

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF RACISM ON THE CAREER  
DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL MEN IN  
CORPORATE AMERICA

by

TONYA HARRIS CORNILEUS

(Under the Direction of TALMADGE C. GUY)

ABSTRACT

More African Americans have careers in corporate America than at any other time in the nation's history. However, even with greater access and participation, studies indicate African Americans continue to encounter racism and disparate treatment, which impedes their career development. African American men are especially vulnerable, though there is little research that focuses solely on their experiences. The lack of attention to African American professional men in corporate America is problematic because it has rendered invisible the range of experiences germane to them as they too encounter gendered racism, meaning they are subjects of prejudice, negative stereotypes and oppression because they are both Black and men – “blackmen”(Mutua, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Four research questions guided the study: (1) how do African American professional men

describe their career development? (2) how has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men? (3) what factors influence the career development of African American professional men? and (4) what strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development? A critical qualitative research design was chosen for this study. The study included 14 African American professional men who held positions at mid-management or higher in their respective companies.

The findings revealed that African American professional men experience both repressive structures and facilitative structures as they negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. From the findings, I concluded four things: (1) personal identity and cultural identity influence the career development of African American professional men; (2) gendered racism constrains the career development of African American professional men in ways not experienced by White men or African American women; (3) African American professional men's careers develop through internal and external organizational resources and through formal and informal learning; and (4) African American professional men learn to employ a range of strategies to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development.

**INDEX WORDS:** Adult Learning , African American Professional Men, Bicultural Strategies, Black Feminist Thought, Black Male Identity, Black Masculinity, Career Development, Critical Race Theory, Cultural Identity, Culturally Relevant Career Development, Diversity, Gendered Racism, Human Resource Development, Political Capital, Racial Identity, Racism, Self-efficacy, Sexism, Social Capital, Social Networks, Structuration Theory

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## DEDICATION

First, I give all honor and glory to God, the author and finisher of my faith. You created me, put this study in my heart and then equipped and trusted me to carry it through. I love you and I dedicate this work back to you.

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support and patience during times when I could not give you all the attention you either wanted or deserved. I'm so proud of each of you.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

American companies are far more diverse today than at any other time in the nation's history. African American professionals' participation in corporate America, like the participation of other professionals of color and women, increased tremendously as a result of the civil rights movement and ensuing legislation. The growth of women's participation in the labor force is noteworthy. At the turn of the twentieth century, only 19 percent of women participated in the labor force; by 1950 their participation rate had increased to over 30 percent and by the close of the century, that figure had grown to 60 percent. By 2050, women are projected to make up 47 percent or nearly half of the entire workforce. The participation rates of racial and ethnic minorities are just as remarkable. In 1900, non-Whites collectively made up roughly 14 percent of the entire labor force. By 2005, African Americans alone comprised about 12 percent of the total workforce. By 2050, African Americans will comprise 14 percent of the workforce, due largely to the growth of African American women's participation (Report on the American Workforce, 2001; Toossi, 2006). Wentling (2001) held, "The changing work force is one of the most extraordinary and significant challenges facing U.S. organizations today" (p. 3).

With the passage of time, it has been revealed that even with increased access and representation in corporate America, African Americans continue to encounter racism and disparate treatment, which impedes their career development (Barrett, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004, 2003; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; James, 2000; Taylor, 2004; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). African American men appear to be especially vulnerable, yet their experiences are not well delineated in career development literature.



Overall, career development literature is scant on the issue of race despite the surge in workplace diversity (Humphrey, 2007). When researchers have focused on African Americans, they have tended to treat African Americans as a monolithic group or delve more specifically into how the intersection of race and gender impacts the career development of African American women. Many of the issues facing African American men are different from those faced by African American women (Bingham & Ward, 2001). The universal approach to understanding African Americans' career development experiences is problematic because it has rendered invisible the range of experiences germane to African American professional men in corporate America and has failed to examine adequately the effects racism has on their career development.

A handful of African Americans have risen to the pinnacle of extrinsic success in corporate America to become chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies. In 2009, Ursula Burns became the first African American woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company when she took the helm at Xerox Corporation. Paving the way for Burns and others was Franklin Raines, the nation's first racial or ethnic minority CEO of a major corporation. Raines, an African American, became the CEO of Fannie Mae in 1998. Since then, another seven African American men have also made it to that level. While these achievements are impressive and reflect progress over time, the likelihood of an African American man holding this position is still extremely small. For the majority of African American men, the picture is far less appealing. Of those employed, only 22 percent are represented in management, professional and related jobs compared to 31 percent of African American women and 33 percent of White men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). African American professional men are twice as likely to be

unemployed as their White counterparts. They also earn 20 percent less, with the greatest disparity occurring at the higher echelons of corporate America (Current Population Survey, 2008; Grodsky & Pager, 2001; Taylor, 2004). These disparities are extremely disturbing and point to a need for more research on the career development experiences of African American professional men in corporate America, the impact of racism on their career development, and the strategies that lead to their positive career development.

### **Background of the Problem**

The demographic changes in the U.S. workforce have brought both hope and challenge. There is optimism because more women and professionals of color participate in corporate America than ever before – a notable achievement attributed largely to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and affirmative action policies. African Americans occupy positions within corporate America that were unimaginable 45 years ago. Yet, with all of the optimism, there is still cause for concern. Research findings indicate that African American professionals continue to experience systemic racism and differential treatment, which impacts their performance, distribution of rewards, and career outcomes (Greenhaus, et al., 1990; James, 2000; Parks-Yancy, 2006). The glass ceiling remains a metaphorical fixture in corporate America. African American professional men appear to be especially vulnerable for three reasons. First, the numbers indicate they are in trouble. Not only do they lag behind their White counterparts in workforce participation, promotions and pay, they also trail African American women in many of the same measures with one exception – median earnings. African American professional men still earn nearly 20 percent more than African American professional women (Current Population Survey, 2008). However, if current trends continue, this will reverse in favor

of women in the near future. Holzer (2005) found that the employment and earnings trends have been much more positive for African American women than for African American men since the 1990's.

Second, African American men encounter gendered racism, meaning they are subjects of prejudice, negative stereotypes and oppression because they are both Black and men – “blackmen” – a multidimensional understanding of their single social position (Mutua, 2006, p. 18). An example of gendered racism leveled against African American men is the numerous cases of racial profiling. They also experience covert gendered racism in the hiring process. As “soft skills” – defined broadly as interaction skills and motivation skills – have become increasingly more important to employers, these elusive criteria have proven detrimental to African American men in gaining access to jobs. Studies indicate employers believe Whites have greater soft skills than African Americans and African American women have greater soft skills than African American men. African American women are seen as easier to work with and less aggressive than African American men (Fugiero, 2006; Moss & Tilly, 1996; 2001). Fugiero's conclusion that African American men have less of a chance of getting into occupations requiring higher levels of soft skills not only speaks to problems African American professional men encounter with getting hired, but also signals trouble for their ongoing career development.

These problems are further compounded by patriarchy where men are believed to trade on their gender to attain power and privileges not afforded to women (e.g., good-old-boy network). As a result, the natural inclination is to believe that African American men are also beneficiaries of unrestricted privilege. However, Mutua (2006) warns, one

must look at the context to determine if African American men are being privileged or oppressed by gender or any other structure. In cases of employment discrimination, “The law has not recognized that the black male gender, rather than providing privileges in the workplace normally associated with being male, signals a unique basis of vulnerability to employment” (Harvard Law Review, 1991, p. 750).

Findings from an influential study conducted by the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) reflect the frustrations some African American professional men experience in corporate America. In a focus group conducted by members of the Commission, African American male executives characterized the barriers to their career development not as a glass ceiling, but a “*brick wall*.” Even more disturbing was the fact that these African American male executives believed that because of the changing demographics of the workplace, both nationally and globally, corporate America considered them a “necessary evil” and devalued their talent, education and experience, which negatively affected their career development and upward mobility. These men expressed concern that the acceptance and rise of women and other professionals of color appeared to be a “discriminatory tactic designed to keep Black men from advancing to the top ranks of Corporate America” (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 154). More recent research supports the findings of the Commission regarding the disparate treatment and disappointments felt by African American professional men in their career development (Goodly, 2007; Moss & Tilly, 1996, 2001; Stewart, 2007; Taylor, 2004). In essence, the research affirms the belief held by some African American professional men that they are on the losing side of a zero-sum game where the progress of one group is achieved at the expense of another (Stewart, 2007).

The third reason African American professional men deserve special attention in their career development is because there is a dearth of research focusing exclusively on them and their career development. Studies exist that focus on both African American men and women collectively (e.g., Barrett, 2000; Cobbs & Turnock, 2003; Palmer, 2001). However, those studies do not distill the distinct career development experiences of African American men. More is available on African American women's career experiences in part because feminist scholars (e.g., Alfred, 2001; Bell & Nkomo, 1994, 2001; Bell, Meyerson, Nkomo, & Scully, 2003; Bierema, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998) have led the way in critiquing dominant career development theories and positing new ways of theorizing career development to reflect the experiences of women. Conversely, less is known about the career development of African American professional men. Social science and education literature are replete with studies on the plight of urban poor African American men and on the career aspirations, counseling and development of those who are working class or school-age and postsecondary students. There is no comparable body of literature that relates to the unique career development experiences of African American professional men.

In my search of the literature, I was able to find only three studies that have focused on some aspect of African American professional men's career development experiences – and these are recent, which indicates to me that this is a phenomenon of study that is just beginning to command the attention of researchers. Taylor (2004) studied the factors that influence Black males' ascension into senior leadership in corporate America and the cultural tradeoffs Black males made to become senior leaders in their respective organizations. His case study included four Black senior corporate

executives already “at the top of American business” (p. 48) – the corporate elite. Humphrey’s (2007) study sought to understand the career development of African American male high school principals. Humphrey researched the personal, professional and institutional factors that influenced the career development of African American high school principals and the role of learning in their career development. Still, the context was high schools – not corporate America. Finally, a third study by Goodly (2007) focused on the upward mobility of successful Black men. Goodly determined to build a grounded theory to explain how Black males can be successful by commingling facilitative structures and personal agency. He interviewed 15 successful African American men, some of whom had careers in corporate America, and others who spent their careers in different sectors (e.g., government, non-profit, and entrepreneurship). Goodly was interested in overall success, which included but was not limited to a focus on career success. Each of the three studies elucidate problems African American professional men encounter in their careers, however none of them center racism as a structural system of oppression affecting the career development of African American professional men. None of the three studies are from a critical qualitative approach and none delve into Black masculinity as an essential frame for understanding the experiences of African American professional men. Only Humphrey uses the framework of career development theories to understand their career development. This present study seeks to understand and critically examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men using the tripartite frame of Black masculinity, critical race theory and career development theory.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study**

Why are African American professional men facing such challenges in their career development? Is their career development markedly different than their White counterparts? Are African American professional women preferred hires over African American professional men? These questions will be examined in greater detail later in the study, but for now, it is worth noting that there is a lack of theoretical understanding of how the confluence of race and gender bears on the experiences of African American professional men in the workplace. The conceptualization of African American manhood, critical race theory, and career development theory are three critical lenses by which to examine this phenomenon.

The first theoretical perspective relevant in this study is the conceptualization of African American manhood in the United States. Bush (1999) examined the definition of African American manhood and surmised the question “becomes more obfuscated by the hegemonic dynamics in the United States that deny some men the social ability to be viewed by society as men despite their biological sex” (p. 49). Indeed, dating back to slavery, Whites viewed African American men with contempt and were conditioned to characterize them as a bogeyman, a step above animals yet lacking intellectual ability, and a sexual predator (Bederman, 1996; Hutchinson, 2002; Marable, 1998; Stewart, 2007). Being stripped of the ability to care for their families – one of the central determinants of manhood in American society – African American men were left psychologically and at times physically emasculated (Bush, 1999). Bederman (1996) found that at the turn of the twentieth century, “Americans were obsessed with the connection between manhood and racial dominance” (p. 4). The belief was that in order

to preserve “civilization,” male power was directly linked to White supremacy. Therefore, according to the prevailing discourse, Black men could never be equal to White men because they were racially inferior. Bederman’s study showcased the contentious relationship between Black men and White men and White men’s quest to define manhood on their own terms and as a reflection of their racial dominance.

In this modern day, African American men continue to be subjects of negative stereotypes which depict them as violent, lazy, having a bad attitude, and being difficult to control (Holzer & Offner, 2001; Moss & Tilly, 1996, 2001). Undoubtedly, these harmful stereotypes play a role in the treatment African American professional men receive on their jobs. Concerning the preference for hiring and promoting African American professional women, a 1991 Harvard Law Review article found:

There is some indication that whites have a greater need to perceive black men in subordinate positions than they do black women, possibly because black women seem, under prevailing categories, to be twice removed from the white male paradigm and thus represent a diminished threat. (p. 758)

Moss and Tilly (1996; 2001) and Lacy (2008) support the contentions made by the Harvard Law Review article. Lacy (2008) expounds on the notion that African American men may be the most endangered Title VII plaintiff (more than women of color) given their unique social position, the racism they experience, and the lack of redress afforded to them.

The necessity for legal redress was the impetus for the second theoretical perspective important to this study – critical race theory. Though the civil rights movement and legislation granted greater access for African Americans to the workplace,



the movement and legislation failed to fully remedy the disparate treatment many African Americans encountered in the workplace. Initially, critical race theory (CRT) was a response from the legal community to address the stagnation and rollback of civil rights legislation such as affirmative action. Some of the core tenets of CRT include: the recognition that racism is rife in American society; that people of color have a voice emanating from their distinctive experiences with racism; and that concepts such as color-blindness and meritocracy are misleading ideologies that have actually contributed to the backlash against race-conscious redress by camouflaging and justifying the exclusion of people of color from positions of power (Shuford, 2001; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998). Given these core tenets of CRT, it is a powerful and relevant theoretical lens by which to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America.

The career development experiences of African American men will be examined in the context of career development theories. It is well established in the literature that major career development theories (e.g., Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, Holland's Career Typology Theory) are inadequate in accounting for the experiences of African Americans. Phelps and Constantine (2001) observed,

Historically, race and ethnicity have not been included as variables in many of the major career development theories and models. The career development, behavior, and patterns of African Americans...have been evaluated, in large part, based on White male behavior and development....The sociopolitical and sociohistorical (e.g., racism, sexism, bias, and discrimination) realities and

experiences of African Americans have not been considered along with their personal and individual realities. (pp. 171-172)

Considerations of positionality, culture, context and historical experiences are all important when framing theories of career development to be used with historically oppressed groups. The lack of consideration for African Americans in career development theorizing has limited the relevance and applicability of major theories to the issues facing African American professional men in corporate America. Certainly, employment data confirms that the experiences of African American men are distinct from their White counterparts. Thus, it is an error to equate the career behaviors and development of White men to those of African American men, simply because they share gender.

Most scholars agree that more research is needed before major career development theories can be broadly applied to African Americans. Recognizing the increasing diversity in the workplace and the lack of attention to race in career development, some scholars have moved to address the gap. For example, Cheatham (1990) and Thomas and Alderfer (1989) developed career development models specifically relevant to African Americans. Cheatham's (1990) Heuristic Model of African American Students' Career Development emphasized the need to consider the sociopolitical and sociohistorical context of African American career development. While Cheatham's model provides insight about the career development process that leads to the selection of a career, Thomas and Alderfer (1989) focused on what happens in African Americans' career development after they have entered the workforce. Both of these theories are important constructions in the career development literature and are relevant

to this present study because they center the issue of race and racism and advance a more holistic lens through which to view the career development of African Americans (Bingham & Ward, 2001). Other theories have also emerged since the earlier traditional theories were developed, but the prevailing thought remains that no single, comprehensive model of career development exists that addresses the issues of racial and ethnic minorities (Barrett, 2000; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Humphrey, 2007; Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995). Certainly, no theory exists that centers African American professional men and “Without relevant theories and frameworks, it can be difficult to identify salient career factors, to adequately address important career issues, or to understand the role of various factors in the career processes of African American [men]” (Phelps & Constantine, 2001, p. 171).

These three perspectives: the conceptualization of African American manhood, critical race theory, and career development theory are important perspectives in the careful examination of the impact that racism has on the career development of African American professional men. Of great interest then is learning from the experiences of African American professional men who have risen to roles in mid-management or higher despite the challenges they have faced with systemic, gendered racism as “blackmen” in America.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Corporate America is more diverse than at any other time in U.S. history and this trend is expected to continue for many years. African Americans occupy positions in corporations today that were inconceivable 45 years ago at the height of the civil rights movement. Though the gains have been notable, they have also presented a significant

challenge. Scholarship on career development and race is still virtually nonexistent. Phelps and Constantine (2001) note, “The lack of information regarding the career development of African Americans is problematic and widespread” (p. 171). This is particularly true for African American professional men (Humphrey, 2007). Few studies center the experiences of African American professional men and those that do are fairly recent (e.g., Goodly, 2007; Humphrey, 2007; and Taylor, 2004). The majority of the career development literature either treats African Americans as one large subgroup or delves into the experiences of women, working class men or students. This is problematic for African American professional men who also face persistent racism and negative stereotypes because of their unique social position as “*blackmen*” in America. African American professional men have twice the unemployment of their White counterparts and earn as much as 20 percent less – the greatest disparity occurring at the most senior levels in corporate America. Studies have also shown that African American professional men have slower promotion rates than their peers and are more likely to be guided into racialized roles that impede their long-term career development (Collins, 1997, 1989; James, 2000; Parks-Yancy, 2002). These findings point to evidence of continued disparate treatment in the career development of African American professional men. What we do not know is how these men deal with the impact of racism on their career development and the individual and organizational strategies that enable their positive career development.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. In particular,

this study is interested in how racism has shaped the career development of African American professional men working in corporate America and the individual and organizational factors that facilitate or inhibit their career development. Four research questions will guide the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?
- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

### **Significance Statement**

This study will contribute both theoretical and practical value to adult educators, human resource development (HRD) practitioners, and corporations that desire to attract, develop and retain African American professional men in corporate America.

Theoretically, it is intended to add to the career development literature. Career development theories that place White males at the center are inadequate to address the needs of today's more diverse workforce. While feminist scholars have expanded the literature to include women's experiences, theories on career development and race are still lacking. Phelps and Constantine (2001) held, "For as long as African Americans have experienced discrimination and institutional racism in the workplace, little systematic research has been conducted to help fully understand their complexities" (p. 173). Almost a decade later, the finding of those authors is still remarkably accurate.

Considering that, this study seeks to understand how racism impacts the career development of African American professional men and how the intersection of race and gender creates a unique social position for African American men in the White patriarchal structure of corporate America. This study then responds to the growing call for new and more culturally relevant ways of theorizing career development to appropriately and more accurately address the experiences of a more diverse workforce – in this case, African American professional men.

In an increasingly global economy, developing and leveraging the talents of every worker is a business imperative. Those who do not maximize the benefits of diversity within their organizations jeopardize corporate productivity, profitability and competitiveness in the global marketplace (Wentling, 2001). Unfortunately, because so few studies have focused on the unique career development experiences of African American professional men, many HRD practitioners and corporations lack the knowledge they need to develop and facilitate appropriate career development strategies for these men. Practically, this study will provide useful information toward the development of career development strategies relevant for African American professional men. Several trends indicate African American professional men are becoming increasingly invisible in corporate America. Their declining presence represents an opportunity cost to corporate America given the importance of having a diverse workforce in the global marketplace. Additionally, the results of this study will also serve to validate the collective experiences of African American professional men and contribute to creating a roadmap for those African American professional men desiring a successful career in corporate America.

**Definitions**

The following terms are defined for purposes of clarity in this study:

*Career development* – An umbrella term that involves the “lifelong psychological and behavioral processes as well as contextual influences shaping one’s career over the life span” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002, p. 7). Included in this study’s definition of career development are also the resulting outcomes of career processes, namely career mobility and career satisfaction.

*Professional* – Those individuals categorized as having occupations in management, professional, and related jobs by the United States Department of Labor. Those occupations generally require individuals to have a college degree or experience and specialized training of such kind as to provide a comparable background (Retrieved from <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeo1survey/jobclassification.html> on March 21, 2008).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. In particular, this study is interested in how racism has shaped the career development of African American professional men working in corporate America and the individual and organizational factors that facilitate or inhibit their career development. Four research questions will guide the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?
- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

The five major sections of this study's literature review include: (a) the conceptualization of African American men in America, (b) critical race theory, (c) career development theory, (d) empirical research on African Americans' career development, and (e) chapter summary. The subjugation of African American men is as long as their history in America and is rooted in the intersecting patterns of patriarchy and racism (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Hall, 2001; Mutua, 2006). This subjugation and marginalization of African American men has an effect not only on how African American men perceive their identity, but how others perceive them as well and



this has consequences for their experiences in the workplace. Critical race theory (CRT) is a powerful lens by which to understand the conceptualization of African American men in America and their unique experiences of gendered racism. The main emphasis of CRT is that race and racism are endemic to the American social order such that they serve to normalize the racial power of Whites in the United States while further subordinating Blacks. The antistatutination of historically oppressed people is a major thrust of CRT (Mutua, 2006). Lastly, the question this study seeks to answer is how African American professional men negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. Thus, an understanding of career development theories and how they have been applied to African Americans is central to understanding the issues facing African American professional men in corporate America.

