also existent.

Theme 4: Keys to Success

Keys to Success emerges as the fourth and final theme. In relation to this study, I defined keys to success as the most important determining factors necessary to achieve or accomplish success while trying to become an officer and while being an officer.

Networking, being brave, and being present where the African American population is heavily populated yielded as keys to success.

While interviewing the participants, I asked the following questions in order to gather rich information in relation to keys to success:

- What are your recommendations to African American females who are enlisted and want to become officers?
- What are your recommendations to the United States Air Force for increasing the number of African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions?

Each of the participants spoke about networking and how essential networking is to become successful in obtaining a leadership position or becoming an officer. The participants also discussed the importance of HBCUs and current Black female officers being both present and authentic.

Being brave. Carmen's recommendations for Black females who aspire to become officers centered on being brave. Carmen began by stating that often Black females give up too easily when pursuing a goal. Carmen stated for them to be successful they must be bold and not be afraid. They should speak up when they are not getting proper and equal treatment as their counterparts. She went on to say,

I would say don't be shy, right? If you speak up, if you don't think it's right, say something. If you even if you're not even sure it's not right, still say something. Because when you don't say something, that's when it will continue. You have to check people who stigmatize you, categorize you, the ones that put you in a box. I think we I think we fail at that by not speaking up. That's the biggest thing. And don't be afraid. I'm like, you know, just be brave, right? Just be brave.

Carmen further elaborated that the reason Black women in the military do not speak up is due to reprisal. However, the more they use their voice and call out the unfair treatment, the less it will occur. She also added that it is important for other Black women to have each other's back and support when they do speak up. She felt that is how to deal with the fear of reprisal.

Carmen also suggested Black female officers should be present more in the community. She particularly referenced high schools and the Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps. She stated, "You have to start early. They need to see us as early as high school." She mentioned that enlisted are sometimes present but rarely officers. She continued to explain,

I can't even remember. I'm trying to think when was the first time I've ever seen a black officer. I think I was probably in the reserves. I think and when students are in high school, and they're in ROTC, you typically see, you know, white ROTC, you know, leads running the program, they need to really bring in black officers, for black female officers, to be like, guest speakers, so people can know that we're out there, you know, because we don't even know we're out there. When they see me, they're like, what, and then when I'm in uniform, they're like, oh, my God, because being in for 30 years with five deployments, people like you don't even look old enough to be in that long.

Carmen stated she also told those she inspired that there are several other Black female officers in the Air Force who have been in for quite some time. However, she felt people did not get to see them often because they are rare and the Black female officers that do exist make their presence known. Therefore, they must get out in the community. She also added she does not think it is a lack of Black female officers not wanting to do it. They just do not know it is an option.

While interviewing Erica, her dialogue was parallel to Carmen's observations. Erica felt it was important for Black females aspiring to become officers or progress to a leadership position be fearless. Erica suggested while being brave and vocal, it is important for Black women to be strategic in how they voice their concerns or speak on things perceived as unfair. She elaborated,

I am not saying to be afraid, but because we are not considered a part of that in-group...we are walking on egg shells constantly. So, when I say be strategic I mean make sure you have documentation and proof of your claims. Find another leader with similar background and have them guide you on the proper procedures and resources to use in order to combat unfair treatment.

Individuals who are knowledgeable on procedures for reporting unfair treatment and has as reputation of being fair can provide vital support. The individual does not have to be in the same organization or military base.

Erica specified to find another leader with similar background it is essential to network. Additionally, she claimed that networking is the number one factor for Black females' success today. She went back and reflected on her time as enlisted and could not find help in becoming an officer. She redirected,

Remember when I said that my leadership would not help me become an officer when I was enlisted? I also said that I had to use outside resources. Well those outside resources were other people in the Air Force but belonged to different

organizations. These were people I got acquainted with at different military functions. I even had one person I reached out to me that sends out the information on how to structure your officer application. He was letting me know what was correct and incorrect. So again it is all about who you know and who you network with. That is number one when it comes to becoming an officer. It is also true when trying to get opportunities as an officer.

All the opportunities that Erica took advantage of as enlisted, and as an officer, came from individuals outside of her organization. As previously mentioned, she has constantly sought assistance and knowledge from outside resources. She credits networking overall for her career success.

Samantha also stated that networking has been a part of all the opportunities afforded to her. She also mentioned that other Black officers in leadership positions should give others a seat at the table. She elaborated,

We have to give each other a seat at the table. In order to succeed as an officer, it is also all about who you are networking with, and those connections I've had afforded to me gave me the opportunities I have had thus far. However, those connections I had are from people who look like me. So except for like, my supervisor, every other opportunity I've had are from people who share the same culture as I do. That is because they wanted to see me win like them.

Samantha continued to express that she felt when Black females make it to the top positions within the Air Force, they forget about everyone else. However, she felt that she and other Black women have a moral obligation to bring others up like them.