My search for literature included combinations of keywords such as *African Americans or Blacks, African American men, masculinity, race, racism, critical race theory, gender, gendered racism, career development theory, career counseling, career mobility, career satisfaction, workplace experiences, and corporate America*. Online searches via GALILEO at the University of Georgia were conducted. I reviewed various social science, business and educational databases, including the Educational Resources Information Center, Sociological Collection, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Journal Storage, and Dissertation Abstracts International. Reference lists from selected readings also served as sources for identifying additional literature. The result was literature from scholarly journals, monographs, books, U.S. Government data and a limited number of dissertations and major news articles relevant for the study.

## **The Conceptualization of African American Men in America**

What does it mean to be a man in America? According to Bush (1999) the study of men is a fairly recent phenomenon that began in the early 1970's. He concluded that while men, particularly White men, have always been highlighted for their conquests, little had been done in terms of examining their gender-role development, masculinities and specific male experiences. More important to note is the fact that masculinity is a socially constructed rather than biologically determined phenomenon (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Bederman, 1996; Bush, 1999; Mutua, 2006). Throughout this study, I use the terms "manhood," "male gender-role development," and "masculinity" interchangeably to highlight that a man's position in society is a product of social construction and historical process rather than biological determination. Bound up in definitions of manhood are the interlocking positional characteristics of race, gender, class and other socially significant dimensions that have the cumulative effect of describing a man's hierarchical standing and experiences in America. Supporting this point, Andersen and Collins (2004) held,

Fundamentally, race, class, and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life....At any moment, race, class, or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's experience. (p. 7)

In essence, because of the different configurations of positional characteristics, there are various masculinities – no universal male gender role. Specifically, the construction of White men's masculinity is different from the racialized and marginalized masculinity of African American men in the United States. Furthermore, there is some evidence that

African American men hold distinct definitions of manhood than what is propagated by the hegemonic White masculinity model – although they persist in attempting to meet the requirements for masculinity produced by the dominant society. The gap between what is a culturally relevant conceptualization of manhood for African American men and what is socially regarded as manhood by the larger society can produce internal conflict, self-esteem issues and problematic behaviors and outcomes for African American men.

Common perceptions about African American men have persisted throughout their history in the United States. Their manhood has been compared and contrasted with the hegemonic masculinity model and system of patriarchy that defines manhood in terms of domination over others, particularly women, children, and other men deemed subordinate by such things as race, class or sexuality (Mutua, 2006). Three challenges continuing to impact the image and status of African American men in the United States are discussed: education, employment, and economics. The common thread running through all three is the persistent discrimination African American men suffer that serves to reinforce their marginalization in this society. There are certainly other factors bearing on the status of African American men to include disproportionate incarcerations, homicides, and substance abuse among others. However, the three challenges discussed were selected for their apparent influence on and relevance to this present study on African American professional men in corporate America.

In this section, the conceptualization of African American manhood is explored. I have attempted to examine African American masculinity from the perspective of the hegemonic masculinity model operative in the United States, from the perspectives of African American men themselves, and from the perspective of Black feminist thought –

which is the standpoint from which I, an emerging Black feminist scholar, am conducting this study. All three points of view, complex and varied within their own right, are shaped by an institutionalized system of male dominance and consequent privilege – patriarchy.

**Analysis of patriarchy.** A brief analysis of patriarchy is essential to understanding gender-role development, the formation and maintenance of a hegemonic masculinity model and the concept of various masculinities in American society. Lerner (1986) defines patriarchy broadly as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (p. 239). Mutua (2006) describes patriarchy as “the structure of men’s social power that privileges and benefits men over women but that does not privilege all men equally” (16-17). Both find that it took men and women to sustain patriarchy over its 2500-year history. Perhaps for reasons of social survival, indoctrination, public powerlessness or economic dependency, women have been complicit in establishing and securing patriarchy as a stronghold in Western civilization. Lerner (1986) states:

The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining “respectability” and “deviance” according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. For nearly four thousand years

women have shaped their lives and acted under the umbrella of patriarchy. (p. 217)

Beginning sometime in the third millennium B.C., patriarchy was firmly established in Greek and Roman law at the time of the writing of the Hebrew Bible (Lerner, 1986). Given that Western civilization was shaped largely by the Judeo-Christian Bible, patriarchy was inculcated in the American psyche from the inception of the nation-state. What is important to know about patriarchy for this study is that it has a history, meaning, it has a beginning – albeit established prior to classical antiquity – whereby the development of power relationships between men and women and among men was deeply rooted in Western civilization’s sociopolitical systems. The subordination of women has been largely known, accepted, reinforced, and even justified throughout history. In colonial America, while White men institutionalized their dominance in the economy, education, and politics, White women were assigned their maternal duties of the republic, “responsible for the raising of male citizens who would lead society” (Lerner, 1986, p. 27). Alternatively, African Americans experienced radically different degrees of un-freedom than did White women because of race and class oppression. During slavery, African American women were exploited as “workers, as providers of sexual services, and as reproducers” (p. 214), while African American men were exploited as workers and never fully benefitted from the privileges associated with patriarchy because they did not own the means of production. Lerner holds, “Class for men was and is based on their relationship to the means of production: those who owned the means of production could dominate those who did not” (p. 215). These radically different degrees of un-freedom and the wide range of privilege among men are

not acknowledged often, but are pertinent to understanding the unique experiences of African American men in American society and the effect on their experiences in corporate America.

African American men, like women, have been complicit in the process of their own subordination because of the historical legacy of slavery where they were psychologically shaped to believe in their own inferiority for over 200 years. Some feminists assert that men appropriate their power because they have been allowed to explain the world on their terms, to make themselves the center of discourse, and to create systems that support the continuance of their domination. I assert it is White men who have been in position to carry this out, thereby establishing and upholding the hegemonic model of masculinity. I extend support to feminist and Black masculinity scholars who find all masculinities and their consequent privileges are not created or experienced equally (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Mutua, 2006).

This analysis of patriarchy and male privilege is paramount to the assertions that I put forth in this study about why it is important to extricate African American professional men's career development from White men's career development and from African American women's career development. African American professional men do enjoy privileges over women (e.g., remuneration, greater access to certain occupations, etc.) associated with patriarchy in American society, but not only do they not enjoy them to the same degree as White men, they also experience oppression as a result of the intersection of their race and gender. As a feminist, this critique of patriarchy is not an easy endeavor, but necessary for my growth both as a feminist and a critical scholar. Lerner (1986) holds, "To step outside of patriarchal thought means: Being skeptical

toward every known system of thought; being critical of all assumptions, ordering values and definitions....Being critical toward our own thought, which is, after all, thought trained in patriarchal tradition” (p. 228). Advancing the reality of various masculinities and underscoring feminists’ struggle to end oppression not only of women, but of all groups will enable “women and men to free their minds from patriarchal thought and practice and at last to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that is truly human” (p. 229).

**Theorizing Black manhood in a culture of hegemonic masculinity.** Though no single theory of Black manhood exists, several scholars have examined how Black manhood has been conceptualized over time and in comparison to the White hegemonic model. Under the patriarchal system in the United States, the “ideal” man is White, elite, and heterosexual (Mutua, 2006). The White male’s gender-role of protector, provider, inherent leader or head of family and society, dominator and aggressor is held up as the standard by which manhood is conceptualized (Blake & Darling, 1994; Bush, 1999; Hall, 2001; Mutua, 2006). This hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group is “the standard or ideal against which all men are measured and under which few measure up” (Mutua, 2006, p. xix). Mutua notes, “This is not a person but an ideal. And a man’s masculinity is measured by how close he comes to the ideal” (p. 13). Material privileges and power are afforded to those who have been historically defined as men under the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Messner, 2004).

The gender-role development of African American men is different from that of White men because their experiences in America are different (Blake & Darling, 1994). Historically, the hegemonic definition of manhood has been problematic for African

American men starting with their unique experience with slavery. Under the system of slavery, African American men were powerless to protect against the dismantling of their families and the sexual exploitation of African American women by their White male masters. In examining slavery's effect upon the construction of African American manhood, Bush (1999) stated, "Any Black man who wanted to stand up and be a man – according to the Western patriarchal definition, meaning leadership – was isolated, killed, beaten, or ridiculed" (p. 50). Consequently, for 246 years, African American men could not fulfill the dominant view of what it meant to be a man and therefore were deemed inferior and less than a man – something Other than a man (Blake & Darling, 1994; Bush, 1999; Hall, 2001). Additionally, Mutua (2006), referring to the work of Clyde W. Franklin II, notes that "black men were considered boys until the 1960s, when they became nominal men" (p. 13). The persistent denigration of African American manhood by the dominant society produced militancy and maladaptive behaviors among African American men in the 1960's. Bush finds,

This denial of manhood combined with the Black Power movement created, according to some in the literature... a Black male with a new psyche... that is during the Malcolm X and Black Power era that Black males asserted their manhood and were now viewed by most of society as Black men for the first time. (pp. 51-52)

The backlash from fighting to be recognized as a man in this society was that African American men began to adopt the hegemonic masculinity paradigm and to expect gender privileges associated with being male in America's patriarchal society. What became evident is the salience of race and privileges associated with being White. The



male privileges thought to be afforded to African American men are often substantially muted compared with the privileges available to White males – thereby disproving the concept of a categorically privileged sex class (Zinn et al., 2004). Racism constrains African American masculinity and the associated privileges of being a man in this patriarchal society (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Hall, 2001; Mutua, 2006).

Some scholars believe that racism precludes African American men from the privileges of masculinity, while others believe that African American men are oppressed by race but are privileged by gender. Mutua (2006) argues for a “multidimensional understanding of black men as a single social position – *blackmen, one word* – and under which black men are sometimes privileged by gender and oppressed by gendered racism” (p. 18). African American men’s historical inability to fulfill hegemonic masculine expectations has had enduring negative effects to the present time. Perhaps most hurtful is the impact to African American men’s individual and collective identities and the subsequent maladaptive behaviors (e.g., cool pose) that further marginalize African American men in this society. Cool pose is a coping or survival strategy some African American men use to respond to a history of oppression, discrimination and social isolation in America (Majors & Billson, 1992). Majors and Billson found that “coolness” is an integral aspect of African American masculinity – a mask worn by African American men across all socioeconomic levels to hide their deeper vulnerabilities. Cool pose is also bifurcated in its effects – linked to pride, self-respect and masculinity on one hand, but to destructive dilemmas (e.g., lowered life expectancy, stress-related illnesses, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, unemployment, and underperformance in education) on the other hand. A central reason for cool pose, the psychological

emasculation, and destructive behaviors of African American men, according to the literature, is society's denial of African American manhood. Additionally, African American men's embrace of hegemonic masculinity as the standard for defining manhood – a standard they have not been able to fully attain due to individual and structural barriers – has been counterproductive (Blake & Darling, 1994; Bush, 1999, Hall, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). For example, Bush states:

Continued structural barriers after the 1960s conjoined with the acquisition of the traditional male sex-role paradigm...led to hypermasculinity (i.e., hyperaggressiveness, hypersexuality, obsession with materialism, and an absence of accountability) especially among poor inner-city males...Hence, Black males have become both victims of and participants in their own destruction by embracing a traditional notion of manhood. (p. 52)

***African American men's conceptualization of manhood.*** So then, what is African American men's definition of manhood? How is their definition different from the hegemonic definition? What consequence do the divergent definitions hold for African American men? African American men perceive themselves as not fitting in with the Western paradigm of manhood (Bush, 1999). Hunter and Davis (1992) point out that African American men are constantly moving in and out of majority and minority cultures and their masculinity and male role identity must be viewed in these various social and cultural contexts. Hunter and Davis conducted a study with 32 African American men, approximately evenly divided between professionals and nonprofessionals, on their conceptualization of manhood, which they distinguished from masculinity. Manhood was defined as the social man, while masculinity was defined as

the physical sexual man (physically strong, competitive, masculine, and aggressive). They concluded that although masculinity may be a part of being a man, it is not the foundation on which manhood resides. Not all authors draw this distinction so literally (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Mutua, 2006). From Hunter and Davis's study, "manhood emerged as a multidimensional construct that defines being a man in terms of the self, a man's relationship and responsibility to family, and a worldview or existential philosophy" (p. 471). Four major domains were identified in the study: (1) self-determinism and accountability, (2) family, (3) pride, and (4) spirituality and humanism. These domains included 15 distinct clusters of ideas.

The clusters of ideas under the domain of self-determinism and accountability included directedness, maturity, economic viability, perseverance, and free will. Hunter and Davis (1992) found this domain to be at the core of the self and manhood. Within this domain they found responsibility and economic viability to be significant in how African American men conceptualized their manhood. Being able to take responsibility for one's life, provide for self, and take control over life's circumstances are central to their ideals of manhood. Poverty and unemployment represent direct threats to African American men being able to realize this aspect of their manhood. The second domain, family, was seen as an extension of the African American man's ego. Manhood was defined in terms of the collective family and the African American man's role within the family. The clusters of ideas included within this domain are family responsibilities and connectedness, equity in male and female relationships, and fulfillment of family role expectations. Contradictory themes of patriarchy and partnership co-exist in this domain. They represent the negotiations and tensions African American men experience when

conceiving their manhood within a larger society predicated on patriarchy and within a cultural society where the egalitarian relationship between men and women is woven into the Black family.

The interrelationship of masculine and feminine experiences for both men and women is a core component of African American men's concept of manhood. The connection with women, with a matriarchal system, and with a nurturing, emotional side of masculinity is a poignant difference between African American men's conceptualization of masculinity and the hegemonic definition. The notion that "African American males are expected to contain within their sex-role identities a masculine and feminine self".... that "the woman's and man's role is the same – shared responsibility in love and struggle" is defined as an African-centered paradigm of masculinity (Bush, 1999, p. 52). This interrelationship between African American men and women is seen as a weakness in the context of the Western paradigm where manhood is defined in terms of domination over women and the expectation is that "real men" eschew all things feminine. Bush posits that "one of the aims of white supremacy is to present an image of a weak Black male" (p. 51).

The third domain of manhood identified by Hunter and Davis (1992) is pride. The two clusters of ideas found within this domain are pride and self-betterment. The authors held, "Thus, a man's pride is linked to his desire and capacity to better himself and his life" (p. 472). The final domain is spirituality and humanism. This domain includes African American men's views of their connectedness with others, with their community, and the importance of having a spiritual foundation. The clusters of ideas include spiritual and moral principles, connectedness to human community, and respect for

womanhood, sensitivity, and belief in human equity. Concepts of giving back to the community and social justice are characteristic of this domain (Bush, 1999). The clusters of ideas under spirituality and humanism represent a stark contrast to the hegemonic definition of manhood that promotes manhood as a tiered hierarchy and where White supremacy is reified. Hunter and Davis note that the focus on the collective “we” and spirituality as essential to African American manhood is born out of a history of oppression.

African American men dance between the dominant gender role expectations (competitive, dominator, and aggressive) and cultural expectations (cooperation, promotion of group, egalitarian relationships with women) to fulfill an acceptable standard of manhood where clearly there remains internal conflict and external denigration by the larger society.

*Stereotypes of African American men.* The difficulties facing African American men in meeting gender-role expectations has led to a number of stereotypes. In an effort to normalize African American men, Blake and Darling (1994) explained that African American men are multidimensional: “He is a husband and father, son and brother, lover and boyfriend, uncle and grandfather, construction worker and sharecropper, minister and ghetto hustler, doctor and mineworker, and auto mechanic and presidential candidate” (p. 402). And, in 2009, even President of the United States. Unfortunately, as these authors and others note, these roles are often distorted by negative stereotypes. Hall (2001) found, “Much like prejudice, definitions of stereotype highlight certain aspects of African American men while completely ignoring others. Unfortunately, for such men, what is highlighted has been limited to the negative” (p. 106). African American men are

presumed to be lazy, violent, physically strong, intellectually deficient, defensive, aggressive, lacking self-control, difficult to control, sexual superstars, athletically superior, scary, and prone to criminal activity (Blake & Darling, 1999; Hall, 2001; Moss & Tilly, 2001). All of these stereotypes have serious consequences for how African American men see themselves in this society, how society perceives them, and the challenges they face.

Many of the negative stereotypes are strong enough to cross class lines. However, it is obvious that class bears on how these stereotypes are apportioned to certain African American men based on class privilege, once again reinforcing the cumulative effect of race, gender and class on social position. One need only look at sports icons Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, political leaders Colin Powell and Barack Obama, or business executives Kenneth Chennault and Richard Parsons to see how these negative stereotypes become diluted or mitigated when African American men of class privilege are deemed successful by the dominant society. Collins (2006) states, “Those who manage to approximate the norms of hegemonic masculinity may enter the inner circle, often as honorary white men” (p. 81). Calmore (2006), speaking of the dominant society’s treatment of successful, middle-class African American men, of which he is a member, finds:

I am often in the interesting predicament that as whites come to know, to accept, and to respect me, they simultaneously disassociate me from my racial group. Separated from the anonymous amalgam of black males and the negative stereotypes that freight their images, I am viewed as different. I am simply an individual....Is it not ironic: I am black until I succeed. (p. 146)

Calmore (2006) is also mindful that when he is out of the context of his obvious success, his Blackness is once again foreground and he, just like African American men of lower socioeconomic status, is seen as a societal irritant. He states, “Even from my privileged position, I still must negotiate race every day, and I still must clear racism’s hurdles every day” (p. 146). Calmore’s explanation of the cultural construction of the Black man is pertinent to this present study such that while African American professional men in corporate America may enjoy class and some gender privileges, they still cannot participate in the privileges of Whiteness. In fact, for African Americans to gain access to some of the privileges of Whites, they must often suppress or deny those attributes deemed unacceptable or a threat to Whites (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000).

**The Challenges to African American Manhood.** Racism, gendered racism, negative stereotypes, systems of privilege and oppression, and maladaptive behaviors by African American men all converge to create significant challenges for African American men. Majors and Billson (1992) held:

The statistics show a clear disadvantage to being born black and male in America: Black males have higher rates than white males on mental disorders, unemployment, poverty, injuries, accidents, infant mortality, morbidity, AIDS, homicide and suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, imprisonment, and criminality; they have poorer incomes, life expectancy, access to health care, and education. (p. 12)

The challenges confronting African American men nearly 20 years ago and even longer are still present today (Merida, 2007; Mutua, 2006; Noguera, 2008;). Of central importance to this study are the challenges African American men face in education,

employment and economics – with all three buoyed by institutional racism and discrimination. Majors and Billson (1992) defined these challenges as “social symptoms of a history of oppression” (p. 12). Each of these challenges impact the image and status of African American men in our society.

***Education.*** In the United States, education is seen as essential for upward social mobility (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994). Historically, for African Americans, education took on even greater meaning. Attaining an education has had the most direct influence on changing the condition of African Americans. Education became the vehicle by which former slaves sought and achieved self-sufficiency. For over 200 hundred years during slavery, education was rarely available to slaves. Indeed, most slave owners believed slaves had no need to read and write and were incapable of intellectual thought. With emancipation, African Americans seized educational opportunities. Bond (as cited in Frazier, 1997) captured the excitement African Americans had toward education following the Civil War by stating, “No mass movement has been more in the American tradition than the urge which drove Negroes toward education soon after the Civil War” (p. 62). Educator and social activist, W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for African Americans to enter higher education. Du Bois believed a liberal and higher education was the answer to elevate the status of African American men in society and to prepare them to compete in an economy that demanded more intellectually and technologically skilled workers (Du Bois, 1903/1989).

A core tenet of Du Bois’s educational philosophy was the development of college-educated men, the Talented Tenth, who would serve the masses and uplift the African American community to achieve social and political equality. The Talented



Tenth philosophy was inculcated within African American middle class men, from which many prominent leaders emerged. However, after long stretches of gains in African Americans' participation in higher education, disconcerting trends regarding African American men's participation began to appear in the late 1960s, and today, two-thirds of all African Americans in higher education are women (Cross & Slater, 2000). According to the 2000 U.S. Census data, the percent of African American men over the age of 25 who had completed a college degree was 13.1%; the rates for White males and African American women were 28.2% and 15.2%, respectively. Cross and Slater (2000) found, "The gap between black women and black men has grown nearly every year for the past two decades" (p. 83). Findings from the 2008 Schott Foundation report, *Given Half a Chance: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, highlight the sobering statistics on the educational attainment of African American boys in our nation's school systems. The researchers found that that while 75% of White males and 57% of Latino males graduate from high school within four years, only 47% of African American males received their diplomas within that time. In the report, Dr. John Jackson, president and chief executive officer of the Schott Foundation, concluded, "A deliberate, intense focus is needed to disrupt and redirect the current educational trajectory for Black males" (p. 1).

Cross and Slater (2000) attribute the persistent racial discrimination against African American men as the major culprit for their abysmal educational performance. These authors found, "this 200-year treatment of black males as children [denial of manhood] continues to be a major factor responsible for black men's severe educational underperformance in higher education" (p. 82). Mutua's (2006) concept of gendered

racism leveled against African American men adds even more specificity to Cross and Slater's statement by further distinguishing the discrimination African American men face from that experienced by African American women.

Other underlying explanations for the dismal educational achievement of African American males include oppressive discourses and treatment that begin in early education and continue at each educational level, institutional barriers to equity and access in education, and employment discrimination which fails to reward African American males equitably for educational achievement when compared with their White counterparts. Blake and Darling (1994) state, "Black men have less incentive than White men to acquire education as data show the same amount of educational investment yields considerably less return for Black males" (p. 405). These authors further acknowledge that until African American males are rewarded for their efforts, they will continue to have less incentive toward educational achievement.

The family structure and relations, particularly the absence of positive African American male role models, the media's portrayal and glorification of successful African American men in occupations requiring little formal education, and the African American males' adoption of behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure also bear on their educational achievement. The decline in African American men's educational achievement has direct implications for the other challenges African American men face – employment and economic viability (Blake & Darling, 1994; Cross & Slater, 2000; Gordon et al., 1994; Irving & Hudley, 2005; Noguera, 2003; 2008). Noguera (2008) states:

Sadly, the pressures, stereotypes, and patterns of failure that Black males experience often begin in school....On every indicator associated with progress and achievement...Black males are vastly underrepresented, and in every category associated with failure and distress...Black males are overrepresented...Such patterns of failure and hardship are so pronounced and entrenched that they end up shaping adult outcomes and have broad and far reaching implications for the status of Black men and Black people in American society. (pp. xvii - xviii)

Noguera (2008) adds that the trouble with Black boys is that they are viewed as a societal problem and their needs as pathological. Black boys are assumed to be at risk due to many of the same stereotypes attributed to adult Black men in society at large. They are rarely thought of as smart and talented, particularly in intellectually driven areas such as science, music, or literature. Black boys are too often placed in schools where their needs for nurturing, support and loving discipline go unmet and where labeling and marginalization are the norm. Noguera (2008) calls on educators to question the assumptions they hold of Black males and to adopt attitudes and postures that are supportive of the boys they serve. He also acknowledges that “Black males are not helpless victims in this situation” (p. xxiii). There are many factors beyond the control of Black males that bear on their quality of living (i.e., quality of school they attend, kind of neighborhood they live in, where there are jobs available or employers who will hire them, etc.). However, Black males do have the capacity to make choices that will positively affect their lives – to study, work hard, not take drugs, support their children, raise their families, etc.

This belief in choice and agency is a strong theme in the career development literature. It seems logical that if African American males attend to making good choices and exercising their agentic capacities early on in their education, they could very well increase their academic achievement and equip themselves with the requisite behaviors to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development when they reach the world of work. Teaching Black boys these skills align with the African American men's concept of manhood.

***Employment.*** Without an education, the employment options for African American men are severely limited. With an education, the hurdles to employability can still be steep. Being able to provide for self and others is central to how African American men conceptualize their manhood. Employment is the means by which African American men can establish opportunities for self-sufficiency. McElroy and Andrews (2000) find, "Black males are in a precarious position in the labor market" (p. 161). The authors note what has become a usual refrain on African American men. The unemployment rates for African American men are among the highest of any demographic group, their participation in the labor force has continued to decline over the decades, and they continue to earn less than their White counterparts even when their education and human capital investments are the same.

However, McElroy and Andrews (2000) elect to take an optimistic and celebratory stance on the status of African American men. They opt to look at how the status of African American men has evolved over time and focus on the achievements, of which there have been many. The thought is that too little attention is paid to the fact that not all Black males are in trouble and that most of what is presented in the literature

reflect Black males as a problem to society. Of advancements in employment, McElroy and Andrews state,

Black males have made notable inroads into the professional occupations. The occupational upgrading of black males in the U.S. labor market during recent decades has been nothing short of dramatic. Black males have moved out of agricultural and private household occupations into professional and managerial occupations in increasing numbers. (p. 165)

The presence of African American men in professional and managerial positions has increased dramatically since 1960, growing from 5% in 1960 to 12% by 1990 to 22% in 2007 (Current Population Studies, 2007; McElroy & Andrews, 2000). These statistics should not be overlooked for they do reflect the professional achievements of African American men. This progress is largely attributed to the civil rights movement and affirmative action policies that granted professionals of color and women greater access to positions that were less open to them only a few decades ago. The problem with an uncritical look at these statistics, however, is that they fail to tell a balanced story of the experiences of African American professional men in corporate America and the continuing systemic discrimination they endure. What McElroy and Andrews (2000) neglect to highlight is that while 22% of African American men are in professional, managerial and related positions, 33% of their White counterparts and 31% of African American women occupy those positions (Current Population Studies, 2007). Many of the jobs open to African American men in the aftermath of the civil rights movement turned out to be racialized roles that may have provided greater visibility for African Americans in corporate America, but also made them economically vulnerable because of

a lack of growth opportunities (Collins, 1989; 1997). Today, African American men earn approximately 20-25% less than their White counterparts (Holzer, 2005). According to a 2001 U.S. Department of Labor *Report on the American Workforce*, African American men's labor force participation rates continue to be lower than those for Hispanic or White men. African Americans are expected to increase their participation in the labor force from 17 million in 2000 to 27 million in 2050 – and that increase will be due mostly to an increase in participation of African American women (Toossi, 2002).

Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard (1994) conducted a review of the social science literature concerning African American men from the mid-twentieth century to early 1990's. They found that racial discrimination against Black male professionals was also operative in the upper echelons of the workforce. They found African American males were continuously excluded from positions of authority, were deemed incapable of management or technical work, and earned less than their White counterparts. Moss and Tilly (2001) also found that stereotypes against African American men impact how employers judge their employability, how most employers tend to view African American women as more desirable hires than African American men. From a feminist lens, I surmise the preference for African American women is associated with power – the perception held by men that African American women represent a diminished threat to the power structure and likely demand less in terms of such things as job assignments, pay, etc. when compared with African American men. Once again, the indication stands that African American men are not only subjects of racial discrimination, but it is their collective position as African American men that marginalizes them in this society. McElroy and Andrews (2000) do well to remind us of the inroads that have been made

when discussed in historical terms. Yet, when viewed from a holistic comparative perspective, African American men continue to lag behind their White counterparts and increasingly behind African American women as well.

So far, I have discussed the employment challenges impacting the status of African American, middle-class professional men. However, it is important to note that African American men who do not prevail in their educational and professional pursuits find themselves caught in an underclass dogged by a full range of challenges and stereotypes. Wilson (1996), in discussing the disappearance of work in the inner-city, found, “For the first time in the twentieth century most adults in many inner-city ghetto neighborhoods are not working in a typical week” (p. xiii). Given that economic viability and the ability to provide for one’s family are inextricably woven into the definition of manhood, this does not bode well for African American men who find themselves in the underclass and out of work. This leads to the third challenge threatening the status of African American men – economic oppression.

***Economics.*** The economic oppression experienced by African American men dates back to slavery when they were introduced to America for the sole purpose of work and building an American economy. Then, they stood at the margins, unable to reap the benefits of the economy they helped to create. Today, many African American men remain at the margins. The gap between African American men and their White counterparts persist in almost every perceptible measure of well-being. Measures of income, wealth, poverty, employment, unemployment, housing, healthcare, and life expectancy all reflect persistent economic disparities between African Americans and Whites (Blake & Darling, 1994; Gordon et al., 1994; Katz & Stern, 2008; Patillo-McCoy,

1999). Blake and Darling (1994) found that the economic status of African American men is actually deteriorating and has been since 1960. They suffer disproportionately from economic downturns and structural inequalities in the U.S. economy (Gordon et al., 1994). For example, unemployment and underemployment rates for African American men are important indices of the economic inequality they face. According to the 2006 *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, the unemployment rate for African American men was higher than any other reported racial or gender subgroup. It was more than double the unemployment rate of White men, even considering the professional class. The unemployment rate for professional and business services industry was 7.5%, while African American males in that industry experienced an unemployment rate of 15.8%.

The explosive growth of African American men with criminal records, marital problems, mental health problems, substance abuse, etc. are all causal factors impacting African American men's economic status. Persistent discrimination, weak informal networks, transformations in the job market, changing views about women's roles in the workplace, changing geography of job creation, hierarchical and inequitable wage structures, and stagnant or declining wage rates are structural factors impacting the economic viability of African American men to a greater degree than their White counterparts (Gordon et al., 1994; Holzer, 2005). These factors mostly impact those African American men of the underclass, raising the point that Wilson (1978) made about the declining significance of race and the increasing salience of class as a determinant in the marginalization of the African American community. Regarding that body of work, Cose (1993) states,



Many read the title [The Declining Significance of Race] but not the tome and leapt to the conclusion that race no longer mattered in America. In fact, Wilson was saying nothing of the sort. He was making an argument [that]....The “life chances of individual blacks have more to do with their economic class position than with their day-to-day encounters with whites,” he concluded, citing a wealth of evidence that more blacks than ever were moving into white-collar jobs....He had little to say, however, about what happened once they got into those jobs....The examination of such matters was not Wilson’s purpose. His real concern was the black underclass, and the major point he set out to make was that the problems of that class could not be attributed to race alone, but were largely the consequence of certain economic developments. (p. 37)

In response to Wilson’s work, a host of scholars took opposing views and presented a body of literature that emphasized the role of race and racism in the economic marginalization of African American men (Gordon et al., 1994). Others, believing that class is more salient, have failed to give serious consideration to the plight of the Black middle class. The latter reflect the thinking that the issues of those who have made it to the middle class pale in comparison to the Black underclass. The more profitable stance is to acknowledge that race, gender, and class matter, and that both the middle class and the underclass have legitimate issues that affect their status in America. Cose (1993) found, “Formidable though the difficulties of the so-called underclass are, America can hardly afford to use the plight of the black poor as an excuse for blinding itself to the difficulties of the black upwardly mobile” (p. 8).

**Summary.** Manhood is a socially constructed phenomenon where the interlocking characteristics of race, gender, class and other socially significant markers form the hierarchical standing of who gets to be a “man” in the U.S. The different configurations of these positional markers form various masculinities such that there is no universal gender role for men. However, there is a standard in the U.S. by which all other men are measured – the hegemonic definition of manhood. For the U.S., the ideal man is White, elite, and heterosexual. All other men represent subordinated masculinities. The ideal man is expected to be a protector, provider, leader of his family and society, dominator and aggressor over women and other subordinated masculinities. Though African American men have attempted to fulfill the hegemonic definition of manhood, individual and structural barriers have prevented them from being fully accepted as men. The result of not living up to the dominant view of manhood is that African American men have been persistently maligned and the brunt of stereotypes, many of which are negative. Racism, and at times gendered racism, has precluded African American men from the privileges of masculinity in this patriarchal society. Classism also impacts the privileges available to African American men. Middle-class and successful African American men are viewed more favorably than African American men in the underclass, even to the extent that Whites may disassociate upwardly mobile African American men from their Blackness.

The reality is that African American men’s conceptualization of manhood is different from that of White men because their experiences in America are different. From a study conducted by Hunter and Davis (1992) with 32 African American men, manhood emerged as a multidimensional construct that defines being a man in terms of

the self, a man's relationship and responsibility to family, and a worldview or existential philosophy. The four domains of manhood included self-determinism and accountability, responsibility to family, pride, and spirituality and humanism. African American men were also more prone to emphasize the interrelationship of masculine and feminine experiences, the ideal of equity in male and female relationships, and the need for a more emotional and nurturing side of masculinity. This is a stark contrast to the dominant view of man as the dominator and aggressor over all things feminine.

African American men still encounter significant challenges that impact their image and status as men in this society. Namely, for African American professional men, challenges in education, employment and economics are salient. Each of these challenges is interconnected and represents a threat to African American men's ability to fulfill the role of manhood as they define it. The structural barriers to success in each of these areas are undergirded by a system of persistent racism and discrimination directed at African American men that is unique to their social position in American society. What is evident is that the confluence of race, gender and class, the unique experience of slavery, persistent marginalization, and ingrained stereotypes of African American men create a distinct conceptualization of African American manhood that is different from White males.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is a theoretical lens by which to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Bonilla-Silva (2003) offered that racism is "a sociopolitical concept that refers exclusively to racial ideology that glues a particular racial order" (p. 173). Racism is a

system of structural domination in that it differentiates power and access to privilege based on race. There has been talk of the declining significance of race, but data refutes that claim. Race and racism are intricately woven into the fabric of American life. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, 2006) found, “race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States – [and this fact] is easily documented in the statistical and demographic data” (2006, p. 12). Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2007) also speak to the centrality of race in America. They state,

Race is real! As a concept, race is complex and ever-changing...but it is real and it does matter....In fact, within mainstream discourse, it has become almost stylish to suggest that “race doesn’t really exist” – that a color-blind policy is the best policy – that there is no salience to skin color. Unfortunately, such negations and dismissals only serve to down play the significance and reality of “racial existence” and oppression. As the axiom asserts: denying a problem does not make it disappear.” (p. 21)

**The conceptualization of race in America.** America has long been confronted with the issue of “race.” Winant (2000), in reviewing the origins and historical evolution of race, asked, “Can any subject be more central or more controversial in sociological thought than that of race?” (p. 172). He defined race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (p. 172). Shuford (2001) elaborated by distilling race as a construct or set of normalized practices for defining and identifying people by racial categories, and allocating assets based on social, economic and cultural positions (p. 303).

It is worth noting that race as a way of explaining biological differences has no scientific basis at all, yet that falsehood is nearly as old as America itself. The genealogy of race was a European invention – a social construction born largely out of a quest for political and economic power. The American slave trade was justified along racial lines, as race was used as a theological and philosophical mechanism for ranking and classifying African Americans as sub-human, incapable of intellectual thought, unfit for freedom and thus warranting governance by their White masters. Slaves were taught that their “very color was a sign of the curse which he had received as a descendent of Ham” (Frazier, 1997, p. 134).

Following the emancipation of slaves, race remained a hierarchical marker for affording privileges to Whites, while denying those same privileges to African and Native Americans. Concepts of social Darwinism defended the stench of inequality, which had become fully and visibly entrenched in American society and its institutions until the cry for democracy from other countries made such “uncivilized” thought politically and economically risky for the United States to continue openly.

By the early twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois, an adult educator and social scientist made a “powerful and strategic argument for the democratization of race relations in turn-of-the-century America” with his empirical study of Black life in Philadelphia (Winant, 2000, p. 175). It was Du Bois who made the often quoted statement that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois, 1989, p. 10).

Contemporary thoughts of the race concept reveal that Du Bois’ statement is still appropriate a century later. After World War II, the concept of race was challenged more

vigorously as migration, urbanization and demands for inclusion and equality evoked social and political change in America. Winant (2000) held, “As a new century begins, a convincing racial theory must address the persistence of racial classification and stratification in an era officially committed to racial equality and multiculturalism” (p. 180). This contemporary view signals a break from Du Boisian thought on the “impossibility of racelessness” (Shuford, 2001, p. 309).

Race, however fluid, is still a salient and polarizing concept deserving of scholarly research. Ladson-Billings (1998) asked the rhetorical question, “Just what is CRT and what is it doing in a nice field like education,” as she addressed the value critical race theory provides in addressing problems in educational scholarship and practice, particularly affecting students of color. Tate (1997) found, “Critical race scholars are engaged in a dynamic process seeking to explain the realities of race in an ever-changing society” (p. 235). Ladson-Billings and Tate were referring to the relevance of race and CRT in education research, yet their findings are just as applicable to the present study where the relationship among race, racism, and career development illuminates the myths and unrealized goals of equality, color blindness and meritocracy in America’s workplaces.

**The nation’s president on “race.”** Barack Obama, the nation’s 44<sup>th</sup> President, is an African American. Throughout the political campaign, Barack Obama was celebrated and ridiculed for either being “too Black” or “not Black enough.” Race still matters in America. In *Barack Obama’s Speech on Race* (a speech Obama made during the Presidential campaign), Obama (2008) stated:

Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now... The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through — a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect.

He spoke of the history of racial injustice in America, the disparities that exist in the African American community, and the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. He addressed legalized discrimination that has contributed to the wealth and income gap and concentrated poverty in many of the urban and rural communities where the majority of African Americans reside. Obama, speaking of the tireless efforts of many who weathered the overt racism of the 50's and 60's stated,

What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way, for those like me who would come after them.

He opined that even those who do make it, race and racism continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. He resolved that America has work to do on the issue of race and racism. Obama (2008) held:

But I have asserted a firm conviction — a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people — that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in

every aspect of American life.... In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination — and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past — are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds.

What President Obama reinforced is that race and racism are endemic in America. To overcome the impact of racism, all Americans must acknowledge its existence, our complicity in racism and oppression, and our need to redress the disparities caused by race and racism to bring about a more perfect union.

**The tenets of critical race theory.** Critical race theory (CRT) evolved in the 1970s following disappointing results of civil rights litigation that failed to remedy racial disparities (Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998). The same movement and legislation that granted greater access to African Americans in the workplace underperformed in its eradication of disparate treatment. CRT was initially developed and espoused as a movement in legal literature to respond to the stagnation or rollback of critical civil rights legislation such as affirmative action. From its beginnings, CRT has had both “academic and social activist goals” (Tate, 1997, p. 197). The theoretical perspective has since extended to research in education, sociology and women’s studies (Taylor, 1998, p. 122).

Some of the tenets or defining elements of CRT include: 1) the recognition that racism is rife in American society, such that Whites are privileged and all people collude to some extent to reinforce White hegemony and normalize racism and oppression; 2) the acknowledgement that CRT is interdisciplinary and borrows from multiple traditions, such as liberalism, feminism, Marxism, and pragmatism, to provide a more complete



analysis of “raced” people; 3) the realization that people of color in American society have a “voice” emanating from their distinctive experiences with racism, and their stories are critical to helping change the mind-set of society; 4) the admission that certain civil rights concepts, such as color blindness, meritocracy, and objectivity, are ideologies that have contributed to the backlash against race-conscious redress by camouflaging and justifying the exclusion of people of color to positions of power; and 5) the realization that Whites, even the well-intentioned, support racial equality except when as Taylor (1998, p. 124) put it, “black progress exacts or imposes a personal cost to their position of power and privilege” (Shuford, 2001; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998).

For my study, CRT provides a powerful theoretical lens by which to understand how race and racism, power, privilege and oppression, and voice all illuminate the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Dixon and Rousseau (2006) recount Derrick Bell’s (1995) analogy of CRT to African American spirituals. First, CRT is a challenge to the dominant, dehumanizing messages of a racist U.S. society. Second, CRT argues for a need to examine contemporary events with a historical context in mind. Third, CRT represents a combination of struggle and hope. Dixon and Rousseau hold, “CRT scholars acknowledge the permanence of racism while, at the same time, arguing that this recognition should lead not to despair and surrender but to greater resolve in the struggle” (p. 2). The theme of liberation, they find, is a constant theme in African American spirituals. I find the balance between struggle and hope characteristic of my commitment to this study. I am a participant in and a product of corporate America. I see firsthand the need to expose hegemony and call into question White privilege and those structural systems of oppression that create inequities in the

career development of professionals of color and women in corporate America. The structures are recursive, meaning they are socially created and maintained by the people within the system. The idea that there are structural barriers to the career development of African American men is informed by Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which he developed to balance the debate between agency (the capacity to act) and the structural arrangements that impact social consciousness and behavior (Rose, 2006; Wheeler-Brooks, 2009).

I see corporate America as a malleable entity capable of the type of change that America yearned for as we elected the nation's first African American President, Barack Obama. I believe all the parties within corporate America have capacity to act upon the structures that constrain the career development of African American professional men – including the men themselves. It takes critical examination, courage and resolve to disbelieve the dominant oppressive discourses and to enact the change that will bring about more just systems where all of America shares in equitable opportunity structures and culturally relevant career development. The path is not an easy one. Race and racism continue to be salient in America. African American professional men in corporate America still encounter the double-edged sword of affirmative action, a glass ceiling, micro-aggressions, White power and privilege, and other material impact of racism. These challenges are discussed below.

**Critical race theory in employment.** I have designed this study with a key assumption: African American professional men do encounter racism in their career development. I come to that conclusion because racism is woven into the tapestry of American systems and life. It would be irrational of me to think that all other systems are

affected by racism, but somehow corporate America escaped the scourge. I counter the voices that say race no longer matters and that America is a color-blind meritocracy. I fully acknowledge that gender, class, sexuality, and other significant social positions are also at play and impact opportunities, power and privileges afforded to certain individuals and groups.

In corporate America, racism is reflected in policies and practices that bear on the career development of African American professional men. Affirmative action, the glass ceiling, micro-aggressions, and White power and privilege (e.g., good old boy network) are evidence that racism is operative in corporate America.