HBCUs. Historical black colleges and universities are a source of dignity and honor for the Black community in the America. Samantha concluded by stating that HBCUs are the key to seeing more Black female officers. She declared that for the Air Force to have more Black females in officers' positions or inspire enlisted Black females, past and present Black female military officers need to start showing up where their quantity is great. She felt HBCUs is the place to start.

The interview with Mary also mentioned HBCUs being a place to reach potential Black female officers. Like all the other participants, she spoke on networking being an important factor. She felt networking was the gateway to success. Mary stated that those aspiring to become officers should network with individuals who are in the same career field they aspire to be in. She also stated, “Getting your foot in the door for opportunities, especially as an officer, it is all about who you know. The entire Air Force is all about who you know”. Additionally, while Mary spoke about networking she suggested that networking should happen outside the military installations. She recalled,

I know, sometimes at least when I was in college, at the career field day, they had tables that were set up. They had the Army, Marines, Navy, and there was supposed to be Air Force, but the Air Force didn't show up. Maybe more representation in schools where you can get that population that you're lacking. So HBCUs, or whatever that may be, because a lot of people don't even know about the opportunity. And I'm pretty sure if they knew about the opportunity; they would love to do it.

Mary mentioned that she has seen more Black female officers in the Army. She felt it was because they are present at HBCUs and make themselves more visible. She also suggested that Black female officers of the Air Force should engage at speaking engagements at high schools where the number of minorities are greater.

Having a plan. Having a life roadmap helps an individual to prioritize what is important and what needs to be accomplished in order to achieve set goals. Conclusively, all participants stated that aspiring officers need to have a plan. Samantha specified that if a person does not have a plan, then failure is inevitable. “If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail” she stated. Mary suggested to develop a plan by writing down goals and revisit each goal daily. Erica stated that you should stick to your plan and do not let anyone deviate you from your goals. Carmen recommended that developing a plan should be a

continuous process. She suggested that once goals have been set and obtained it is time to make new ones.

Summary of keys to success. Each participant shared their perspectives, experiences, and gave factors on what it takes for African American females in the Air force to successfully become an officer or attain a leadership position within the officer corps. Additionally, the participants stories also gave insight on what Black female officers endure once in the officer corps. In the next section, I further examine the emergent themes developed from the participants' narratives using social identity theory as the theoretical framework.

Framework Analysis

I analyzed the participants' stories and experiences using the social identity theory as a theoretical framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, I applied social identity theory to understand the practices by which individuals, particularly Black female officers in the Air Force, established and maintained their social identities either within the in-group or out-group. Furthermore, I used the social identity theory as a lens to understand groups that experience stereotyping, discrimination, sexism, prejudice, and racism, all of which emerged in the participants' narratives. The theory incorporates three fundamental components: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory suggests that individuals engage in a normal process of labeling their social world into either the in-group or out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals viewing their social groups as the in-group and of higher caliber to enhance their self-images and comparisons can lead to

discrimination of the out-group. Individuals viewing their social groups as the out-group and lower caliber can lead the individuals to having less motivation and facing a massive number of challenges. The participants revealed that because they were not a part of the in-group it caused them to face barriers and challenges on numerous of occasions while trying to become an officer and trying to get promotions and leadership opportunities as an officer. Table 3.4 summaries how the emergent themes from the participant narratives aligned with the social identity theory.

Table 3.4

Emergent Themes Aligned with Social Identity Theory

| Social Identity Theory Elements | Race and Gender | Barriers and Challenges | Mentoring | Keys to Success |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Social categorization | X | X | | |
| Social comparison | X | X | | |
| Social identification | X | X | X | X |

The social categorization and social comparison element of social identity theory aligned with the following themes: race and gender as well as barriers and challenges. All four themes aligned with the social identification element of the social identity theory. As a review, social categorization is when an individual is categorized inside the in-group or outgroup or “us” and “them.” Social comparison is when an individual wants to obtain a positive social identity for positive in-group comparisons. However, if the individual categorization is in the out-group, the result can bring forth discrimination from those within the in-group. Social identification in a positive aspect operates basic needs for

faith, confidence, and value (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, if an individual identifies with the negative aspect of their identification, then their basic needs decrease.

The participants' categorized themselves as Black women being in the out-group. Throughout their narratives and experiences, they were constantly comparing themselves mostly to their White male counterparts within their organization. According to Vignoles, et al. (2011), there are four levels of identity: individual goals and personal beliefs that defines you as a person, your awareness of being within or outside of a group, social interaction with others, and material social identity. It is important to understand why African American females' assessing feelings about their racial and cultural group linked with their own inner well-being. The inner well-being plays a vital part in becoming successful both professionally and personally.