***Affirmative action.*** In 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 into law thereby setting affirmative action policies in motion. In the beginning, affirmative action was connoted as positive deeds to combat racial discrimination. The language of the order stated that it is the “policy of the United States to encourage by affirmative action the elimination of discrimination” (Katznelson, 2005, p. 145).

Katznelson also notes the language of the order: “Federal contractors...were obliged to engage in ‘affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed and that employees are treated...without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin’” (p. 145).

Affirmative action policies were enacted during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, but they grew under President Nixon. Employers and educators were required to take race into account in order to redress the disparate treatment and impact against African Americans. Companies were held liable for discrimination if their policies and procedures effectively excluded African Americans or diminished their opportunity – even if that was not the intent of the policy or procedure. This effectively

shifted the burden of proof of discrimination from the employee to the company.

Affirmative action has been challenged politically and legally. Yet, it has proven to be one of the tools to advance the nation's commitment to the ideals of equality and fairness. Affirmative action has been deemed the single most important factor accounting for the growth and sustainment of the African American middle class (Katznelson, 2006; Patterson, 1997). Katznelson states, "If affirmative action did not exist, the United States would be a vastly more segregated country... This post-1965 affirmative action has made our schools and our workplaces much more diverse" (p. 148). He continues that because of affirmative action, "many African Americans – especially black women – have achieved quite dramatic occupational mobility" (p. 148).

Despite all of the gains in access and equality for racial minorities and women attributed to affirmative action, the policies have reached an impasse and have come under increasing scrutiny. Efforts to circumscribe affirmative action began in the late 1970's and gained the support of President Reagan when he was elected in 1980. During his administration, Reagan appointed Cabinet members and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, an African American man, all opponents of affirmative action (Barrett, 2000). One of the reasons affirmative action has come under scrutiny is because it has become racialized. The focus on women's gains through affirmative action has been all but eliminated from the current discussion on the policies. Instead the discussion has been on racial preferences and benefits for professionals of color and on the supposed reverse discrimination against Whites. Women, particularly White women, have joined the ranks of those wanting to dismantle affirmative action policies. Wise (as cited in Barrett, 2000) found that White women perceived that affirmative action was preventing their husbands

and sons from getting jobs. Another reason for the opposition mounting against affirmative action is a belief by opponents that race-based considerations run counter to the ideal of a color-blind equality. Even some African Americans believe they have experienced a backlash due to affirmative action, including having their qualifications questioned.

African American men have failed to enjoy the same protections under Title VII and affirmative action policies as African American women (Harvard Law Review, 1991; Lacy, 2008). Some believe that African American men have benefitted the least from affirmative action. Initially, affirmative action enabled African American men to gain roles in corporations that had either been off limits to them or roles that were created to focus on affirmative action or racial issues (Collins, 1997). However, those racialized roles created dead end jobs for many African American men as affirmative action policies scaled back. After the early 1970's, companies attempting to conform more expediently to affirmative action goals began increasing their hiring of African American women because of the ability to double count women (Harvard Law Review, 1991; Lacy, 2008). The Harvard Law Review article stated, "This practice demonstrates that overlapping race and gender categories commodify black women's attributes and reduce the affirmative action consideration accorded black men" (p. 760). The article further states that "black men do not benefit in employment from privilege by gender; rather, they are totally separated from white men when blackness, a traditionally disenfranchised category, is combined with maleness, normally considered a privileged one" (p. 764). Stewart (2007) also addresses the need for race and gender considerations in hiring, but extend that same consideration in examining the hiring of African American men. He

states, “Companies with entrenched racism must go farther than proclaiming they are an equal opportunity employer. Rather, their affirmative action plans must include a race plus gender (i.e., African American males) provision” (p. 15).

***Glass ceiling.*** The glass ceiling remains a pervasive fixture in the corporate workplace. While some acknowledge that “women and minorities have begun to break the so-called glass ceiling” (Cobbs & Turnock, 2003, p. 215) and others agree that the ceiling may be higher on the ladder to power than it once was (Rosenkranz, 2007), evidence that the ceiling continues to exist in corporate America is well represented in the literature (Barrett, 2000; Palmer, 2005; Phelps & Constantine, 2001; U.S. Department of Labor, 1997). Johnson-Bailey and Tisdell (1998) found, “the ceiling still has different meanings for different groups” (p. 89). Bell and Nkomo (1992) used the metaphor of a “concrete wall” to distinguish between the organizational experiences of White and African American women managers, finding African American women experience a concrete wall – a structure that is not only more difficult to penetrate, but one that cuts them off from the mainstream of organizational life and that makes invisible the decision-makers on the other side. African American men have a similar characterization of the glass ceiling. They coin the barrier to upward mobility, a *brick wall* (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). In the report by the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, African American men executives voiced a concern that the rise and acceptance of other minorities had created a stalemate in their career development. They noted that their talents, education and experience are devalued in corporate America and they feared they were on the losing side of a zero sum game where the progress of one group is achieved at the expense of another. A 1997 U.S. Department of Labor report acknowledged that

the glass ceiling does appear to be lower for minorities than it is for women. This conclusion may support earlier contentions that race is a more determining factor of inequity in the U.S. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), but that when race and gender are at play in employment hiring and promotion, the ceiling seems to be lowest for African American men than for women of color.

***Micro-aggressions.*** America has matured, such that racism is a much more sophisticated and complex act of imputing privilege and oppression. The overt acts of racial oppression, individual and institutional, have been replaced largely by racial slights and covert racism – micro-aggressions. Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) found:

Microaggressions are subtle acts or attitudes that are experienced as hostile, and that fit a history and pattern of personal racial slights and disregard. They act as status reminders by their implicit suggestion of unworthiness, and have a leveling effect on the recipient (i.e., “Stay in your place!”). They promote “defensive thinking”...and force the individual to remain vigilant in order to preserve personal dignity and self-respect. (p. 36)

The racial slights are disorienting because they are episodic and provocative. Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) found that the everyday racism of micro-aggressions become a part of an individual’s intrapsychic structure. These constant slights can lead to feelings of invisibility, disidentification and negative self-efficacy, which have tremendous implications for an individual’s motivation, performance and career development. Barrett (2000) found that aversive racism also has the effect of marginalizing African Americans in the workplace. Aversive racism is the turning away from other people with the goal of isolating and undermining them. Barrett (in citing

Wells, 1998) found that an African American in middle management may experience aversive racism because as he advances in an organization, Whites may feel threatened that he is encroaching on Whites' rightful entitlement and privilege. Whites may then practice forms of aversive racism to ultimately marginalize, disempower, or even remove the African American middle manager.

***White privilege.*** Du Bois (1935) wrote about White privilege early in his career. He referenced the unearned public and psychological wages of whiteness in describing public deference afforded Whites regardless of socioeconomic status. This unmerited privilege provided Whites with unquestioned respect and flattery, leniency in legal matters, and access to superior education among other privileges. Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2007) hold the following on the persistence of White privilege:

It is through the privilege of Whiteness that 'difference' continues to be both defined and articulated. Today, while White privilege is continuously asserted in and through sites of privilege as a justification for racist practice, claims to White 'innocence' and the resulting denial of systemic oppression serve to leave the mechanisms for racism intact. (p. 81)

White privilege and racism go hand-in-hand because privileging Whites necessarily involves oppressing non-Whites. Dei et al., find that in order to have an open and equal opportunity system, the dominance of Whiteness and White racism must be disrupted. They find that critically addressing White privilege requires an analysis of how oppression is constructed. Wildman (1996) (as cited in Dei et al.) points out that "the invisibility of privilege strengthens the power it creates and maintains. The invisible



cannot be combated and as a result privilege is allowed to perpetuate, re-generate and re-create itself. Privilege is systemic, not an occasional occurrence” (p. 84).

Barrett (2000) discussed how White privilege manifests in the workplace. Some examples include how Whites can go to meetings and readily feel a part of the group, are heard and not ignored. Also, White hires would never be questioned on their qualifications as African Americans are. Whites are not the objects of speculation that they are affirmative action hires. The comparisons in career development, pay, and other tangible markers of career success between White men and African American men indicate that Whiteness is privileged – the tiebreaker when gender is the same. The “good old boy network” that White males enjoy is understood and discussed by all racial and ethnic minorities and women. It is understood that White males are privileged and that all “others” share in gradients of oppression.

**Strategies to negotiate the impact of racism.** Negotiate is a term that is used within adult education literature to denote “the process whereby two or more parties with both common and conflicting interests come together to talk with a view to reaching an agreement” (Newman, 2006, p. 129). I use the term to highlight that while negotiation is often such an interaction as defined, it is also a multifaceted strategy that might entail action, withdrawal, and even silence as means to jockey for power and accomplishment of interests. Negotiation is continuous, social, situational and political – as all human interaction can be defined. In short, negotiation is also a navigational strategy. What are the strategies African Americans use to navigate around the structural barrier of racism? Some of the strategies African Americans use to negotiate the impact of racism on their

career development include assimilation, biculturalism, mentoring, and learning to commingle structures and personal agency.

**Assimilation.** First, assimilation requires that African Americans suppress their cultural norms and values to “fit in” or conform to traditions, norms and values of the dominant White culture (Barrett, 2000). In corporate America, African Americans may adopt the dress, language, social habits, leadership style, etc. of their White counterparts in order to appear more like them. This is a tactic that African Americans sometimes use thinking this will lead to greater acceptance and career success. In social psychology, the assumption that a reduction in the salience of group boundaries and distinctions will lead to better intergroup interaction, is central to an assimilation approach. However, the homogenization of corporate America is unrealistic given the nation’s increasing diversity. Nkomo (1992) contends “race has been present all along in organizations, even if silenced or suppressed” (p. 488). The suppression of differences is the essence of assimilation. Nkomo further states that because the dominant group members in organizations (White males) are considered the standard or “the best,” others are defined and judged solely with reference to that hegemonic category. Thus, assimilation becomes a strategy to overcome the obstacles that African Americans face due to race and racism.

**Biculturalism.** Another strategy that African Americans employ is biculturalism. Different from assimilation where African Americans shed their cultural distinctions, biculturalism is the process of balancing between two different cultures. Darder (1991) defines biculturalism as “a process wherein individuals learn to function in two distinct sociocultural environments: their primary culture, and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live” (p. 48). Biculturalism derives from Du Bois’

(1989) concept of the color line and the dilemma that African Americans face in a culture where they must employ a double consciousness to survive in two worlds – one White, the other Black. Du Bois (1989) elaborated on the double-consciousness with which African Americans must alternate. He found:

The Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1989, p. 3)

Biculturalism posits that African American professionals must “evoke power strategies to successfully combat and manage oppressive forces in the dominant cultures” (Alfred, 2001, p. 113). For many, the Black world becomes a safe space where African Americans find strength, affirmation, and authenticity. Barrett (2000), in his study on the career development of African American human resource developers in corporate America, found that they adopted bicultural strategies to negotiate between their work and personal lives. The human resource developers reported seeking out relationships with other African Americans and immersing themselves in primarily Black lives away from work.

***Mentoring.*** Mentoring is another strategy that is sometimes used to enable African Americans to deal with the blight of racism in the workplace. The lack of mentoring in organizations has been found to be a structural impediment to career development (Palmer, 2005; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). Palmer (2005) finds, “The lack of a role model or mentor with political savvy, organizational influence, and power emerged as the factor that could have the most profound impact on the career development of African Americans” (p. 12). Thomas (1993) also found that mentoring relationships are important to African Americans’ career development. Thomas discussed two categories of developmental relationships. One, the sponsor-protégé relationship provides instrumental career support such as advocacy for promotions, performance feedback, coaching, protection, and challenging work assignments. The second type of developmental relationship is the mentor-protégé relationship. This relationship also provides career support, but also provides important psychosocial support as well, helping individuals develop and maintain self-esteem and professional identity. The historical tensions between African Americans and Whites can prevent the development of important cross-racial mentoring relationships (Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). These authors found that greater success was found in White males mentoring of African American women than in White males mentoring African American men. This signals the longstanding tensions between the two groups. Palmer & Johnson-Bailey also found that African Americans are less likely to be chosen as participants in formal mentoring programs and that most of the mentoring that is done is through informal means. The conclusion, however, is that mentoring plays a pivotal role in the career development of African Americans.

*Learning to commingle structures and personal agency.* A fourth strategy African Americans employ is learning to commingle structures and personal agency in their career development. Goodly (2007) conducted a study of 15 successful African American professional men and found that what was common among the men was their ability to employ a cultural toolkit whereby they commingle facilitative structural factors with personal agency to overcome institutional and structural barriers and the negative impact of racism on their career development. Employing various definitions of structures, Goodly found that structures are those principles that pattern social practices and systems, while agency is the intentional actions taken to reinterpret and mobilize those structures. As with all social systems, structures are politically based and reflect power relationships. Facilitative agency factors ( e.g., perseverance, adaptability, self-efficacy, and continuous learning) were used along with facilitative structural factors (e.g., family, community, education, and spirituality) to mitigate the effects of wage disparities, racialized role assignments, the glass-ceiling and other like structures that could hinder the professional's career development. I find the commingling of agency and structure an important concept because African American professional men must learn the rules of engagement to negotiate power relationships and navigate within corporate structures that from inception were not designed to work for them.

### **Career Development Theory**

This study aims to examine how African American professional men negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. Understanding career development theories and their usefulness to African Americans is central to this study. The problem is that there is a paucity of research on career development and race (Bingham & Ward,

2001; Brown, 2002; Brown & Pinterits, 2001; Cheatham, 1990; Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994; Leong & Hartung, 2000). Regarding the attention paid to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, Leong and Hartung (2000) state, “career psychology pays little, if any, attention to cultural factors and career development theories have traditionally held relevance for only a small segment of the population, namely, white middle-class, heterosexual men” (p. 214). Feminist scholars (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; 1994; Alfred, 2001; Bierema, 2001; 1998; Johnson-Bailey & Tisdell, 1998) have, however, led the way in critiquing dominant career development theories and positing new ways of theorizing career development to reflect the experiences of women. Bierema (2001) found that “Women began criticizing classical career development models during the 1960s” (p. 56). As a result, research has significantly advanced our knowledge of women’s career development (Leong & Hartung, 2000). Unfortunately, similar gains in our understanding of African American’s career development have not been achieved. When studied, African Americans have been treated as a monolithic group or the intersection of race and gender has been examined in terms of African American women’s career development. The career development of African American men is virtually absent from the literature (Humphrey, 2007). In this section I will provide an overview and critique of several career development theories drawing out the need for more theorizing of African American professional men’s career development. Additionally, I will review some of the empirical research and recent dissertations that highlight the career development experiences of African Americans and African American professional men, in particular.

**Classification of career development theories.** There are many ways to present career development theories. Generally, theories have either been organized

chronologically or by categories (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002; Chen, 2003). For example, some theories are categorized as psychological, developmental, or trait and factor (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). Bingham and Ward (2001) delineated career development theories as either major theories or culturally focused theories and Stitt-Gohdes (1997) provided the label “contemporary” to identify those career theories that expanded to include such variables as race, gender, class and context. For this review, career development theories are classified as either *traditional* or *culturally relevant*. Some attention is given to the original conception of career development theorizing done by Frank Parsons in 1909. However, the two main traditional theories reviewed are Super’s life-span, life-space theory, and Holland’s career typology theory. These two theories were first developed in 1953 and 1959, respectively, long before professionals of color and women had a significant presence in the workforce. The subjects of Super’s and Holland’s early theories were White, middle-class, educated males even though they and other scholars have applied their constructs to other groups. Since their development, these theories have continued to evolve and even today, they stand as two of the most influential career development theories in research and practice.

Culturally relevant career development theories developed after affirmative action policies took hold and began changing the composition of the workforce. The culturally relevant career development theories are those that considered more prominently race, gender and other cultural factors. The culturally relevant theories examined in this section include Cross’s (1971) nigrescence theory; Gottfredson’s (1981) theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation; Dickens and Dickens’ (1982) career development model; Cheatham’s (1990) heuristic model of career development; Lent,

Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT); and Alfred's (2001) bicultural life structure framework. The selection of theories was narrowed to those that have been influential in shaping career development research and practice and to those that continue to advance toward more culturally relevant career development for African Americans. The term *culturally relevant* as defined in the context of career development theories and practices relates to the inclusion and centering of contextual variables, such as culture, race/ethnicity and gender identities, values, and norms in the theoretical framework (Alfred, 2001; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1995; Hartung, 2002; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002; Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995). Hartung (2002) held, "Contemporary emphasis on contextual variables reflects notable movement toward attaining cultural relevance in career theory and practice" (p. 12).

**Traditional career development theories.** The first conceptual framework for career development came out of work by Frank Parsons in the early 1900s. Parsons devised principles that he used to help young people choose a vocation. From his principles, several standardized assessments were developed to objectify interests, values, and abilities, which were to help individuals decide where they fit in the occupational structure. Perhaps Parsons' greatest contribution to the field of career development was the schema for successfully choosing a career. Parsons (as cited in Brown, 2002) held,

In the wise choice of a vocation there are three broad factors: (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and knowledge of their causes; (2) a knowledge of the requirements, conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation,



opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts. (p. 3)

Many of the career development theories and definitions describe career development in terms of choice and adaptability or adjustment (Betz, 1994). However, the concept of choice must be examined critically when discussing the career development of African Americans. African Americans, like many other racial/ethnic minorities and women, have not had a full range of choices available due to race and gender discrimination, socialization, and a host of other cultural factors not typically considered in traditional career development theory. An early definition by Tiedeman and O'Hara (as cited in Stitt-Gohdes, 1997) described career development as, "those aspects of the continuous unbroken flow of a person's experience that are of relevance to *fashioning* [italics added] of an identity at work" (p. 2). This concept of fashioning an identity at work is important for at least two reasons. First, in American culture, so much of our identity is tied to what we do. Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2002) found, "In the United States, especially, many people view work as the most important source of their identity" (p. 2). In describing ourselves to others, it is likely that we will begin by describing our work, even position and title. Second, the very term "fashioning" carries the connotation of choice. Regarding the centrality of choice in career development, Stitt-Gohdes (1997) wrote:

The mere notion of career development implies that initially a career *choice* has been made. The term *choice* implies that a number of options are available from which one might choose. Although this may well be the case for the majority

population, especially white males, a very different set of choices may emerge when issues of gender, race, and class are introduced. (p. 1)

What Stitt-Gohdes highlights is the importance of career development to the person and how race and other socio-political factors influence career choice, development and outcomes. Barrett (2000) held, "Career choice theories have been routinely denounced for their lack of applicability to the career behavior of ethnic minorities (Leong & Brown, 1995), and African Americans in particular (Brown, 1995)" (p. 26). Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2002) also found career choice theories to be problematic for minorities and women because they tend to emphasize individual control over one's career and de-emphasize the role sociological variables play in shaping one's career. They stated, "Our denial of sociological factors influencing the pattern of one's career development...become problematic for many of us because we link work with self worth" (p. 4).

Parsons' early work provided another important contribution to career development theory. From his work evolved the actuarial or trait and factor approach, which dominated career development theories and practices for decades and are still within some of the major theories today (Brown & Brooks, 1996). The trait and factor approach to career development and counseling assumes that individuals have certain traits (interests, skills, aptitudes, etc.) that can be matched to occupational requirements through a process of reasoning and decision-making. The trait and factor approach, grounded in career choice, has limitations that prevent generalizing the theory to African Americans or other racial and ethnic minorities. First, the predictions of individuals' success in specific occupations are not precise because there are other variables such as

values, which can differ culturally, personal agency, energy and perseverance, that are not measured and that impact career success (Herr & Cramer, 1996). Second, the trait and factor approach does not account for positional factors, such as race, gender, and class, which impact a person's career options and resulting choices. Third and perhaps most notable, no documented studies have tested the trait and factor theory with African Americans. Thus, for a given occupation, it is not known whether the same traits needed for job success are the same for Whites and African Americans (Barrett, 2000; Humphrey, 2007). The lack of attention to race in career development theory construction is something that has continued despite the increase in workplace diversity.

Although traditional career development theories have been the subjects of numerous critiques for their lack of attention to race, gender, class, and other culturally relevant criteria, a brief review of Super's life-span, life-space theory and Holland's career typology theory is important for at least two reasons. First, these theories represent a rich history in career psychology and career development ideology. Chen (2003) held, "The majority of the established theories have their foundation in or are strongly influenced by the positivistic worldview" (p. 204). This worldview analyzes career choice and behaviors by matching a person's personal traits with the demands of the work environment (Chen, 2003; Hartung 2002). The second reason these theories are relevant in this review is perhaps the most important. Some scholars and practitioners are not convinced that such theories do not work for minorities and admit more research is needed to determine their utility (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1995; Bingham & Ward, 2001; Brown & Pinterits, 2001; Parham & Austin, 1994). Parham and Austin (1994) wrote that the omission of race does not render a career development theory completely invalid to

racial/ethnic minorities. Both Super's and Holland's theories are still held up as major theories and are applied broadly across demographic groups. Some research of these theories have included and even focused on African Americans (Byars & McCubbin, 2001).