Answering the Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study was to describe and gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of African American women in the U.S Air Force that joined as enlisted members and then became officers. My goal was not to develop a theory, but to report on the lived experiences of the Black female officers and to solicit their interpretation of how their work experiences affected their military career. Therefore, I projected the research questions that guided this study to educate all military members, especially military leaders, on the pressing issue of Black women not fulfilling leadership roles in officer positions and to generate suggestions for addressing the racial and gender barriers when it comes to Black females aspiring to become officers within the United States Air Force and other military branches. This research study produced numerous findings that answered the following central and secondary research questions. The

primary research questions was: What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions in the military identify as factors that played a role in their selection?

To answer the central research question, I asked the participants the following interview questions:

- What factors contributed to your being selected for commission when you applied as an enlisted member in the United States Air Force?
- What factors have contributed to your being in a leadership role?

The participants identified seeking outside resources, having the required education, impeccable military records, conducting research, and being persistent is what contributed to their selection for commission. At times no one was willing to help the participants with the process of becoming officers. It is imperative to know that it is reasonable to seek guidance and help from outside the organization. It benefits to learn from others who have gone through the process. Furthermore, it vital to be persistent and ensure your military records alone can reflect your attributes as a leader.

Moreover, the participants recognized knowing their personal strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, limitations, and willingness, contributed to their selection for leadership roles in the past as an enlisted member and as an officer currently. Three out of the four participants stated that their compassion and consistency is what factored into getting leadership roles as an officer. They are consistent with their direction and how they treat people. They are equal when it comes to holding people accountable. Overall, their actions match their words by meaning and doing what they say.

Secondary Question 1: What work experiences contribute to African American females' success in the military?

To answer the first secondary question, I asked the participants the following interview questions:

- What are some of your current and past work experiences that have contributed to your success in becoming and being officer?
- What working experiences are essential for a Black female to become and be an officer in the United States Air Force?

Both positive and negative work experiences contributed to the success of the participants becoming and being an officer. Many of them expressed having bad leaders and toxic work environments. However, they used the negative experiences to learn how to turn a negative into a positive. Additionally, each of them echoed their previous leaders' communication which allowed them to see the significance of clear direction and the importance of communicating with their subordinates to help them achieve their goals. Furthermore, their past work experiences allowed them to reflect on their role within the experience. They had to admit their wrongs and learn from them, so their wrongs did not impact their future roles in their military career. For a Black female in the military to become an officer in the Air Force, the participants explained Black females need to experience having other Black female leaders within their chain of command. By visibly seeing someone with similar background enables motivation. Additionally, the prospects should question Black female officers that are visible about their experiences and solicit recommendations.

Secondary Question 2: What type of working relationships do African American females identify that contribute to the success of becoming an officer?

To answer the second secondary question, I asked the participants the following interview questions:

- How have your relationship with other African American female officers contributed to your success?
- How have your relationship with others within the military such as mentors contributed to your success?

Relationships between an enlisted African American female and an African American female officer are rare. All participants expressed while enlisted and trying to seek advice or guidance on becoming an officer, they would receive none. Many felt as if the officers were more focused on how to elevate their own career now that they became a part of the officer corps. Overall, it was very difficult for them to even locate another African American female officer. Two of the participants formed relationships with White female officers and felt their guidance was significant in their success. One of the participants formed multiple relationships with African American female officers in the Army. However, she could not apply the tools received from that mentorship to her becoming an officer due to the different standards the Air Force had. None of the members felt they had mentors that contributed to their success due to numerous negative experiences. However, Carmen became a mentor to help others to succeed. Carmen did not venture out to try to find mentees. Her mentoring relationships happened naturally. In return, she seen many of their mentees becomes successful in obtaining their career goals.

Secondary Question 3: What are some of the challenges African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions have had to overcome in their military career?

To answer the third secondary question, I asked the participants the following interview questions:

- What challenges have you faced while becoming and being an officer?
- How did you overcome challenges faced?

While trying to become an officer and being officer, the participants have encountered many challenges from being an African American female. The most prominent challenge was being the victim of negative stereotypes and sexism. The participants felt military leaders placed them in a group and categorized them as being the angry Black woman, aggressive, always having a negative attitude, unexperienced, and unwomanly. Additionally, the gender category they identified with also brought about challenges. The participants felt Air Force leaders did not promote or select them for certain leadership opportunities as often as their male counterparts despite being more educated or experienced. Also, they had to navigate and confront incorrect narratives about their family responsibilities. Moreover, their gender and race intersected in a majority of the times when they encountered a problem.

Overcoming these challenges involved educating people in the workplace about what behaviors could be perceived as sexism and stereotyping. One of the participants established a formal mentoring program aimed at helping to break down barriers between men and women in the military workplace. Others stated they have used their resources to voice what they experience and offer solutions. Overall, majority of the participants felt they have yet to overcome the challenges and are still facing them currently and will continue to do so throughout their career.

Secondary Question 4: What recommendations would participants offer to African American females that are enlisted and in lower-ranking positions aspiring to advance to officer leadership positions in the military?

To answer the fourth and final secondary question, I asked the participants the following interview questions:

- What are your recommendations to African American females who are enlisted and want to become officers?
- What are your recommendations to the United States Air Force for increasing the number of African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions?

The participants' first recommendation for African American females who aspire to become an officer is to develop a plan and outline goals to achieve that plan. Second, they recommended seeking mentorship from another Black female officer in the Air Force. Black females aspire to become officers must network and ask others to connect them with other members. Third, a Black female must conduct research and ensure becoming an officer is something they want to do. Finally, aspiring Black females must keep trying even after the Air Force tells them no. When the Air Force tells them no, they should revisit their plan and adjust as needed. Throughout the whole process they must be their authentic self. People draw themselves to those who display their consistency. By them being their authentic selves at work, they will inspire others to follow their lead.

There are also recommendations from the participants for the United States Air Force as an organization for increasing Black females in the officer ranks. The Air Force must recruit where the number of minorities are greater such as HBCUs. There should be more focus on outreach and recruiting strategies. Additionally, the Air Force should examine their selection criteria and make changes as needed. Furthermore, the Air Force

should examine why female officers, specifically Black female officers, have lower retention rates than male officers.

In addition to the participants' recommendations, in Chapter Four I will first recommend for the Air Force to develop formal mentoring programs. Second, the Department of Defense ensures Black female officers are represented in the Air Force recruiting and advertising content such as social media websites, magazines, flyers, and commercials. Third, establish partnerships with organizations that have a large Black population. Last not least, incorporate mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion training annually that includes engagement workshops.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to describe and gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of Black women in the U.S Air Force that joined as enlisted members and then became officers. My goal was not to develop a theory, but to report on the lived experiences of the Black female officers and to solicit their interpretation of how their work experiences affected their military career. Furthermore, I wanted to supplement the shortage of current research related to challenges, barriers, and success of Black females in the Air Force. The results of the study revealed various findings about Black female officers' experiences related to their race and gender, barriers encountered, mentoring, and success. Each individual interview produced three principal findings related to the emergent themes and research questions answered previously:

1. Black women face complex experiences in relation to their social identity that may compromise success in their military career.

2. Mentoring is scarce for Black females in the Air Force, and the mentoring relationships that do exist are forced.
3. For an aspiring Black female to successfully become an officer in the Air Force, or a Black female officer obtain a leadership position, the member must network within and outside their organization.

Finding 1: Black Women Face Complex Experiences in Relation to Their Social Identity That May Compromise Success in Their Military Career.

Each of the participants revealed in their interviews how they have faced barriers and challenges due to the intersection of their race and gender. Mary and Carmen gave examples of how the good ol' boy network was a barrier for Black women to succeed as enlisted and officer in the Air Force. Erica explained how Air Force members and leaders automatically stereotype and place Black women in a category that is non-dominant. Carmen gave examples of how Black women are often at a disadvantage in the Air Force's ROTC programs. Each example posed a social identity threat for each participant, because of their worry of being or devalued and discriminated against because of categorizing with a stigmatized minority group. The social identity threat in return can lead to low recruitment and retention rates of Black females.

According to Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979), each individual is given multiple social identities. Each categorization has a social position with dominant and non-dominant groups. In the category with race, dominant members limit opportunities to members that fall into different categories. The participants of this study felt they their counterparts categorized them in the non-dominant group. Therefore, they experienced oppression in the form of shortcomings, limitations, or disapproval, particularly with the good ol' boy system that consistently discriminated against non-dominant groups and benefited their groups.

In Chapter One, I examined literature concerning glass and concrete ceilings. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), described the glass ceiling or concrete ceiling as barriers to women's progression in several organizations and highlights women's diverse challenges. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) defined the term "concrete ceiling" as thicker barriers for women of color due to racial prejudice and sexism. Kerr et al. (2008) highlighted the concrete ceiling is present and prevents Black women from progressing in their careers regardless of their qualifications. I examined in the literature correspondences of Samantha's experience. Samantha affirmed that she was more qualified than the person the hiring authorities hired for the leadership opportunity she applied for. Also in Chapter One, Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested no barriers exist for any women to progress in their career. Men progress more frequently due to women lacking leadership skills and having more family problems. Therefore, organizations choose men over women to prevent personal life factors affecting work. The hiring authorities saw Samantha's status of being a single parent as family problem. However, I pose the argument that leaders in the Air Force view family problems such as being a single parent as a barrier for women to progress in their careers. Moreover, females are not always the primary care giver in single parent households. Males sometimes fulfill the single parent role. However, males progress rapidly in the leadership roles in the Air Force than females.

The social identity theory and sexism connect throughout the participants' experiences within the theme of facing barriers and challenges. According to the participants' stories, Black women belong to a low-status group and face discrimination and stereotypes, prohibiting them from power. Not all women receive equal stereotypes

or have the same sense of belonging according to only the gender category. Aligned with the social identity theory, the participants of this research study are more vulnerable to the stereotype and to its negative effects because they strongly identify themselves with their gender and race category combined.