*Super's life-span, life-space theory.* Herr and Cramer (1996) asserted that "the developmental approach that has received the most continuous attention, stimulated the most research, influenced the field of vocational psychology most pervasively, and is the most comprehensive is that promulgated by Super" (p. 230). Super's approach integrated personal and environmental factors in career development. He offered a longitudinal view of careers and career choice over the life span and established the relationship of self-concept to career development, two valuable contributions to the field (Barrett, 2000; Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002; Humphrey, 2007). Super advanced a set of propositions that made explicit the connection between career development and personal development. The propositions were general statements about the relationship of vocational development to people, their characteristics, and their interactions with the work environment (Salomone, 1996). He put forward the notion that the career development process is ongoing, continuous, and generally irreversible. It is a process of compromise and synthesis within which the development and implementation of a person's self concept operates. The basic theme of Super's theory is that a person chooses occupations that will allow him to function in a role that is consistent with his self-concept and these choices occur over the life-span. The life stages are growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline. During each stage, a person is expected to master increasingly complex career development tasks. Super's later

additions to his theory included the life-career rainbow and the archway model. Both expand on Super's concept that an individual's career development is integrated with adult development and the various roles an individual plays in life (child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent, and pensioner). The nonoccupational roles influence the adult career and together constitute the life cycle and life space of an individual. The archway model was designed in 1990 as a mature expression of how biological, psychological, and socioeconomic determinants influence the diversity of roles by individuals across the life span. Herr and Cramer note, "The keystone of the archway is the person who, through decision making, reflects the bringing together of personal and social forces as these are organized into self-concept and roles in society" (p. 218).

Super's theory is applauded for its close ties to empirical studies, though it is believed that its propositions have not been sufficiently tested (Salomone, 1996). Even empirical testing of Super's career stages is limited. Hackett, Lent, and Greenhaus (1991) (as cited in Salomone, 1996) found, the empirical study of career stages has been conducted outside the framework of Super's theory per se. They held, "Super's theory has often been drawn upon as a post-hoc justification for, or link to, research, rather than as an a priori conceptual framework for deriving research hypotheses" (p. 180). For example, Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2006) used Super's theory to illustrate how image norms may operate within each of his career stages, but did not test the validity of the career stages. They held, "An image norm is the belief that individuals must present or possess a certain image, consistent with occupational, organizational or industry standards, in order to achieve career success" (p. 318). Image norms influence career

choices in every stage of an individual's career. How messages about image norms are internalized and the long-term implications they hold cannot be underestimated by career development theorists and practitioners.

Super's theory is also criticized for its limited applicability to persons of color and women and the need for more systematic research to determine its relevance for African Americans (Barrett, 2000; Bingham & Ward, 2001; Brown, 1995; Humphrey, 2007; Palmer, 2001). Phelps and Constantine (2001) found,

The role of self-concept and self-referent attitudes have [sic] long been examined in relation to career choice and development. However, it has been noted (e.g. Gainor & Forrest, 1991; Snyder, Verderber, Langmeyer, & Myers, 1992) that these factors often have not been examined, conceptualized, or understood in the context of African Americans. That is, the sociopolitical and sociohistorical (e.g., racism, sexism, bias, and discrimination) realities and experiences of African Americans have not been considered. (p. 172)

These "isms" affect self-concept and image norms, which, following Super's theory, have a direct impact on career choices and developmental stages (Bingham & Ward, 2001; Brown, 1995; Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006; Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995; Phelps & Constantine, 2001). The linkages among self-concept, "isms," and career choice and development are extremely important in a study of the career development of African American professional men. Given how African American men are conceptualized and are the brunt of persistent negative stereotypes and discrimination in this society, it stands to reason that their career development is also impacted – and most probably impacted negatively.

***Holland's career typology theory.*** The second traditional theory reviewed is Holland's career typology theory, which is perhaps the most widely researched of the major theories (Bingham & Ward, 2001). Six types of personalities and environments describe Holland's career typology: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (RIASEC). Holland's career typology is grounded in "modal personal orientation," which means that a person's career choice is an expression of personality, experiences, abilities, likes and dislikes. Stitt-Gohdes (1997) found, "Indeed it would be incongruent to choose a vocation that caused dissonance with all else in one's life" (p. 19). Interestingly, several studies of African Americans utilizing Holland's career typology have found that African Americans are overrepresented in social occupations (i.e., enjoy the company of others, especially to help them) and underrepresented in enterprising occupations (i.e., enjoy the company of others, but mainly to dominate or persuade them rather than to help them) (Barrett, 2000; Bingham & Ward, 2001; Humphrey, 2007). Trusty, Ng, and Ray (2000) elaborated on the common characteristics of those preferring social occupations (S types). They state:

Holland (1997) presented characteristics of individuals who are the S personality type; and the presence of these characteristics is supported by research. S types tend to value helpfulness and equality, and ascribe less value to logic and intellectual pursuits. Religion is an important part of their lives. S types see themselves as understanding and interpersonally skilled, and see themselves as deficient in scientific and technical abilities. They have moderate self-esteem. S types are cooperative and responsible, but are frustrated by tedious tasks. There is

consistent evidence that women choose S occupations and college majors more than men. (pp. 50-51)

Trusty et al. conducted research using national data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics to study the longitudinal effects of several variables on choice of Holland (1997) social type college majors versus other majors. Participants were later adolescent college students. The variables included gender, socioeconomic status (SES), school achievement (reading and mathematics scores), social values, and self-perceptions of self-esteem and locus of control. The SES variable was comprised of parents' income levels, educational levels, and occupational prestige. Social values measured included the importance of helping others in the community and working to correct social or economic inequalities. They examined these effects for four of the five major U.S. racial/ethnic groups, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Blacks, and Whites. For purposes of this review, I am culling out the findings as they relate to understanding African Americans and their preference for social occupations. Comparisons between African Americans and Whites are also noted.

Regarding African Americans, Trusty et al. (2000) found that SES had an impact on choice of major. The strongest effects of SES on choice of S majors were for Black men, with increases in SES resulting in decreases in the choice of S majors. The negative relationship was also found in Whites. The authors found that helping others was present but nonsignificant in African Americans' and Whites' choices of S majors comparatively, and that correcting social and economic inequalities was significant *only* for African Americans. Other results showed a positive relationship between African Americans' choice of social occupations and self-esteem and locus of control. Whites with a



moderate self-esteem were most likely to choose S majors. Interestingly, the effects of locus of control were strongest for African Americans, although results for both African Americans and Whites formed a positive and linear regression line indicating that as locus of control increased, the likelihood of choosing S majors also increased for both groups. African Americans with moderately high levels of religiousness were also most likely to choose social majors. For Whites, the level of religiousness was on the higher end for those selecting S majors. The conclusion was that African Americans and Whites shared some similarities in their preferences for S majors and differences were largely a matter of degree. The biggest difference was in African Americans' strong sense of social values - correcting social and economic inequalities – as a catalyst for choosing S majors. Trusty et al. concluded that language and immigration may have had some effect on the Asian/Pacific Islanders' and Hispanics' results.

The Trusty et al. (2000) study invites scrutiny in its use of parents' information as the basis for comparison across multiple racial and ethnic groups where inequities and cultural differences abound. Additionally, generalizations about African Americans are extremely difficult, given that "Black America is a highly diverse and stratified society" (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993, p. 267). Spokane, Luchetta, and Richwine (2002) reviewed Holland's theory and the number of empirical studies done utilizing the theory. They found serious problems to be addressed in the theory's application across cultural and subcultural boundaries. Namely, comparability of sampling with respect to SES, age, employment status, gender, Holland type, etc., and consideration of fundamental cultural values were concerns that needed to be addressed before any universal variables or generalizations could be made. However, the Trusty et al. study does illuminate factors

that deserve consideration and might help to understand why African Americans tend to choose social occupations more than others. There seems to be some congruence between the findings from the study, African American cultural values and experiences, and African American men's conceptualization of manhood (valuing helpfulness and equality, importance of spirituality, and social justice). Interestingly, the occupation of business executive is found within the enterprising personality type and occupational roles. Understandably, individuals usually do not fall solely within one personality or occupational type. However, what insight does this provide in understanding African American men's career development in corporate America? Does the enterprising occupation of corporate executive cause cognitive or cultural dissonance for the African American professional man? What does the career choice or preference for social occupations say about African Americans and the impact of race, gender and culture in the development of vocational personality types? Bingham and Ward (2001) asked this very question and referred to a model described by Fouad and Bingham (1995) that purports that "people of color are born with genetic traits that influence career choice" (p. 53). Admittedly, Bingham and Ward note there is no research to support the Fouad and Bingham contention. The more reasonable explanation is that career choice is socially constructed; it is the result of positionality, cultural context, life experiences and reinforcing messages and behaviors (Barrett, 2000; Gottfredson, 2002; Leong & Hartung, 2000; Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007). Herr and Cramer (1996) held, "as persons explore occupational possibilities, they use stereotypes of themselves and stereotypes of occupations to guide their search" (p. 200). Given what we know of the stereotypes impacting the self-concept of African American men in this society, their selection of

careers may be guided by factors that have been understudied in career development theory and research. Trusty et al. (2000) concluded that even though Holland's theory has been applied across multiple racial/ethnic groups, to include African Americans, the theory still needs further adjustment and research.

Lastly, Holland's theory acknowledges the presence of "isms," and the limitations this provides on career choice. However, the theory does not articulate the consequences of selecting from a restricted set of options, which is the experience of African Americans (Barrett, 2000). Young, Marshall, and Valach (2007) observed that culture is rarely made explicit in career theories. Concurring with Barrett's findings, Young et al., found that [traditional] career theories make only an occasional reference to cultural issues and rarely demonstrate how those issues impact career choice and decision-making. In fact, they found "Rooting occupational choice in personality and interest factors...may actually serve as a means of protecting or isolating the individual from the culture" (p. 7).

In summary, both Super and Holland provided a foundation for career development literature and some of their postulates (e.g., career development over the life-span, importance of self-concept, person-environment congruence, and career choice) have been supported in research with African Americans. However, because their theories were originally developed by studying the experiences of middle class White males, most scholars and practitioners agree that both theories demand more research attention before concluding broader utility to African Americans, other minorities and women.

**Culturally relevant career development theories.** The culturally relevant career development theories included in this review delve into issues of race, gender, and context. They derive from social constructivist ideology, which views career as a complex, dynamic, evolving and socially constructed process that involves a person's individual actions and interactions with others (Chen, 2003; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005; Young et al., 2007). The culturally relevant theories examined here are presented chronologically to reflect the field's attempts to keep pace with current realities in the workplace: Cross's (1971) nigrescence theory; Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation; Dickens and Dickens' (1982) career development model; Lent et al.'s (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT); and Alfred's (2001) bicultural life structure framework. The prevailing thought is that no single, comprehensive model of career development exists that addresses the issues of racial and ethnic minorities (Barrett, 2000; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Humphrey, 2007; Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995).

***Cross's nigrescence theory.*** Understanding that African Americans are not a monolithic group, that traditional models fail to account for individual and within group experiences of African Americans, and that race and culture play an integral role in career development, the nigrescence theory was developed as a model of African self-consciousness (Cuyjet & Associates, 2006). Racial identity models, like Cross's, are "essential for providing appropriate career development interventions" (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002, p. 104). Parham and Austin (1994) also noted the use of Cross's model of nigrescence in career development to understand the relationship between racial/ethnic identity development and perceptions of vocational options. The model follows four

stages of racial identity (1) preencounter, (2) encounter, (3) immersion-emersion, and (4) internalization. Each stage reflects a progression of identity moving from a denial of race as a factor in gaining acceptance and mobility to an Africentric point of view to the ultimate stage of positive self-identity, acceptance and appreciation of multiculturalism. In the Internalization stage, the African American can integrate his or her positive racial identity effectively within the workplace, while combating racism and stereotypes (Barrett, 2000; Parham & Austin, 1994; Worrell, Cross, Jr., & Vandiver, 2001).

While not a career development theory in the purist sense of the term, the nigrescence theory has been applied to explain the career development and behavior of African Americans. It has been used in studies along with other career development theories such as Gottfredson's theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation; Holland's career typology theory; feminist identity development theory; and Parham and Austin's (1994) nigrescence study (Byars & McCubbin, 2001). Byars (2001) underscored the importance of Black racial identity development as useful in explaining career interests, choices, and values. Individuals at different stages of identity development hold varying perceptions about career options available to them and attitudes that affect their career choices, behavior and development. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that racial attitudes and consciousness, not just a racial designation, all impact African Americans' career development (Brown & Pinterits, 2001; Byars, 2001; Parham & Austin, 1994). Parham and Austin recommended that instead of devising new career development theories, traditional theories (e.g., Super's and Holland's) could be augmented to encompass African American culture and intragroup variations along the racial identity continuum.

A critique of the nigrescence theory is that it does not account for gender differences. Issues facing African American men may be very different from those faced by African American women (Bingham & Ward, 2001). Specifically, gender stereotypes and how the intersection of race and gender affects identity development are not addressed. Secondly, while the nigrescence construct explains the African American's stage of racial identity, it does not account for the perceptions held by the wider society and how these perceptions impact the African American's career development (Brown & Pinterits, 2001). Brown and Pinterits (2001) held, "Indeed, racism and sexism, the differential structure of opportunity, the lesser social value ascribed to many African American persons is a function of how members of the dominant social group perceive them" (p. 17). These perceptions have a direct relationship to the structural barrier of discrimination in a way that constrains career choice and development. Thirdly, the research on applying racial identity, and specifically the nigrescence construct to understand the effect on career choice and development, has been "scant, unsystematic, and mixed" (Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001, p. 183). The consensus seems to be that more research is needed (Barrett, 2000).

***Gottfredson's theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation.***

Gottfredson developed her theory in part to explain gender and class differences in career development and the barriers individuals face. The major concepts of the theory are that individuals act on their self-perceptions of themselves (self-concept); they hold images of occupations, including the personalities of those within those occupations; and the images are organized in a cognitive map of occupations. Gottfredson assumes that Americans from all segments of society share the same images of occupations and distinguish them

along dimensions such as masculinity-femininity, prestige level, and field of work. Stitt-Gohdes (1997) held, "Gottfredson's theory is the marriage of one's self-concept with one's image of occupations" (p. 14). It is similar to Super's and Holland's theories in that Gottfredson also recognizes that career choice is a developmental process and the success lies in how well the career choice fits with an individual's personality and self-concept. However, Gottfredson's theory is distinguishable because she sees career choice as a volitional act that begins in early childhood where young people begin to narrow possible career options long before they reach the labor market. Gottfredson's attention to career decisions made during childhood is intentional. She states, "I have chosen to address a lacuna shared by all theories of careers: Where do interests, abilities, and other determinants of vocational choice themselves come from" (Gottfredson, 2002, p. 86)? Her theory is an important contribution to the field of career development theory because it attempts to trace back to the earliest moments when individuals begin to make decisions about careers, the messages that influence those decisions, and the impact of socialization on career choice.

The theory of circumscription, compromise and self-creation is described as follows: Individuals identify the occupations they most prefer by assessing the compatibility of different occupations with their images of themselves. The greater the perceived compatibility, the stronger the person's preference. Individuals may seek out but rarely achieve compatibility with all elements of self. Occupations that conflict with core elements of the self-concept will be most strongly rejected. The theory postulates that (1) public presentations of masculinity-femininity will be most carefully guarded, (2) protecting social standing among one's fellows will be of considerable but lesser concern,

and (3) ensuring fulfillment of activity preferences and personality needs via occupation will be of least concern. An individual's most preferred occupations may not necessarily be realistic or available. Many barriers may stand in the way of implementing them. Individuals therefore must also assess the accessibility of occupations when choosing which vocational alternatives to pursue. Circumscription is the process by which children narrow that territory. They progressively eliminate unacceptable alternatives in order to carve out a social space from the full menu that a culture offers. Compromise is the process by which children begin to relinquish their most preferred alternatives for less compatible ones that they perceive as more accessible. Compromise can occur either in anticipation of external barriers or after they are encountered. The conclusions youngsters have about which work is suitable or unsuitable can have lasting consequences on their career choice, even before they are fully aware of the options (Gottfredson, 2002).

Gottfredson (2002) developed four stages of circumscription that represent a child's development of his or her self image and maturity as he or she begins to make meaning of work and their identity in relation to a career. The first stage is *orientation to size and power*. This stage occurs between the ages of three and five. During this first stage children begin to classify people as big (powerful) or little (weak); they understand there is an adult world and that work is a part of it. The second stage, *orientation to sex roles* occurs between the ages of six and eight. At this stage children understand sex roles and vocational aspirations are shaped by what they think is appropriate for their sex. By this stage children have already begun to rule out part of the occupational world based on their image of what is accessible and acceptable for sex types. The third stage, *orientation to social valuation* occurs between the ages of nine and thirteen. At this stage, children



are sensitive to social evaluation of what is considered low-status occupations and high-status occupations. By age thirteen, children rank occupations in prestige the same way adults do, and they understand the relationship among education, income and occupation. They clearly understand there is an occupational hierarchy that affects how people live their lives and are regarded by others in society. This stage begins the child's understanding of social class and they seek those occupations they perceive to be accessible and valued and reject those that are of unacceptably low prestige. Socially, teachers, parents, and others encourage and reinforce a child's understanding of occupational prestige. Those of higher socioeconomic status are encouraged toward higher prestige occupations as are those who are academically bright students. Similarly, those of low socioeconomic status and low academic ability receive messages that lower their occupational aspirations by lowering what is deemed acceptable or possible. The final stage, *orientation to the internal, unique self* begins at age fourteen and continues through adulthood. During this stage, adolescents begin to forge a more personal sense of self and through learning and experimentation they begin to discover who they can and want to be. Occupational exploration is confined to the images that were formed during the earlier stages. Sex-role types and society's expectations of each gender influence occupational preferences.

This fourth stage initiates the process of compromise where individuals begin to abandon their most preferred alternatives for those that align to their external reality. Barriers such as inequities in education, discrimination, and family obligations further narrow occupational choice. As long as the compromise does not threaten an acceptable gender identity and meets an acceptable threshold of prestige, the individual will

psychologically accommodate the compromises made in occupational choice. As individuals settle into adulthood, they may reflect on the compromises made earlier and may even free themselves from earlier images to pursue what they feel is their true calling in life.

Gottfredson's theory is important to the present study because it elevates gender and class differences and perceived boundaries in career aspirations. It was a timely contribution to the field when professionals of color and women began to increase their presence in the workforce. Aside from wanting to understand how interests and abilities are formed, Gottfredson wanted to put forth a theory that addressed women's career choices and development. The theory provides a map of the cognitive process of career choice that begins in early childhood and extends through adulthood. The impact of socialization on career choice is prominent in Gottfredson's theory, although Gottfredson believes that individuals are active agents in their own creation of self not passive products of their social environments. Gottfredson (2002) holds, "This apparent cross-generational transmission of inequality suggests that many young people are influenced by social stereotypes or other restrictions on personal choice" (p. 144). I find this an important point in Gottfredson's theory that may elucidate how African American professional men go through the process of career choice and development. I perceive the influence of teachers, parents and others in affirming or disaffirming perceptions about occupational aspirations during the early teen years as pivotal in the career development of African American boys. Research has consistently shown that African American boys are not nurtured in schools, but are consistently marginalized and tracked into the lower rungs of academic coursework, and are overrepresented in disciplinary actions (Noguera,

2003, 2008). Given the postulates of the theory, it stands to reason that African American boys may narrow their career aspirations immensely and this has ramifications for their academic and professional achievement. Gottfredson's work does not address racial dynamics, the intersection of race, gender and class, or how the experiences of special populations may fare differently through the stages of circumscription and compromise. Additionally, Gottfredson's downplay of the impact of socialization theory on career choice and development indicates an underestimation or lack of understanding regarding the sting that pervasive discrimination and marginalization can have on a group. The confluence of political, social, and economic barriers on African Americans' experiences is grossly miscalculated. Therefore, without extensive research applying Gottfredson's theory to African Americans and in particular African American males, the utility of the theory to this group is not known. As found in Super's theory, the need for more longitudinal studies that identify how variables facilitate or constrain the career development of African Americans over time is sorely needed.

***Dickens and Dickens' career development model.*** Dickens and Dickens (1991) stated, "In 1968, we became very sensitive to and interested in the behavior exhibited during interactions between blacks and whites because we were members of a new breed – black professionals entering white corporations" (p. 15). In 1982, their interest and research led to the creation of a model of career development for African American professionals entering predominantly White corporate workplaces. The Dickens and Dickens career development model acts as a guide to African American managers' mobility in large white corporate settings and "represent the learning process exhibited by

black managers as they pass through the four phases of development: (1) Entry Phase, (2) Adjusting Phase, (3) Planned Growth Phase, and (4) Success Phase” (p. 16).