Revisiting the literature on glass and concrete ceilings in Chapter One, Baker and Lightle (2001) found Black women working in corporate America faced lack of mentorship. The lack of mentorship was one of many factors that concrete ceilings are present. Many of the participants felt that it was hard to find mentorship because they rarely saw someone who looks like them to seek mentorship from.

Finding 2: Mentoring is Scarce for Black Females in The Air Force, and the Mentoring Relationships That Do Exist Are Forced

While mentoring is essential for Black females in the Air Force, it is very limited. All the participants revealed most of their mentoring experiences with them being the mentee have been negative. Samantha shared that majority of her mentoring relationships have been with white males. Her experience supported the literature on Levinson (1996) claimed that cross-gender mentoring may do more harm than good for mentoring relationships. On the contrary, Erica supported having an older mentor in age regardless of gender. She felt they have experienced more in their career and can be helpful when guiding others. Mary and Carmen revealed they have never connected with their mentors because none of them “looked like” them. They did not share the same cultural background or social identity. Collectively, the participants stated when they tried seeking mentorship from other Black females, they were hard to find. Those that were available, refused to provide mentorship.

Burke and McKeen (1990) identified that mentoring is an important factor for career advancement. Considering finding that mentoring is scarce for Black females in the Air Force, mentoring can singularly become the reason for the rare sighting of Black females in the officer corps and leadership positions. Even though it was not specifically stated during the interviews, each of the study participants' narratives revealed their ability to becoming successful by networking since meaningful mentoring relationships were absent.

Finding 3: For an Aspiring Black Female to Successfully Become an Officer in the Air Force, or a Black Female Officer Obtain a Leadership Position, the Member Must Network Within and Outside Their Organization.

Despite having problems with mentoring, the study participants identified it is essential to network within and outside your organization for you to become successful in the officer corps. Mary and Erica sought outside resources such as, Black female officers in the Army and Black males who became officers, to help them become officers. Additionally, they network with White females to gain insight on how they combat sexism and got their foot in the door for unique opportunities. Samantha and Carmen suggested networking should occur in high schools and HBCUs where Black people are the majority. All participants revealed networking with other races was challenging and sometimes uncomfortable because as a Black woman they were not seen as influential or resourceful as their counterparts. Samantha assumed Black females are hesitant on sharing information about their successes which restricts their ability to be their authentic selves at work and to build meaningful relationships with others.

Although networking work for Black females are essential, research shows that these networks experience hardship due to the network magnitude (Ibarra, 1992).

Minority women have a lesser percentage of same sex and same race connections in their networks than white males (Ibarra, 1992). The lesser percentage is due to the small number of Black women in organizations such as the Air Force. Furthermore, according to Ibarra (1992), men tend to network more in their work environment and using multiple areas which could give reason for why there are present more in leadership roles. Women tend to network mostly through social networks (Ibarra, 1992).

According to Mengel (2020), gender differences in networking occurs due to women seeking support from established relationships versus men seeking human capital. Also, women are not as comfortable as men when mixing work with friendship (Mengel, 2020). The result is men networks being generally larger than women. By having a larger network men are able to have a wide range of people to assist in their professional and financial growth (Mengel, 2020)

Implications

The present narrative inquiry projected to gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of Black female officers in the U.S Air Force that were prior enlisted members. This study also supplemented the research on the barriers and challenges faced by Black female military members due to their social identity. Furthermore, the study informed future stakeholders on the lack of mentoring and networking programs specifically for Black females that is essential to raise their success in the military ranks and leadership positions. With the findings of the study, I propose the following implications for retaining and increasing the number of Black females in the Air Force's officer corps and leadership positions:

- Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion training for both officers and enlisted within the workplaces.
- Develop formal mentoring programs for minority women in the Air Force.

Next, I give the details for each implication along with recommendations.

Implement Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training for Both Officers and Enlisted Within the Workplaces

Deborah Lee James, the 23rd Secretary of the Air Force, stated:

To perform, we need top talent. Today we claim the title ‘World’s Greatest Air Force,’ but to remain so, we must learn to be comprehensively inclusive, throughout our ranks, and throughout our specialties. If we get this right, we will glean significant benefit from the many perspectives of the population we serve” (Losey, 2017, p. 4).

By providing DEI training, on a consistent basis, the Air Force can take a step in achieving inclusiveness for all. First, DEI training can provide a safe place for people to voice their experiences with bias and discrimination as well as for others to face their biases and prejudices. Members of an organization feel included when their voices are heard. Second, it can help recruit and retain more minority females. Last, increasing diversity in the military ranks can lead to discomfort for those considered to be in the “in-group” and can inspire group members to recognize and actively address potential stigmatism.

Develop Formal Mentoring Programs for Minority Women in the Air Force.

As previously explored in the literature, researchers have found women benefit from mentoring to help with career advancement as well (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Ragins, 1989). Formal mentoring programs for Black women in the Air Force will improve their success and presence in the officer ranks. The Air Force does not have structured mentoring programs in place. By having a structured program for Black

females, the Air Force can create a safe place for members to learn. Additionally, having a structured mentoring program can decrease stress and anxiety. The majority of the times Black females are hesitant on going to their leaders when faced with an issue at work due to certain stigmatism. A mentor who has similarities can provide guidance to the mentee no matter the issue. Finally, the mentee will pay it forward by providing mentoring to others. To effectively implement formal mentoring programs, effort from Black female officers that have been successful is vital.

Summary and Conclusion

In closing, for this research study I presented the problem of Black females' underrepresentation and lack of advancement to the officer corps in the United States Air Force. Previous research showed how stationary African American military members become while trying to become an officer. Baldwin (1996) investigated women and minorities' representation in the U.S Army's promotion record and promotion rates of women and minorities in the Army compared to men and Caucasians. The findings from the investigation revealed that Black female officers, when compared to White female officers, had a higher attrition rate and lower promotion rate (Baldwin, 1996). Segal and Segal (2004) compared the number of Black service members in the enlisted corps and officer corps across all branches and found Black service members underrepresented in the officer corps. Smith (2010) determined the lack of mentorship contributed to the disproportion of promotion of Black female officers. Lack of mentorship opportunities for Black females poses a barrier to their advancement to officer status. The U.S armed forces is an all-male environment, and women are in lesser roles. Thus, finding a mentor when this perception exists prevents military women from asserting themselves.

Mentorship is vital for the professional development of military members. However, the lack of mentorship opportunities for Black females posed a threat to help advance women to the officer corps. Therefore, it was imperative to address the issues to determine if the United States military, specifically the Air Force branch, is an egalitarian society.

I used a qualitative narrative study design to capture the voices of four current Black female officers in the United States Air Force, who was once prior enlisted. I used their voices to describe and explain the lived work experiences of Black women in the Air Force. The current qualitative narrative research study resulted in the following emergent themes from interviews with four Black female Air Force officers: race and gender, barriers and challenges, mentorship, keys to success. Throughout this study, the participants provided different experiences in relation to their success. I analyzed the participants' stories and experiences using the social identity theory as a theoretical framework. Additionally, I used social identity theory to understand the practices by which individuals, particularly Black female officers in the Air Force, established and maintained their social identities either within the in-group or out-group. Furthermore, social identity theory facilitated in understanding the participants experience with stereotyping, discrimination, sexism, prejudice, and racism. The findings suggest White males within the military often discriminate against Black females according to their group categorization of both race and gender. The findings also suggested mentoring and networking specifically for Black females in the Air force may be a challenge due their limited network.

As Black females and the Department of Defense seek to raise Black females' presence in the Air Force officer ranks and leadership positions, it is important to

understand how Black female officers in the Air Force establish and maintain their social identities either within the in-group or out-group. The result of this study encourages for the implementation of DEI training for both officers and enlisted within the workplaces. The results also encourage the development of formal mentoring programs and networking opportunities for Black women in the Air Force. In Chapter Four, I present the distribution of findings with informed recommendations, executive summary, and the proposal of findings distribution.

CHAPTER FOUR

Distribution of Findings

Executive Summary

As one looks at the top leadership positions and officer ranks in the United States Air Force, it becomes challenging to locate faces of Black females. Black women represent one-third of all women in the U.S. armed forces and their enlistment rates are higher than any other racial minority group (Melin, 2016). Currently, the U.S. military branches are more ethnically and racially diverse than any prior generations. Ethnic and racial minority groups making up the active-duty component of the U.S. military branches increased by 25% between 1990 and 2015 (Parker et al., 2017). However, racial diversity diminishes at the officer ranks and positions of the military. In 2018, 25% of the officer corps was comprised of minorities. Out of that 25%, only 9% were Black (2018 Military OneSource, 2020). With statistics showing minorities making up a large percentage of the military demographics, the statistics related to minorities should also encompass a proportional amount of the officers. Yet Black females disproportionately do not pursue or obtain officer ranks. According to Gilroy et al. (1999), Black female officers do not believe equal opportunities for promotion are available for their racial group. Black enlisted females find it difficult to see the possibility of moving to the officer corps when current Black female officers do not witness fair chances at promotions.

Literature on Black women working in corporate America is parallel to Black women in leadership positions and ranks within the military. Finding Black women in top

positions within corporate America is rare, and they find their path to success to be quite difficult (Bush, 2000). Literature suggests the underrepresentation of Black women at certain levels within their professions is due to multiple discriminations, such as race and gender, and organization lacking the same gender and race mentors to help members in their careers (Baker & Lightle, 2001; Cotter et al., 2001; Jackson & Stewart, 2003).

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I used a qualitative narrative design to gain in-depth knowledge about the lived work experiences that contributed to Black female officers' success in the Air Force. The use of qualitative narrative design helped to understand the rare sighting of Black females in officer ranks and positions in the Air Force by allowing the participants to recount their own stories and experiences. Additionally, this design also allowed me to conduct a thorough study by collecting data using open-ended questions which resulted in gathering an abundance of detailed data from a small number of participants (Creswell, 2014).