The entry phase is characterized by no movement in terms of job growth, little or no direction from the manager, little or no direction in terms of personal goals, but a positive feeling for having secured the position. Anger, interpersonal and job discomfort are ignored. During the entry phase, the person believes the organization is a meritocracy, ignores racial issues and seeks to “fit in.” When the African American professional begins to experience dissatisfaction and frustration due to a lack of career mobility, they are in the adjusting phase. During this phase, African American professionals begin to see inequalities and harbor anger and resentment at seeing their White peers get better jobs and expanded responsibilities. Eventually, this anger is released and the African American professional may be viewed as militant, uncooperative, or as having a bad attitude. The third stage, planned growth, is the stage where the successful African American professional learns to manage his or her frustrations and develops a style that is more consistent with corporate norms. This is a time when the African American professional establishes a career plan and makes a conscious effort toward career development and mobility. Finally, in the success phase, the African American professional achieves basic career goals and is able to see progress; new and harder goals are set; self-confidence grows; and more value is placed on results than on verbal affirmations from others – particularly Whites. By the time the African American professional reaches the success phase, he or she is able to incorporate lessons from the previous stages, is aware of his or her identity as an African American in the workplace, and is able to confront issues of race tactfully (Barrett, 2000; Dickens & Dickens, 1991).

The Dickens and Dickens career development model is limited in a few ways. First, the model focuses exclusively on identity, attitudes, and behaviors of the African American professional. Barrett (2000), in his study on the career development of Black human resource developers, held: “The Dickens and Dickens model indicates that blacks spend more time than whites wrestling with inclusion and identity” (p. 50). However, Barrett also observed that while identity development is important in one’s career success, a model focused solely on identity takes accountability away from corporate systems to remove systemic barriers to career development and create more inclusive, culturally responsive workplaces. Essentially, in the Dickens and Dickens model, career development is the responsibility of the individual and the impact of contextual factors are not foreground, which is a key concept in culturally relevant career development models. Dickens and Dickens (1991) held, “the two major issues of concern in our model are survival and success” which they go on to explain are covered by looking at the individual’s attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and job skills (p. 19). Second, the Dickens and Dickens model presents a generic formula for a monolithic group – the African American manager. The research that led to the creation of the model involved a structured survey distributed to a group of African American male managers. While useful for this present review, the analysis of gender differences at each of the four stages might yield additional insights in this model. Third, the Dickens and Dickens model does not provide guidance to African American professionals trying to break into the managerial ranks. Fourth, Dickens and Dickens assert that the phases are sequential and are never skipped. This seems a definitive assertion given the complexity of human emotions and behaviors as a person interacts with his or her environment. Lastly, the

model is more of a practical guide for African Americans than a research-based and tested theory of career development. More research on how the model has been applied and the results of that application are needed to know if the model is current for today's African American professional.

***Cheatham's heuristic model of African American career development.***

Cheatham conceptualized a culturally specific career development model for African Americans within an Africentric framework. The theory is based on the premise that African Americans have retained culturally relevant values, attitudes and beliefs that were inherent to their African origins. The legacy of slavery yielded unique cultural norms, conduct, group solidarity, etc. that are germane to African Americans collectively. Cheatham (1990) held, "In apposition to the western philosophic system, or Eurocentrism, African tradition has no central emphasis on the individual; rather, the individual's being in authenticated only in terms of others" (p. 3). Values such as interdependence, communalism, and mutuality take precedence over individuation and competition. "It might follow, then, that the overrepresentation of African Americans in careers and occupations in the social and behavioral sciences is, in part, a manifestation of the Africentric value of working with others instead of in direct competition" (Cheatham, 1990, pp. 6-7). Conceptual models and career development interventions must incorporate these Africentric perspectives without implicating that those perspectives are in some way dysfunctional or inferior. Theoretical models that force African Americans to acculturate or accommodate solely to the majority culture or Eurocentric structures do not reflect a respect for the cultural distinctiveness of African Americans.

Cheatham (1990) believed that traditional theories, such as Super's and Holland's theories, could incorporate African American culture. He advocates investing the Eurocentric with the Africentric social order to develop more useful career development models and interventions for African Americans. Thus, Cheatham's heuristic model provides a holistic lens through which career development can be viewed for African Americans (Bingham & Ward, 2001). Cheatham puts forth three propositions in his heuristic model. First, American experiences that are unique to African Americans (e.g., slavery and consequent social attitudes regarding race and color) are presented. Second, these unique African American experiences are combined with the African origins to create an Africentric social order. In the process of adaptation, not all African Americans will experience identical outcomes. African Americans are not monolithic. Depending on the degree of their acculturation between Eurocentric and Africentric worldviews, some experiences can enable one person while disabling another. Therefore career development is a personal as well as collective endeavor. Third, the Eurocentric social order has a direct and predominant effect on the career development process while the Africentric social order is tentative and indirect.

Cheatham's heuristic model centers African Americans' cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors. He recognizes that African Americans are a part of two cultures or what he calls co-cultures – Eurocentrism and Africentrism. His admonishment that career development concepts and interventions reflect the interplay between the two social orders is distinct from most other career development theories. Yet, a weakness in Cheatham's model is that it has not been widely applied and his theory has not continued to evolve over time. While other career development theorists have referenced

Cheatham's model, research on the practicality or results using the model are lacking. The model itself appears to have remained stagnant since its development in 1990. Additionally, though Cheatham rightfully acknowledges that African Americans are not monolithic, he does not indicate how the intersection of Eurocentric and Africentric values might lead to gender differences in the career development of African American men and women.

*Lent, Brown, and Hackett's social cognitive career theory.* Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) note that one of the trends in career development theory and research is an increasing focus on cognitive variables. They find, "Accompanying this quiet cognitive revolution has been an equally important trend toward viewing people as active agents in, or shapers of, their career development" (p. 255). Additionally, these authors understand that career development is not solely a cognitive or volitional enterprise, but that there are often external and internal barriers to choice, change and growth. They hold, "In short, a complex array of factors such as culture, gender, genetic endowment, sociostructural considerations, and disability or health status operate in tandem with people's cognitions, affecting the nature and range of their career possibilities" (p. 256).

Lent et al.'s social cognitive career theory (SCCT) derived principally from Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and focuses on three variables that influence career choice: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. (Lent et al., 1994, 1996, 2002). Lent et al. (2002) state, "These three variables are seen as basic 'building blocks' of career development and represent mechanisms by which people are able to exercise personal agency" (p. 262). Self-efficacy plays a significant role in how



people employ their abilities and this concept of belief in one's capabilities has been the studied extensively in career development research.

The SCCT shares certain assumptions with the traditional models offered by Super and Holland, namely agentic functioning is connected to a person's interests, attitudes, values, and career choices (Chen, 2006; Lent et al., 2002; Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001). Under optimal conditions, the theory holds that people will select careers that are consistent with their interests (Barrett, 2000; Stitt-Gohdes, 1997). However, SCCT differs markedly from those theories by providing a cultural context for understanding career development (Lent et al., 1996; Perrone, Sedlacek & Alexander, 2001; Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001). Specifically, Lent et al. (1996) acknowledged that optimal conditions do not always exist. They held, "economic need, educational limits, lack of familial support, or various other considerations may inhibit the pursuit of one's primary interests or preferred career goals" (p. 392). Gender and cultural factors are also linked to the opportunity structure such that women and racial and ethnic minorities may not have been exposed to opportunities and experiences that would lead them to feel efficacious about their abilities to pursue certain careers or to expect positive outcomes. Pope-Davis and Hargrove (2001) found that the SCCT goes beyond a cursory mention of cultural factors and "attempts to describe how cultural learning experiences directly impact an individual's personal agency. Personal agency, which is reflective of both self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, in turn, influences the development of career interests and career goals" (p. 179). In essence, SCCT attempts to balance personal agency and structural and environmental constraints on career opportunities. This balancing or commingling of agency and structural factors has been found to be an

important conceptualization in African American males' academic and professional achievement (Goodly, 2007; Noguera, 2003, 2008).

Any concern relative to the application of SCCT to African Americans is simply that more studies are needed to address the cultural specifics of this population (Barrett, 2000; Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001). The theory does not specifically address how the unique history of slavery and persistent racism and discrimination impact the self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals of African Americans. The theory does not articulate how one's motivation and sense of personal agency are maintained when outcomes consistently fall below expectations regardless of self-efficacy and behavior, which is the experience encountered by many African Americans (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Barrett, 2000). Additionally, the application of SCCT to African Americans has largely been done to understand the social cognitive process related to African American women's career development (Lent et al., 2002). No known studies specifically and explicitly center African American men. Therefore, it is with caution that the theory be generalized to the population of interest in this present study.

***Alfred's bicultural life structure framework.*** Alfred (2001) shared her story of being a doctoral student in an adult education program at a predominantly White college. It was in a career development course that Alfred discovered that traditional career development models were insufficient in describing her experiences as a woman of color. She reacted: "Wait a minute, what about my race? My sex? My ethnicity? What about the challenges and obstacles I encounter as I try to navigate the many cultures and their expectations?" (p. 109). She resolved that the themes from her biography did not fit neatly into the traditional career development models. Now an advocate for expanding

the career development literature, Alfred recognizes there is still much work to be done to address specific developmental experiences of people of color.

Alfred's (2001) career development model, born out of her study of successful African American women in the academy at a predominantly White academic institution, reflects in her findings that "culture and identity play a vital role in the career development of minority professionals in majority organizations... [and] allows one to examine the influence of both the personal and organizational dimensions of the developing career" (p. 123). The women in the study identified five factors that contributed to their career success: (1) maintaining a fluid bicultural life structure from which they could negotiate their identity and culture within different contexts using agency and individual power; (2) having a positive personal identity and Black cultural group identity; (3) finding a safe space where they could reclaim and reaffirm their identity, which may have been threatened as a result of their interactions in the White-dominated culture; (4) knowing the professional culture in which they worked and the institution's role expectations; and (5) becoming visible within their disciplinary and institutional cultures.

The bicultural life structure framework is organized as an internal and external framework, visually representing the bicultural life of the professional. Personal agency and power reside in the nucleus of the framework, followed by the internal career, which encompasses the psychological and personal contexts of career development (identity, safe spaces, etc.) and the external career, which focuses on the structural dimensions involved in career development (e.g., institutional cultures, structures, and role expectations).

Alfred's model is the only one within this present review that explicitly studies the intersection of race and gender. Although studies using Alfred's model have tended to focus on Black women's career development and faculty of color, Alfred contends that it is applicable to other groups that attempt to explore new ways of theorizing the career development of minorities working in majority organizations. The limitation of the theory is just that – its scant application to African American professional men and other racial/ethnic minorities working in professions outside the academy.

**Summary of culturally relevant career development theories.** The theories examined in the above section illustrate the gradual movement toward more culturally relevant career development. As women and minorities increased their presence in the workplace, career development researchers began theorizing models that could address the unique career development attitudes, behaviors and choices of these diverse professionals. Issues of race, gender, and cultural context figured more prominently. The future directions in theory building continue to be toward more culturally relevant career development for professionals of color (Barrett, 2000; Goodly, 2007; Humphrey, 2007; Palmer, 2005; Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001; Stitt-Gohdes, 1997). To build culturally relevant career development theories for African Americans, researchers and practitioners must coalesce to understand the historical, as well as the present-day contextual factors that impact the career development of African American professionals – particularly African American professional men, who some studies indicate are particularly vulnerable in today's corporate workplaces (Blake & Darling, 1994; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994; Hall, 2001; Harvard Law Review, 1991). This next section is to offer some insight into the career development of African

Americans by looking at empirical research and gleaning themes important for theory construction or revision.

### **Empirical Research on African Americans' Career Development**

More research on career development and race is needed. Cox and Nkomo (1990) conducted a review of 20 academic journals with a major focus on organization behavior and human resource management research between 1964 and 1989, seeking to report on research that addressed issues of race in organizations. Those authors concluded at that time that the amount of total research on the topic of race heterogeneity on organizations was small relative to the importance of the topic and that the trend was for less rather than more. Almost twenty years later, Cox and Nkomo's prediction seems remarkably true. Humphrey (2007), in his study on the career development of African American male high school principals, observed that research on the career development of African Americans was sparse, and even seemed to stop immediately after the 1970s and restart again in the 1990s for no explainable reason.

**Recent research on the career development of African Americans.** Consistent with Humphrey's findings, few recent studies were located that seem to respond to the call for more research on the career development of African Americans – and fewer still that focus on African American professional men. Barrett (2000), Palmer (2001), Cobbs and Turnock (2003), Goodly (2007), and Humphrey (2007) are examples of studies attempting to elevate the career development experiences of African Americans and continue expanding the discourse calling for culturally relevant career development. The studies by Goodly (2007) and Humphrey (2007) are focused on African American professional men and are highlighted in the following section.

Current research reveals the challenges African Americans continue to face in their career development. Consistently, research studies show that race is salient in the career development of African Americans. For example, in Barrett's (2000) study of 10 Black male and female human resource developers, respondents reported working in unfavorable racial climates marked by the double-edged effects of affirmative action, prejudice and discrimination, career plateaus and glass ceiling issues, and feelings of isolation that came from being the only Blacks in a department or in certain meetings. Barrett held: "Dealing with issues of race was a lens through which many of their experiences were seen" (p. 106). Palmer (2001) found similar results in his study of 10 African American male and female professionals in the training and organization development field. He sought to understand the structural, attitudinal and personal factors that facilitated and inhibited the career development of training and organization development professionals. He found the lack of diversity and the presence of the "good old boy" network were just two of the structural factors that served to inhibit the career development of his respondents. He found race and gender stereotypes and discrimination were common attitudinal barriers to career development.

In both Barrett's and Palmer's studies, successful African American professionals learned to employ strategies to help them manage and succeed in their careers. Barrett noted the use of bicultural strategies, which helped the human resource developers negotiate between their work and personal lives. He found that his respondents sought out and developed relationships with other Blacks at work and immersed themselves in Black lives away from work. Their choice of developing a strong Black-based support system reflected Alfred's findings that successful African American professionals often seek out

safe spaces to reaffirm their identity, which may have been threatened in their interactions with Whites. Both Barrett and Palmer cited mentoring relationships as essential to successful career development. Palmer (2005) held, “The lack of a role model or mentor with political savvy, organizational influence, and power emerged as the factor that could have the most profound impact on the career development of African Americans in the areas of training and organizational development, and certainly in other professional areas” (p. 12).

Cobbs and Turnock (2003) conducted a study with 32 African American men and women professionals with widely different career trajectories to understand the challenges and strategies they faced in their upward climb in some of the top corporations in the United States. These authors also noted the significance of race in the career development of African Americans. Cobbs and Turnock held:

Race is surely the most unyielding of the many issues that warrant your time and energy, but it must be addressed if you are to reach your goals. Even though it is not central in every situation, your race is part of who you are, part of how others see you, and a key part of how you see yourself. (p. 8)

In their study with the 32 African American professionals with varying individual biographies, the authors found common threads that enabled their success. Success factors for African American professionals included among others the ability to manage race issues and the frustrations and rage that surface on occasion, to learn to overcome feelings of isolation by establishing their presence and “voice” at work, to learn the written and unwritten rules of the game, and to understand where power resides in the organization and how to acquire it.

**The career development of African American professional men.** The career experiences and development of African American men require special attention. African American men are among the nation's most unemployed and underemployed groups (Chung, Baskin, & Case, 1999; Noguera, 2003, 2008). According to the 2006 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for African American men was more than double the unemployment rate of White men, even when comparing the professional class. While some have concluded that African American men must expand their job skills to compete for jobs with lower unemployment risks, others point to the disparate employment statistics as a reminder that systemic racism is a reality within many of America's workplaces and African American men are especially vulnerable.

In this section, attention is paid to a few recent studies on the career development of African American professional men (Goodly, 2007; Heggins, 2004; Humphrey, 2007; Merriweather, 2002). Heggins (2004) sought to examine the contextual issues and challenges facing six African American men preparing to be faculty. His study is not detailed here because the participants were in higher education and had not yet entered the profession. Still, his findings indicated the importance of networking and mentoring for these aspiring professionals. Merriweather's (2002) research on achievement factors for successful African American men is also a great contribution to the literature, but is not detailed in this review because its focus was broadly on African American men's success in society – not just in the workplace. However, Merriweather found that successful African American men employed resiliency factors and communities of support to sustain them (family, community, and a sense of giving back). The two studies examined in more detail are those conducted by Goodly (2007) and Humphrey (2007).



Many of the same factors enabling the success of those 32 African American professionals in Cobbs and Turnock's (2003) study were also found to be instrumental to the career success of 15 African American professional men in Goodly's (2007) research. Goodly conducted a study to identify the agency and structural factors that led to the upward mobility of African American professional men from diverse fields and industries. Themes from his research revealed familiar findings, such that institutional and structural barriers serve to constrict the upward mobility of African American professional men. Goodly concluded:

Whether these barriers manifest themselves as racism, neo-racism, discrimination, unsupportive work environments, racialized or powerless job functions, wage disparity practices, or the often-discussed 'glass-ceiling,' these larger structures pose a direct challenge to the upward mobility prospects of African American men. (p. 55)

Other macro structures impeding the upward mobility of African American professional men included the scrutiny and contestation of African American men's advancements and the role the organization plays in facilitating their upward mobility, which included mentoring and sponsorship. Goodly found, "corporations can establish work climates that either nurture or impede the advancement of African American executives" (p. 56). From the interviews with the 15 African American professional men, Goodly revealed the presence of 10 agency factors (perseverance, bravery, adaptability, ambition, strategic planning, continuous learning, gratitude, self-awareness, meaningfulness, and self-efficacy) and five midrange structural factors (family, community, education, spirituality/religion, and athletics) that account for the upward career mobility and success of African American professional men. Successful "African

American men employ their ‘cultural toolkit’ to combat larger societal structures that challenge their mobility quests” (Goodly, 2007, p. 20). Goodly concluded that successful African American professionals are those that learn to commingle agency and structural factors – that it is the interlocking of these factors that enable African American professional men to overcome contextual barriers and maintain their identity at work.

Humphrey (2007) also conducted his research on African American professional men. The purpose of Humphrey’s (2007) study was to understand the career development of African American male high school principals. Specifically, the focus of the study was on understanding personal factors, institutional and professional factors, and the role of learning in the career development of this population. Interviews with 12 African American male high school principals revealed that having a support network, a career plan, and personal confidence were important personal factors. Three institutional and professional factors were found to be important: mentors, encouragement from colleagues, and the perception that African American male principals are good disciplinarians. Formal and informal learning helped shape the career development of the respondents.

### **Chapter Summary**

The theoretical framework that grounds this study includes an examination of African American manhood, critical race theory, and career development theory. The confluence of these theoretical perspectives provides the focus for examining the career development of African American professional men. First, the understanding that African American men occupy a unique social position in American society where they have been historically and consistently marginalized and denied full attribution of their

masculinity is critical in this study. The ideal man is White, middle-class, educated and heterosexual. Only those that come closest to this ideal are afforded a measure of gender privilege. Without this understanding, one could surmise that African American men's career development is at least somewhat comparable to their White counterparts because of gender privilege in this patriarchal society. However, the reality is that because of the legacy of slavery, negative stereotypes, repeated denial of manhood, and persistent racial discrimination, African American men are often subjects of gendered racism. Partly due to political, social, and economic barriers, African American men have found difficulty in living up to the hegemonic definition of manhood – defined in terms of superiority or domination over those perceived to be inferior. However, the other reason why African American men have not always been accepted as men in this society is because they hold a distinct definition of manhood more reflective of Africentric values of self-determinism and accountability, family, pride, spirituality and humanism. Their idealized values of community uplift and equitable relationships between men and women stand in stark contrast to hegemonic ideals of individuation, superiority and competition. African American men still encounter challenges to their manhood and position in this society. The education, employment, and economic challenges they face continue to impact their image and status in society. Undoubtedly, these challenges in turn affect their career development.

The denial of manhood and the persistent marginalization of African American men is a product of systemic racism in America. Critical race theory provides a powerful lens by which to examine the treatment African American men experience in this society. Some of the core tenets of the theory recognize that racism is rife in America, that all

people are complicit to some degree in reinforcing hegemonic structures that normalize White privilege and racism, and that people of color have a distinct and important voice emanating from their experiences with racism. Policies, practices and social norms such as affirmative action, the glass ceiling, micro-aggressions, and White power and privilege (e.g., good old boy network) are evidence that racism is operative in corporate America and deserve consideration in the study of African American professional men's career development. Strategies that have been found to mitigate the negative impact of racism on career development include assimilation, biculturalism, mentoring and commingling facilitative structures with personal agency.

Career development theories have evolved over the decades as professionals of color and women increased their presence in the workforce. Traditional theories, such as Super's life-span, life-space theory and Holland's career typology theory, centered the experiences of White, middle-class, educated males. Although the traditional theories have contributed greatly to career psychology and practice, application of these theories to African Americans is widely suspect without more research. The addition of more culturally relevant career development theories has extended the reach to include positionality and cultural factors. Still, there are no comprehensive career development theories that center African Americans – and the research on African American professional men is virtually nonexistent. Recent empirical research on African American professionals and on African American professional men specifically is cause for optimism. The aim of this study is to contribute to that literature base and advance culturally relevant career development as a field of practice whose time is now.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Four research questions guided the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?
- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

This chapter is organized into seven sections: (a) design of the study, (b) sample selection, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, (e) validity and reliability, (f) researcher subjectivities, and (g) chapter summary.