The theoretical framework that supported this qualitative narrative inquiry was social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory deals with the way individuals view themselves and their distinctive characteristics and association in different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) it is a normal cognitive process to stereotype and place people into groups based on the differences between groups and the similarities of the same group. There are two groups for placement: in-group or out-group. The central assumption of social identity theory is that a member of an in-group will pursue to discover negative qualities about a member of an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The social identity theory linked to the central and secondary questions and guided the qualitative narrative research design. The central research question that guided this study was:

- What factors do African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions in the military identify as factors that played a role in their selection?

Furthermore, the following secondary questions continued to guide the research:

- What work experiences contribute to African American females' success in the military?
- What type of working relationships do African American females identify that contribute to the success of becoming an officer?
- What are some of the challenges African American females in officer ranks, and leadership positions have had to overcome in their military career?
- What recommendations would participants offer to African American females that are enlisted and in lower-ranking positions aspiring to advance to officer leadership positions in the military?

Moreover, I used the social identity theory to understand the practices by which individuals, particularly Black female officers in the Air Force, established and maintained their social identities either within the in-group or out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Data gathered for this study came from a purposeful sample of four Black females in the Air Force who were prior enlisted and now officers. I went through three phases collecting data: pre-interview, one-on-one interviews with each participant, and follow-up. The primary method of collecting data in this current study was interviews. Interview questions contributed the best information based on the research questions. I analyzed the participants' interviews through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The participants' individual and combined experiences as enlisted and officer established the

following emergent themes: race and gender, facing barriers and challenges, mentoring, and keys to success. Next I compared the themes to previous literature and the theoretical framework.

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed various findings about Black female officers' experiences related to their race and gender, barriers encountered, mentoring, and success. The participants interviews produced three principal findings related to the emergent themes and research questions:

1. Black women face complex experiences in relation to their social identity that may compromise success in their military career.
2. Mentoring is scarce for Black females in the Air Force, and the mentoring relationships that do exist are forced.
3. For an aspiring Black female to successfully become an officer in the Air Force, or a Black female officer obtain a leadership position, the member must network within and outside their organization.

The findings of this study exemplified how members of the Air Force discriminate against Black females according to their group categorization of both race and gender. Evidence from the participants narratives show the application of social identity theory to develop a social change mindset of the dominant group so members of the non-dominant group attempt to improve their status collectively. Evidence from the participants narratives also revealed the need to consider specific mentoring programs according to race and gender for implementation. However, mentoring programs and networking specifically for Black females in the Air force may be a challenge due their limited network.

Informed Recommendations

The present narrative inquiry gained an understanding of the lived work experiences of Black female officers in the U.S Air Force that were prior enlisted members. This study also supplemented the research on the barriers and challenges faced by Black female military members due to their social identity. Furthermore, the study informed future stakeholders on the lack of mentoring and networking programs specifically for Black females needed to raise their success in the military ranks and leadership positions. In addition to the key findings of this study, I offer the following recommendations for current Black female officers and the Department of Defense about retaining and increasing the number of Black females in the Air Force's officer corps and leadership positions:

For Current Black Female Officers

Develop a formal mentoring program for Black females in the Air Force. Mentors can advocate for up-and-coming minority leaders, tell their stories and strategies for how they broke through the perceived concrete ceilings, and provide networking opportunities. It is imperative for current Black female officers to vouch for, coach, and counsel their proteges at different stages within their career. Collaborate with Air Force recruiters, community leaders and organizations, and participate in speaking engagements where there is a high rate of minority attendance such as HBCUs and the NAACP.

For The Department of Defense

Ensure Black female officers are represented in the Air Force recruiting and advertising content such as social media websites, magazines, flyers, and commercials. It is crucial to develop a plan to aide in attracting a diverse aspirant pool. Establish a

partnership with African American organizations, schools, and sorority and fraternities such as HBCUs, NAACP, and the National Pan-Hellenic Council. The purpose of the partnership would be to raise the awareness of opportunities available for minorities that do not become regularly exposed to members of the Air Force officer corps.

Additionally, a partnership allows Air Force leaders and members of these distinct organizations to network and learn about developing talent within their communities.

Provide public access to demographic information on promotion selections and nominative career opportunities. This disclosure will provide transparency in selection processes and reinforcement on equity. Demand that processes within Air Force organizations are fair, equitable, and exhibits diversity for people being considered for promotions, assignments, and special career opportunities. Last but not least, incorporate mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion training annually that includes engagement workshops. Due to the heavy volume of computer-based training for military personnel, face-to-face engagement workshops are more engaging and impactful.

Findings Distribution Proposal

Along with providing each participant a voice, this study aimed at producing information to bring awareness on the lack of Black female officers in the Air Force. The information produced highlights the barriers and challenges minority women face when trying to advance in their military career. The final parts of this chapter present a findings distribution proposal that includes the target audience and method of distribution and venue.