#### **Design of the Study**

The study was based on a critical qualitative design. Qualitative research emanates from a constructionist epistemology that reality is not an objective, fixed, or measurable phenomenon, but is instead socially constructed as human beings interact with one another and their world (Crotty, 2003; Merriam, 1998, 2002; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Merriam and Simpson (2000) held, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives, to delineate the process...of meaning-making, and to describe how people interpret what

they experience” (p. 98). Though interpretivism is generally considered an uncritical form of study (Crotty, 2003; Patton, 2002), qualitative research has become increasingly critical (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002). I chose a critical qualitative design because it builds on the basic interpretive model, and includes additional considerations and characteristics relevant to the purpose of this study. Merriam (2002) describes the critical qualitative approach as an investigation into how social and political aspects of a situation shape the reality. With this approach questions such as: “Whose interests are being served?” and “How do power, privilege, and oppression play out?” (p. 4) become central to the inquiry. Merriam (2002) further defines critical qualitative research as research that “uncovers, examines, and critiques the social, cultural, and psychological assumptions that structure and limit our ways of thinking and being in the world” (p. 9). Crotty (2003) adds:

The critical tradition, encountered today most markedly in what we know as critical theory, is even more suspicious of the constructed meanings that culture bequeaths to us. It emphasizes that particular sets of meanings, because they have come into being in and out of the give-and-take of social existence, exist to serve hegemonic interests. Each set of meanings supports particular power structures, resists moves toward greater equity, and harbours oppression, manipulation and other modes of injustice and unfreedom. (p. 59-60)

A critical qualitative design raises questions about the influence of race, class, and gender and keeps the spotlight on power relationships and how those relationships advance the interests of one group while oppressing others (Crotty, 2003; Merriam, 2002). The aspirational goal of critical qualitative research is to go beyond understanding a

phenomenon to examining it in an effort to influence change or bring about emancipatory consciousness (Crotty, 2003; Patton, 2002). A critical qualitative researcher “eschews any pretense of open mindedness in the search for grounded or emergent theory....[and begins the inquiry] with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what conceptual framework will direct fieldwork and the interpretation of findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 129). In critical research, the “researcher’s main goal is to be ‘critical,’ to uncover and challenge the assumptions and social structures that oppress” (Merriam, 2002, p. 328). It is also quintessentially qualitative in that it seeks to give voice to those who have been silenced or marginalized (Merriam, 2002). The emic, or participant’s perspective, was the focus of this study.

In critical qualitative research, the theoretical or ideological perspective frames and focuses the inquiry. The theoretical perspective that guided this study was critical race theory (CRT). The underlying assumption expressed in CRT is the belief that racism is endemic to American society and serves to shape the realities of those advantaged as well as those oppressed by race. The very notion that African American professional men have different career development experiences attributable to their race and gender and these experiences are buffeted by systemic racism and discrimination are why I chose a critical qualitative design. I captured the stories of the African American professional men participating in the study to bring about emancipatory possibilities for them, while also undressing the systems of oppression and inequity that impact their career development.

## **Sample Selection**

I used a purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling is used so the researcher can select information-rich cases strategically and purposefully (Patton, 2002). With purposeful sampling, participants are chosen “on purpose” in hopes of yielding the greatest insights and understanding into the phenomenon under study. Merriam (2002) puts it this way: “Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 12).

There are many variations to purposeful sampling. The two types of purposeful sampling techniques that were of most interest to this study were criterion-based purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. In this study where African American professional men working in corporate America were at the center of study, the following criteria were important: (a) race, (b) educational attainment, (c) professional status, (d) longevity in corporate America, and (e) company profile. First, the participant needed to identify himself as African American or Black. Given the multicultural society of the United States, I could not assume that men of color that “look” Black would identify themselves as such (e.g., voluntary immigrants from Africa or Afro-Latino males who identify themselves more as Latino men than as Black men).

Second, each participant had to have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree from a four-year college or university. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines professional occupations as those that generally require individuals to have a college degree or experience and specialized training of such kind as to provide a comparable background. To avoid a subjective analysis of whether a participant’s experience or



specialized training is equivalent to a college degree, I made the achievement of a four-year college degree a baseline criterion for the study. Additionally, holding a college degree has historically been a criterion of indoctrination into the Black professional class (Durant & Loudon, 1986; Frazier, 1997).

Third, the participant had to be actively employed in a company and in the position of mid-management or higher as determined by his company. This criterion was important because it signaled the participant had some level of positive career development on which he could reflect. It was also likely that he had experienced one or more promotions and was aware of individual strategies or organizational factors that facilitated or inhibited his career development. The participant's active employment status meant that he was working within the system framing his experiences and perspectives – corporate America. In the spirit of naturalistic inquiry, having the participant employed in corporate America provided a greater information-rich case complete with contextual descriptions, which was essential in understanding the participant's perspectives and experiences.

The fourth criterion in the sample selection process was that each participant had to have at least 10 years of professional experience in corporate America and at least one year with his current company. Ideally, participants would have had a longer tenure in their current companies, but given the country's economic depression and the swell of corporate workforce reductions, I applied more flexibility to that criterion. Considerations of age and sufficient time for the participant to understand his company's culture, career development practices and patterns were vital to a holistic understanding of the participant's experience. Considering college graduation rates reported by the U.S.

Census Bureau typically count those persons with college degrees by age 25, I envisioned that participants would likely range between 35-65 years of age. The actual age range of the participants was between 35-55 years of age. According to the Census, the average tenure at present companies for men 35 to 44 years of age is just over five years, eight years for men 45 to 54 years of age, and over ten years for men 55 years and older. Removing outliers whose tenures were 28 years and 33 years on the high end and one year and two years on the low end, the average tenure for participants at their present companies was eight years. On average, the men's total professional experience spanned 25 years. The richness of participants' experiences and the evolution of their careers over time provided a better view into the phenomenon under study.

The fifth criterion was the company profile. Participants had to be employed in for-profit corporations with an employee population of 500 or more. Companies comprised of 500 employees or more are likely to have greater opportunities for vertical or lateral mobility. Those companies, then, were also more likely to have some type of career development practices, formal or informal ways in which they make decisions about employee growth and development, leadership succession, and career mobility.

In addition to a criterion-based sample, I employed the snowball sampling approach to locate participants. Patton (2002) describes snowball sampling as a process which begins by asking well-situated people "Who knows a lot about \_\_\_\_\_? Whom should I talk to?" (p. 237). Snowball sampling is a specific type of purposeful sampling technique that works as more people are asked to identify potential participants, the snowball gets bigger and bigger until the yield is new information-rich cases. Using the snowball sampling approach, I utilized my professional and personal network of people

to locate potential participants. I informed professional colleagues, family, and friends of my study and the criteria for participation. I asked if they were aware of any African American men that met the criteria. Through my network, I was able to identify a few participants. I asked members of my network to introduce me to the participants, which allowed me to explain the study and qualify participants for the study. I met participants for the first time either face-to-face or via telephone. I followed up the initial conversation by sending each participant a solicitation letter (Appendix A).

During my initial meeting with potential participants, I confirmed that they met the selection criteria and were interested in participating in the study. I then established a date, time and location for the in-depth, face-to-face interview. I followed up by sending participants a confirmation letter (Appendix B), acknowledging their interest in participating in the study, confirming the interview date, and requesting the participant review the accompanying consent form and demographic questionnaire. The consent form and demographic questionnaire are found in Appendices C and D, respectively. I gained a few additional participants from recommendations provided by the selected participants. I secured a sample size of 14 participants for the individual, in-person interviews and six of those participants also participated in focus groups - four participants for the first focus group and two participants for the second focus group. The participants in the focus groups were a subset of the total sample population.

### **Data Collection**

In qualitative research, interviews, observations, and documents are the three most common forms of acquiring data. The selection of data collection methods is determined by the purpose of the study and which sources would yield the best

information (Merriam, 2002). Jones (2002) persuasively makes the point that “Clearly, how data is collected influences what can be known, experienced, and told by the researcher” (p. 467). Using critical race theory as a theoretical frame where hearing the voices of the marginalized is important, I determined interviews to be the primary method of data collection. I chose individual interviews and focus group interviews.

Each interview approach provided advantages and disadvantages. The individual interviews were favorable in terms of gathering in-depth, personal accounts of participants’ experiences. Patton (2002) found, “individual interviews were 18 times more likely to address socially sensitive discussion topics than focus groups” (p. 389). However, in focus groups, the participants were able to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments. Marshall and Rossman (2006) held, “This method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum; People often need to listen to others’ opinions and understandings to form their own” (p. 114). Second, the focus group interviews cater to human tendencies as social beings and can be more enjoyable and relaxing than individual interviews for some participants. I sensed that participants’ relished the validation of their perspectives and experiences from the other participants. Likewise, as a researcher, I was able to recognize when participants had divergent views and that became a source of inquiry that led to a deeper understanding of unique experiences or extreme views.

In terms of disadvantages, both interview approaches yield mounds of data that can be time consuming to organize and analyze. I did not perceive any of group dynamics problems sometimes associated with focus groups, such as having the group dominated by one or two people or having someone with a minority view reluctant to share his

experiences. I attribute their openness during the focus groups to having gotten comfortable with me during the preceding individual interviews and to the fact that I had my doctoral advisor, an African American male, co-facilitate the focus groups with me.

Patton (2002) holds, “Every interview is also an observation” (p. 381). During the interviews I observed the setting, participants’ voice inflections, gestures, and other nonverbal cues as data points to help me understand context and meaning. For example, whenever I visited a participant in his office, I made note of where his office was situated, any pictures or artifacts that hung on the walls or lined his desk, and whether the corporate culture felt formal or informal. I paid attention to how comfortable participants felt in talking about the topic in their office space. During the focus group interviews, I paid attention to the interactions among participants and how freely they felt sharing their stories, supporting another’s story, or in offering different perspectives. I captured my observations in the notebook I used to document all the interviews.

I used the semi-structured interview approach for the individual and focus group interviews. With this approach, I was able to structure some of the questions, but remained fluid to pursue lines of questions based on participants’ responses. I used separate interview guides for the individual and focus group interviews. The interview guides are found in Appendices E and F the confidentiality statement for focus group participants is found in Appendix G. I conducted individual, in-person interviews with each participant that lasted approximately two hours each. The focus groups lasted approximately two and one-half hours each. Each interview was digitally recorded. I employed a transcriptionist to transcribe each interview. I then listened to the interviews while reading along to ensure the transcriptionist had captured the data accurately.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an inductive process. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) described the process of data analysis as “working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 157). Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe data analysis as a “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating” process (p. 154). As to when analysis should begin, Marshall and Rossman found, “In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis typically go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation” (p. 155). Likewise, Merriam (2002) stated, “one begins analyzing data with the first interview, the first observation, the first document accessed in the study” (p. 14). The simultaneity of data collection and analysis allowed me to make adjustments to my interview approach. For example, when I found that two of the questions yielded similar answers, I grouped those questions in the later interviews. As I found themes emerging, I was able to test those themes with participants and to recognize when I had reached the point of saturation in the data (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

The specific data analysis technique that I used was the constant comparative method. This technique is the core of most qualitative data analysis (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Data analysis for this study began once I conducted the first interview. Given the voluminous data collected and the ambiguous and iterative nature of data analysis, I developed a plan for managing the data for easier retrieval and analysis. I followed Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) analytic procedures for conducting analysis: “(a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes;

(d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report or other format for presenting the story” (p. 156). Marshall and Rossman’s phases of analysis align with the stages of constant comparative analysis prescribed by Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

First, I organized the data. I transferred the digitally recorded interviews to my computer and made an additional copy of each file on a portable disk drive. I labeled each file, noting the dates, places, times of interviews, and participants’ pseudonyms. On the computer, I established password-protected folders to safeguard the data. I placed the backup files in a file cabinet in my home office and kept the data protected by lock and key. Second, I immersed myself in the data. I listened to each interview prior to sending the file to the transcriptionist. I reviewed the notes that I had made while conducting the interviews and added additional thoughts as I listened to the interviews. I sent the digitally recorded files to the transcriptionist who transcribed each interview. After receiving the transcriptions, I listened to the interviews again, following along using the transcription records. I listened multiple times to ensure the transcription records accurately matched the audio file of the interview. I made some minor corrections to the transcription where the transcriber had not accurately captured a word or phrase or had listed a portion of the interview record as “inaudible.” When I was sure the transcription record was accurate, I placed the record in the format to ready it for a deeper analysis. I used the data preparation format suggested by Ruona (2005).

During the third phase of the analysis process, I identified recurring ideas and messages to formulate emerging themes. Marshall and Rossman (2006) found, “The

process of category generation involves noting patterns evident in the setting and expressed by participants” (p. 159). Initially, I used four different colors of highlighters to categorize emerging patterns in participants’ responses: yellow to highlight motivators or factors that influenced career decisions; orange to capture thoughts and experiences that facilitated participants’ career development; pink to highlight challenges that constrained participants’ career development; and blue to capture participants’ thoughts on the extent and reasons for their career satisfaction. As I continued to analyze the data and as additional patterns emerged, I was able to code the data into two larger categories: repressive structures and facilitative structures. I then added and moved themes from one category to the other as needed to provide the most cohesive reflection of the data into the overarching storyline. The fifth phase involved writing analytic or reflective memos of my thoughts, feelings, and insights over the analysis period. The memos were informal notes, sometimes questions or thoughts that I wanted to reflect on or pursue more in the data. I reviewed literature and I challenged myself on whether I was applying a critical lens to the findings. During this interpretive phase, I stepped away from the data over a period of several weeks to ensure that I was providing a fresh eye to the data and assembling the storyline in a way that the reader would be able to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study using the theoretical framework anchoring the research – the conceptualization of Black masculinity, critical race theory, and career development theory. Jones (2002) captures the analytic process that I experienced. She held:

Simply pulling out a few themes and ideas from the data does not constitute analysis. Deriving meaning from pages and pages of transcribed interviews or



field notes from observations requires the researcher engage in an inductive analytic process while staying close enough to the data to create an in-depth understanding of the exact words and behaviors of the participants in the study. (p. 468)

The sixth phase involved taking time to explore other plausible alternatives to explain some incident or theme. I engaged in self-reflexivity as well as reflexivity about the participants and the companies where they work. I questioned and challenged my biases and assumptions and inquired through a process of self-discovery, such questions as: “What shapes my perspectives?” “How do I perceive those that I have studied?” and “Is there anything getting in my way of seeing the situation differently?” I used member checks to make sure I was capturing the emic perspectives of the participants and I had my doctoral advisor and methodologist to review my final categories and themes. The members’ validation and my professors’ inquiries provided assurance that I had presented the data in a manner that was succinct, and theoretically plausible.

### **Validity and Reliability**

There is much debate in the literature as to how to think about validity and reliability in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research, after all, relies on subjective, qualitative data gathered through stories, observations and documents. In qualitative research, reality is socially constructed as humans interact with their world. Given that, there are many realities (Merriam, 2002). This major difference in perspective on what counts as reality requires qualitative researchers to think differently when deciding matters of validity and reliability. However, what remains true is that *all* ethical researchers desire to produce

valid and reliable research. I took my ethical responsibility in this research very seriously. Merriam (2002) holds, “both producers and consumers of research want to be assured that the findings of an investigation are to be believed and trusted” (p. 22). The believability or credibility of a study rests on its validity.

**Validity.** There were several things I did to enhance the internal validity of the study. I employed member checks, peer reviews, rich, thick description, and triangulation methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002). I sent the participant biographies and the initial findings and analyses to each of the participants for their review. I allowed them an opportunity to comment on whether I had captured their experiences accurately or had interpreted their quotations in the context they intentioned. Merriam (2002) writes, “While you may have used different words, participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation” (p. 26). The second approach, peer reviews, was accomplished by having my doctoral advisor and methodologist review and comment on my findings. Throughout the process, I consulted with both my doctoral advisor and methodologist on the data I collected and on the plausibility of my interpretations.

The third strategy, providing rich, thick description, ensured external validity or generalizability. Generalizing findings to other populations and settings in qualitative research is fundamentally distinct from the positivist-oriented approach. In quantitative research, data gathered from a random sample is generalized to the population from which the sample was selected (Merriam, 2002). Matters of statistical significance and probability are important when evaluating the generalizability of findings in quantitative research. In qualitative research, where words and impressions are prevailing sources of

data, generalizability is problematic and met with a great deal of skepticism. Marshall and Rossman (2006) find:

To counter challenges [to generalizability in qualitative research] the researcher can refer to the original theoretical framework to show how data collection and analysis will be guided by concepts and models. By doing so, the researcher states the theoretical parameters of the research. Then, those who make policy or design research studies within those same (or sufficiently similar) parameters can determine whether the cases described can be generalized for new research policy and transferred to other settings. (p. 202).

To meet the threshold of generalizability in this study, I provided thick descriptions of the problem under study, the theoretical framework guiding the research decisions, research questions and methods, sample selection criteria, context, and findings. The rich, thick descriptions are provided to help readers make a determination whether the findings can be transferred or applied to another group or setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002).

Triangulation is perhaps the most well known of the strategies used to enhance validity in qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). The use of multiple sources of data is a form of triangulation. The belief is that qualitative research is strengthened when the researcher employs multiple methods. To enhance the strength of my study, I collected data through individual and focus group interviews and observations during the interviews. I also had my doctoral advisor co-facilitate the focus groups with me, which allowed me to gain a different perspective based on his observations. I triangulated the

data by comparing and cross-checking the data for confirmation, illumination, and consistency.

**Reliability.** Consistency of findings is another consideration in judging the quality of a study. In positivist-oriented research, this is referred to as a study's reliability – or the ability to replicate findings (Merriam, 2002). However, reliability is also problematic in qualitative research, where the social world is always being constructed and the notion of replication is neither logical nor likely. Instead of reliability, qualitative researchers strive for dependability or consistency among the data collected and the findings. To increase the dependability of this study, I provided detailed information on the methods and data collection procedures. I also wrote analytic memos or notes, as I explained in the Data Analysis section of this chapter. These memos captured my reflections, questions, decisions, issues, and interpretations such that they reflect to some extent an audit trail of my interaction with the data and the findings that resulted.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

The researcher's position or reflexivity is the "Critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation" (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). Being self-aware and monitoring personal biases and assumptions are essential to designing and implementing a qualitative study that will meet the rigors of validity and reliability. However, self-awareness and monitoring are not sufficient to produce a credible study. Patton (2002) states, "Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry, a qualitative report should include some information about the researcher" (p. 566). I recognize that as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I brought to this

study my unique personal qualities and subjectivities that combined to make a study that is distinctively personal.

As an African American whose present research focuses on the career development of African Americans, I face certain dilemmas, challenges, and dualities familiar to researchers whose scholarships focus on their own communities (Alridge, 2003). Alridge wrote about the dilemmas, challenges, and dual agenda he faces as an African American historian of education whose research focuses on the education of Black people. The dual agenda he faces is his commitment to the concept of race uplift to improve the social and educational conditions of Black people, while also conducting research that is rigorous, precise, and respected by the academy. He acknowledges that all scholars who conduct research to improve the conditions of their respective communities face this same duality. Alridge reflected on the dilemmas and challenges of objectivity, presentism, and voice and agency that he faces in his research.

On the challenge of objectivity, Alridge notes that when he and a fellow African American colleague present their findings from research at conferences, White scholars often ask how Alridge and his African American colleague “remain objective and detached” from their research and how they avoid “contaminating” their research as African American scholars (p. 25). Alridge finds it unnecessary to detach himself from the community he studies. However, in his commitment to rigorous scholarship, Alridge finds it important to acknowledge his own subjectivities and to use consistent and rigorous methodological approaches such as triangulation of sources and careful explanation of his arguments supported by data. By studying how other scholars (e.g., W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin, Gunnar Myrdal, Patricia Hill Collins, James

Banks, and Joe Kincheloe) have approached the dialectical challenge of objectivity, Alridge concluded:

Objectivity does not have to be a mystical and entirely unobtainable goal....there are implicit and explicit ideological aspects to all research, that I, too, bring a conceptual lens to my research, and that I am inherently a part of all research that I conduct. At the same time, they have encouraged me to be rigorous in my scholarship and to strive for “strong objectivity” by recognizing my complicity in the communities I research, substantiating my claims with a multiplicity of sources, and offering a careful explication of my arguments. (p. 27)

Like Alridge, I find comfort in knowing that I do not have to distance myself from studying the career development of African Americans because I am African American, but that I can acknowledge my subjectivity and embrace the rigors of research in such a way that I advance the discourse on career development and race and thereby improve the social conditions and career development experiences of African Americans. There is no conflict between doing good research and uplifting the race (Alridge, 2003).