Target Audience

The targeted audience for this Problem of Practice is Black females who are officers or enlisted in the Air Force, Department of Defense, and all senior leaders. For current Black females enlisted or in the officer corps, this study provides information and recommendations that can help those aspiring to become successful in promotion opportunities or leadership positions. The Department of Defense's primary mission is to coordinate and supervise all agencies of the government. Additionally, it deals with matters related to the national security of all military branches. For the military to be strong and an effective force, they must ensure service members reflect diversity among the ranks. Air Force leaders set the highest standards of conduct and performance by setting the examples.

Proposed Distribution Method and Venue

I will present the key findings and recommendations of this Problem of Practice to Black females who are officers or enlisted in the Air Force, Department of Defense, and all senior leaders through an article in the *Air Force Times* which is a newspaper published online and every Air Force installation in the U.S. and overseas. I chose this method and venue due to its ability to reach a broader Air Force audience. I will also submit the executive summary to the Department of Defense through a presentation to provide awareness on the underrepresentation of Black females in officers ranks and positions. I will need to develop presentation slides and a publication manuscript to attain the distribution goals. Additionally, I will share the executive summary on different military blogs, social media websites, and with minority mentoring groups.

Conclusion

My connection with the Air Force inspired me to capture the stories of Black females within the officer corps. Due to the lack of research existing on the experiences of Black females in the Air Force officer corps, I was determined to examine this topic through a qualitative narrative inquiry. The current qualitative narrative research study resulted in the following emergent themes from interviews with four Black female Air Force officers: race and gender, barriers and challenges, mentorship, keys to success. The participants provided different experiences in relation to their success. I analyzed the participants' stories and experiences using the social identity theory as a lens. Additionally, I used the social identity theory to understand the practices by which individuals, particularly Black female officers in the Air Force, established and maintained their social identities either within the in-group or out-group. Furthermore, it facilitated in understanding the participants experience with stereotyping, discrimination, sexism, prejudice, and racism.

This study will inform stakeholders on the lack of mentoring and networking programs specifically for Black females that is essential to raise their success in the military ranks and leadership positions. Additionally, the findings of the study will provide insight on ways to recruit, retain, and increase the number of Black females in the Air Force's officer corps and leadership positions.

I will present key findings and recommendations of this Problem of Practice to Black females who are officers or enlisted in the Air Force, Department of Defense, and all senior leaders through an article in the *Air Force Times* which is a newspaper published online and every Air Force installation in the U.S. and overseas. The presentation will be by means of presentation slides and a publication manuscript.

Additionally, I will reach other military servicemembers by sharing the executive summary on different military blogs, social media websites, and minority mentoring groups.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Consent Form for Research

Consent to take part in research

“When You Finally See Us”: A Narrative Inquiry of The Rare Sighting of Black Females in Officer Ranks and Positions in the United States Air Force

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to describe and gain an understanding of the lived work experiences of African American women in the U.S Air Force who were prior enlisted and now commissioned officers. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, a qualitative method, specifically narrative, was decided as the best approach. The results of this study will generate suggestions for addressing the racial and gender barriers when it comes to Black females aspiring to become officers within the United States Air Force and can also apply to all military branches. The results will inform and educated all military members, especially military leaders, on the pressing issue.

**Please initial by each numbered line.*

- _____ 1. I [Enter your full name here] voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- _____ 2. I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any questions without any consequences of any kind.
- _____ 3. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- _____ 4. I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- _____ 5. I understand that participation involves verbally sharing my story through conversations or interviews.

- _____ 6. I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- _____ 7. I agree to my interview being video and audio recorded via zoom. However, only the audio transcripts will be kept.
- _____ 8. I understand that I will be given a copy of the transcripts to review and make corrections as necessary.
- _____ 9. I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- _____ 10. I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- _____ 11. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation titled above, published papers, and future conference presentations.
- _____ 12. I understand that if I inform I that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- _____ 13. I understand that signed consent forms and original video audio recordings and field notes will be retained on a password protected memory card.
- _____ 14. I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years following dissertation defense : May 2024.
- _____ 15. I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- _____ 16. I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher:
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Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. What factors contributed to you being selected for commission when you applied as an enlisted member in the United States Air Force?
2. What factors have contributed to you being in a leadership role?
3. What are some of your current and past work experiences that has contributed to your success in becoming and being officer?
4. What working experiences are essential for a Black female to become and be an officer in the United States Air Force?
5. How have your relationship with other African American female officers contributed to your success?
6. How have your relationship with others within the military such as mentors contributed to your success?
7. What challenges have you faced while becoming and being an officer?
8. How did you overcome challenges faced?
9. What are your recommendations to African American females who are enlisted and want to become officers?
10. What are your recommendations to the United States Air Force for increasing the number of African American females in officer ranks and leadership positions?

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