The challenge of presentism was especially useful to me in this study. The “fallacy of presentism” is “the historian’s mistake of over-reading the past into the present or forcing contemporary values and views onto the past” (Alridge, 2003, p. 27). My interpretation of the career development experiences of African American professional men in corporate America was about understanding the evolution of Black masculinity, the associated stereotypes held about Black men, and the histories of American slavery, patriarchy, sexism, racism and classism that converge to give insight into the modern experience. When I first conceptualized this study, I did not think about

examining Black masculinity from the time Black men were enslaved to the present, but gradually I came to realize that I could not discuss credibly the present-day experiences Black men encounter with gendered racism, without knowing how Black masculinity was conceptualized and changed over time. Additionally, in my critique of traditional career development theories I acknowledged the historical context of the time when middle-class White males were the norm group in the workplace, thus appropriate research targets of the prevailing career theories. I surmised that a critique of contemporary theories and practices is appropriate because there is still great opportunity to develop more culturally relevant career theories that speak to the issues germane to women and professionals of color. Alridge talks about the sankofa approach. He states:

Sankofa means “return to the past to go forward”....As a methodological construct for doing and writing history, sankofa guides historians to think of history not as events frozen in time, but rather as occurrences that are one with the present and future....The sankofa approach prompts us to see the Black experience in America – from its beginnings on the coast of West Africa, to the lynchings of Blacks during the early 1900s, to the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to the present – as one struggle. (p. 29).

The third challenge Alridge (2003) highlighted is the challenge of voice and agency, not only for the researcher, but for the communities whose stories and acts of agency have not been duly chronicled in career development literature.

**Insider/outsider status.** I expected to establish some insider status with the participants given my race and class. One of the sample selection criteria is that participants identified themselves as African American or Black. Sharing the Black

culture with participants enabled participants and I to relate to one another's experiences and to what it means to be African American in a society where the legacy of slavery and persistent racial oppression are common to the biographies of African Americans. The degree to which race was salient in a person's identity varied, but each participant was still familiar with and had some empathy for the plight of African Americans in America. For example, the concept of operating with a double consciousness and working twice as hard to achieve the same gains as similarly situated Whites were common refrains in the stories of African Americans and was also in participants' stories. Other criteria that united participants with me were that participants had to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree and work in mid-management or higher in corporate America. These criteria situated the participants in the middle-class, which brought with it certain class privileges and experiences. Like the participants, I too work in corporate America in mid-management and have first-hand experience with the declining presence of African American professional men in corporate America. I have had conversations with human resources colleagues and other African American professionals in various companies who report a similar trend in their companies. I work in the field of human resource development, so my study is conceived with that in mind. I am seeking to equip fellow colleagues and myself with the knowledge we need to influence, create and implement strategies that better support the career development of African American professional men and other diverse employees.

The one social marker that I believe mediated the relationship between my participants and me is my gender. African American women have become direct, and at times unknowing and unwilling competitors with African American men in the



workplace (Harvard Law Review, 1991; Holzer, 2005; Moss & Tilly, 1996, 2001; Stewart, 2007). The fact that African American women lead African American men in educational attainment and employers perceive African American women as less threatening and having better soft skills, which then factor into their employment decisions are two reasons why tension is mounting between some African American men and women. This tension was discussed in the Harvard Law Review (1991) that found, “The growing disparity in status between black men and women creates a distrust that threatens to divide a community of people with a remarkable historical ability to act collectively in redressing wrongs perpetrated against them” (pp. 767-768).

While I did not perceive participants mistrusted me, I did at times sense some of the participants chose to refrain from discussing tension between African American men and women in the workplace or they denied the tension. Even those who acknowledged that African American women are preferred hires over African American men, stayed away from placing any blame on African American women for those actions. I am certain that for some, my gender influenced their decision to not focus on the dynamics between African American men and women. A second important aspect of my positionality is that I am the daughter, mother, and sister to African American males. I am surrounded by African American men in my family who work or have worked in corporate America. I know first-hand some of their stories of accomplishments as well as overt and covert discrimination they encountered in their career development. This knowledge is a very strong influence in my research that I monitored carefully over the course of my data collection and analysis activities. I wanted to ensure that I did not project inappropriately into the stories of the participants, the biographies of my family members. The

experiences of my brothers were central to my decision to pursue this study. As a mother, I am also concerned about what my teenage son may encounter when he embarks on his professional career and what strategies he could begin learning now that will help him to be successful in his career development.

Third, I approach this study with a critical lens. Crotty (2003) contrasted research that seeks merely to understand and interpret and research that challenges, a research that accepts the status quo and a research that seeks to bring about change. Emphatically, one of my motivations for this study is to bring about change. Crotty notes that today's critical enterprise is expressed in many ways – one being in the power of ideas and in constructing knowledge that challenges the status quo. I wanted to enlighten and awaken the emancipatory consciousness of African American professional men regarding the hegemony of corporate America and how they may be complicit in their own oppression by accepting without question the norms designed to validate and reinforce White male privilege. I hoped to highlight the strategies that African American men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development and to achieve career success. Citing Kincheloe and McLaren (1994), Crotty also distilled basic assumptions that critical theorists accept, and which I accept. Among those assumptions are the beliefs that power relationships are socially constructed and historically constituted, that certain groups in any society are privileged over others, that oppression has many faces, and that “mainstream research practices are generally implicated...in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression” (p. 158).

I chose to anchor my study in critical race theory because I believe that “race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States” (Dixson

& Rousseau, 2006, p. 12). I believe racism is at the center of the disparities African American professional men face in their career development in corporate America. My belief is apparent in this study because I do not ask *if* racism has impacted the career development of African American professional men, but rather, I assume it has. My question, then, is how African American professional men negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. Supporting my belief that corporate America is a system where power relations and racism exist, Fernandez (1998) writes:

American corporations are a rather accurate reflection of American society...that if one needed any proof that American society has by no means succeeded in rising wholly above racism and sexism, one could do no better than look to corporate America. (p. 5-6)

Finally, I bring to this study my perspective as a Black feminist. I am excited to approach this study from the standpoint of an emerging Black feminist. Yet, I am also aware that because of my feminist standpoint, some men and other feminists will read this study with skepticism, greater scrutiny, and perhaps even disdain. Some men have shunned anyone declaring their feminism because of the belief that feminists see all men as “the enemy” and are therefore not empathetic to the gendered racism African American men experience. For some men that fact that I carry the banner of Black feminism, they may not even see my scholarship as credible. Additionally, some Black men have a longstanding fear that Black women will betray them to the White power structure, a belief that Black women are given preference over them, and that White men often use Black women to diminish Black men (Phillips, 2006). Some of the findings in the research validate their perceptions (i.e., Black women are preferred hires over Black

men). To this charge, Phillips comments, “Black women are continually trying to disprove the allegation that we collude with white men to the detriment of black men” (p. 217).

Alternatively, some Black feminists may see this study as misplaced attention. Those Black feminists might see this study as a platform privileging the Black male experience and validating Black male sexism when in the aggregate, they assert, it is Black women who are more economically and socially disadvantaged than Black men. They rightfully point out that it is Black women who suffer often at the hands of violence by Black men. Furthermore, Black feminists would emphatically object to the Black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race label and would argue forcibly against those with misogynistic thinking who ask them to conspire directly or indirectly in the continuous subjugation of women while bolstering male privilege (Phillips, 2006). Still other more contemporary Black feminists might embrace this study because at the same time they fight against the oppression of women, they also “live with and observe black men on a daily basis” (Phillips, 2006, p. 219) and in doing so, seek to correct the distortion that Black males consistently benefit from gender privilege. Phillips states, “If black feminism seemed to deny or to misapprehend the realities of black male oppression, then it was unsurprising that black women were reluctant to describe themselves as *feminist*” (p. 219).

I am cognizant of these various points of view and they inspired me to conduct this study with great rigor. As a feminist, I am joined to the struggle to end sexist oppression, as well as other forms of group oppression (hooks, 2000, p. 28). My feminist perspective is aligned with hooks, in that she clarifies that true feminism cannot be

defined singularly as a movement to gain social equality with men, for then, one would have to answer to which men are we seeking equality. hooks finds, “men do not share a common social status...patriarchy does not negate the existence of class and racial privilege or exploitation...all men do not benefit equally from sexism” (p. 69). She, like Phillips (2006), also articulates the tension that Black women feel in their support of Black men and feminism. hooks (2000) found,

There is a special tie binding people together who struggle collectively for liberation. Black women and men have been united by such ties....It is the experience of shared resistance struggle that led black women to reject the anti-male stance of some feminist activists. This does not mean that black women were not willing to acknowledge the reality of black male sexism. It does mean that many of us do not believe we will combat sexism or woman-hating by attacking black men or responding to them in kind. (p. 70)

As a Black feminist, I relate to hooks’ assertion that Black men are not our enemy and that we will achieve more together in the anti-racist struggle if we resist the socialization that teaches us to hate ourselves and one another. In pursuing this study, I resisted pitting African American women against African American men. I offered insight into the experiences of African American men and where appropriate reflected the synergy between African American men and women, but I thought it was counterproductive to the larger purpose of putting the spotlight on systems of power and inequity that end up affecting the career development of both groups. Phillips (2006) finds the trope “ain’t nobody so free as a black woman and a white man” implies that “black men are worse off than black women in the social order structured by American

white supremacy” (p. 218). To this, she charges that the trope “deflects from the social institutions and ideologies that are the principal sources of African American oppression” (pp. 218-219). The competitive victimization charges are not useful to eradicating sexism, racism or any other oppression faced by groups.

I used the information available on African American professional women’s career development to inform and illuminate the phenomenon under study. I believed the experiences of African American professional men and women are different and worthy of individual attention. I chose to study the career development of African American professional men because so little scholarship is available on this group and the consequences of this inattention are dire. The career development particular to African American professional men, the effect of gendered racism on their career development and the strategies they employ to mediate the effects of that racism are important to study because they hold long-term implications for Black men, the Black family and a diverse American workforce.

My interest in this topic does not in any way lessen my support of the matters pertaining to Black feminism. The sexism that women face in the workplace, particularly women of color, also deserves continued attention. In fact, my interest in this topic is reflective of the issues that greatly concern Black feminists – the eradication of sexism and oppression of other groups. African American women have long played a significant and valuable role in bringing issues of their communities to light and acting as catalysts for change. That was and continues to be my motivation and intention in this study.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology for this study. Issues related to the design of the study, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and researcher subjectivity were presented. The goal of qualitative research is generally to interpret the lived experiences of participants in order to better understand the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research is also increasingly critical where the aim is to challenge the status quo and delve into issues of power, privilege and oppression. Because my study was on the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men, I chose a critical qualitative research design. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Specific purposeful techniques used were criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling. The criteria for participants included: (a) race, (b) educational attainment, (c) professional status, (d) longevity in corporate America and with current company, and (e) company profile. I used professional and personal networks to launch snowball sampling and obtain the 14 participants in this study.

Data was collected using individual interviews and focus group interviews. Additionally, observations were made during the interviews. The analysis of data began in conjunction with data collection. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. To strengthen the validity and reliability of the study, I employed member checks, peer reviews, rich, thick description, and triangulation. I prepared analytic memos and notes throughout the analysis process that reflected my interaction with the data and detailed my impressions, interpretations, questions and decisions. Finally, I offered the subjectivities I believe influenced the study. I monitored my biases

and assumptions, which impacted my decisions and interpretations throughout the study.

I challenged myself to examine alternative explanations and I solicited feedback from my doctoral chair and methodologist on the plausibility of my interpretations.



## Chapter 4

### Participant Biographies

I look at me being a Black man in a corporate setting – I look at the positive things. I mean, what are the things about me being a Black man in America and having to work myself through a corporate structure? What are the things that really empower me and that make me different? And that’s when I come back to it – I say, you know what, if it came down to it, I could outwork everybody in here. If it came down to it, I’d be the last man standing.

*Mike, 35 years old; the youngest Regional Vice President of Sales in his company*

Not enough is known about the career development of African Americans, and particularly African American professional men. When researchers have focused on African Americans, they have tended to treat African Americans as a monolithic group or have delved more specifically into how the intersection of race and gender impacts the career development of African American women. Consequently, the experiences of African American men are unknown or are vastly misunderstood. This study brings to light the diverse backgrounds and experiences of African American professional men in corporate America using their own counter narratives. The use of stories, or counter narratives are a core tenet of critical race theory. Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) held: “The ‘voice’ component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice” (p. 21).

Fourteen men participated in the study, all of whom have reached levels of mid-management or higher in corporate America. In this chapter, I provide a brief biographical sketch of each participant using data contained in their Demographic

Questionnaire (Appendix D), as well as information I learned through the interviews and conversations with each of them. Table 1 provides a summary of key information about the participants. The chapter concludes with a summary of common characteristics among several of the participants as well as my observation of differences.

My hope is that by providing information on each of the participants' backgrounds, key people, life experiences, and my perceptions, the reader will gain greater insight into participants' responses and the distinctive aspects of each participant's career development. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, as well as others mentioned in their stories. Names of organizations were also masked or changed to conceal their identities.

**Table 1***Participants*

Name	Age	Education Level	Years of Professional Experience	Current Position	Field	Industry
Bill Smith	49	Master's	27	Vice President	Human Resources	Health Science
Dallas Ward	38	Master's	16	Senior Director	Marketing	Cable Media
Steve Bell	47	Doctorate	24	Senior Vice President	Human Resources	Media/ Entertainment
Mike Memphis	35	Bachelor's	10	Regional Vice President	Sales	Financial Services
Jerome Felton	55	Master's	34	Division Vice President	General Manager	Financial Services/ Data Processing
Henry Brown	50	Bachelor's	28	Vice President	Production	Cable/ Media
Gordon Sims	52	Doctorate	35	Director	Diversity	Utility/Energy
Alfred Martin	42	Master's	24	Senior Manager	Organization Development	Manufacturing
David Minton	52	Master's	30	Vice President	Client Services	Consulting
Celica Harris	48	Master's	26	Vice President	Sales	Pharmaceutical
Mitchell Johnson	41	Master's	14	Director	Human Resources	Retail Wholesale
Hank Foster	47	Master's	25	Vice President	Media Operations	Broadcast
Martin Jones	51	Bachelor's	25	Vice President	Human Resources	Transportation/ Logistics
Duncan Davis	50	Bachelor's	28	Group Manager	Product Support	Insurance/Risk Management

**Participant One: Bill Smith**

Bill is 49 years old, has 27 years of professional experience, 20 years of which has been in a supervisory capacity. He is vice president of human resources for a European-based health sciences company that employs over 3000 people in the United States. Bill has accountability for approximately one-third of those employees. He received his undergraduate degree in business administration from a historically Black university and his master's in business administration (MBA) from a private, predominantly White university ranked among the top 30 national universities according to the 2009 U.S. News Best Colleges report.

Bill's road to corporate America was not an easy one to project. Bill stated that throughout his growing up, "I did not have exposure to anyone who was in corporate America." He grew up in a blue collar community in the Midwest where most residents ended up working in the steel mills. Initially, Bill thought his future would also be working in the mills, and following high school he began working in a mill and joined the union. He quickly resolved that he wanted a different career. Bill said,

It didn't take me long, like literally four months, to figure out that this is not what I want to do the next forty years, like everyone else who works in this plant...The steel mill is very proud that no one died this year in this factory, and then people just being all around me getting injured, hurt, arms cut off, and everything...

That is when Bill knew he wanted a different career, and that meant going to college. Bill had received athletic scholarship offers from universities to pay half the cost of tuition, but his mother did not have the means to pay the other half. Bill thought that if he worked in the mill for four months, he could pay the other half of the tuition. After four months,

Bill called many of the predominantly White universities that had extended the offers, but by then they had exhausted even the half-scholarships. Finally, Bill called a historically Black university in the south. The coach told Bill that all the scholarships had been given, but if he could be there Sunday (it was Wednesday when Bill called the coach), he would make it work for Bill. Bill recalled his last day working at the mill; he finished his shift at midnight on Saturday and immediately his mother drove him 500 miles to the historically Black university. Bill remembered,

Mom, at that time was thirty-seven years old. She had to go to work on Monday.

So it was son, I don't know, this seems like a good place, call me and let me know how it goes, but I have got to get right back in the car and drive fourteen hours back home so I can be at work tomorrow.

Bill sums up his experience of getting into college as, "It started with someone taking a chance, right? Someone saying, you know, we are going to help you out." As I listened to Bill, I noted that he was careful to make sure that I knew that that "someone" was a coach at a Black university.

Bill's mother was unwed and nineteen when she gave birth to him. He was raised by his mother and stepfather. He has a brother who is eight years younger than he. Bill's grandparents also played a significant role in his childhood. Bill and his mom lived with his grandparents until he was seven years old. Bill attributes his work ethic to his grandfather. He stated,

I learned my work ethic from my grandfather, who worked in the steel mill, had a full garden, and had a house of eight people with one person with a job, and so I recognized the value of hard work, and he took me when I was five years old to

the bank and said son, a man has to be able to save money, and provide for his family, so ...we are going to set you up a bank account.

When I met Bill, I saw an African American man, well groomed, conservatively attired in a dress shirt, sleeves rolled up slightly, and dark slacks – no tie. He has a formal, yet personable style, which intersperse serious recounts of his experiences with light humor. For example, he told the story of pre-Internet benefits he received, which opened doors for him that might not have been opened. He said,

One of the interesting things about then is you know, we didn't have email, you couldn't go online and find someone, and when your name is Bill Smith, I often notice that when I showed up for the interview, they were surprised that I was Black.

Bill stands approximately 5'7" and looks younger than his 49 years. His pace is quick, yet I found him to be generous in trying to ensure that I was comfortable. I had some technical difficulties with the recorder when I first arrived, and he was patient. I remember thinking, he was either eager to tell his story, thus accommodating, or his personality was that which tries to put others at ease. By the time I left the interview, I had concluded it was both. Bill is a family man, divorced, but devoted to his children. During the interview, he was explicit that his children were a priority and have factored into his career decisions. He ended our interview talking about the graduation of his children from college and his daughter's impending entry into graduate school. He stated, "I'm proud of that and that to me is more important than me ascending to some other job."

**Participant Two: Dallas Ward**

After a brief slow start, what I now characterize as the warm-up, the first things that struck me about Dallas were his candor, animation, and sense of humor. We laughed several times throughout the interview as he gave colorful recounts of some very poignant career development experiences. The first account dealt with the path he took to deciding his college major. He said:

I always thought I was going to be a physician....and after my first lab, sitting in the front row and not understanding anything that the professor was saying, I called my mom and said Mom, I don't think I'm gonna be a doctor...I was a valedictorian so I'm one of those people, I was like really proud of myself on achieving and academics and just being smart. And so of course you know I'm sitting in the front row and I cannot understand anything – I'm picking up a couple of words – but he's [the professor] going – his accent – I don't know what he's saying. And I was being positively influenced by Bill Cosby and the whole Dr. Huxtable thing because I wanted to be an OB/GYN. And I said all that glitters isn't gold and this isn't for me....Now throw all that into the mix during my junior year, going into my senior year, I went to a job fair and actually started the application process to become a CIA agent. And I was on the path to becoming one and when they got to the later stages and they really started to talk about the realities of the job I realized that it was more than just James Bond and 007. There was actual harm that could happen to you, danger that you would be confronted with, and I was like I'm not doing that either.

He told that story with such theatrics, it made me laugh and our interview proceeded with ease. I surmised that humor is a tool that Dallas uses to engage and build relationships with others. Dallas ended up receiving his bachelor's degree in business administration with a specialization in international finance and marketing from a private university in the southeast, which ranks among the top six business schools in the nation for providing the greatest opportunity for minority MBA students (Princeton Review, 2009). Dallas later returned to the university to complete his MBA in marketing. His credentials are impressive, tracing back to his high school career where he graduated valedictorian, then college where he was elected the first African American vice president of student government at a university that had fewer than 10% African Americans, and now as a high potential thirty-something executive in a media company of over 80,000 employees worldwide. In fact, Dallas is 38 years old and is senior director of marketing. He has over 16 years of professional experience, nine of which have been at his present company.

Dallas's dress was professional and neat, yet stylish. His office was also tidy. He displayed mementos of his alma mater and fraternity, and pictures of friends and professional colleagues lined his desk and walls. However, in terms of Dallas's family background, he was less revealing. He only casually mentioned his mother, never mentioned having a sibling, so I got the impression that it was just his mother and he, and that he was close to her. I gathered that from comments he made about calling his mother when realized he was going to change his major and when he decided to take the job that would relocate him back to metro-Atlanta. He seemed to consult her on most decisions. In the decision to take his current job which placed him back in metro-Atlanta, he remarked that it allowed him to get back to his family support system, but the "system"



was not clearly defined – and I failed to probe for more. What was clear to me was that Dallas is a confident young professional, who values achievement. After he recounted a list of accomplishments where he served in leadership roles, I told him I felt he had an innate sense of achievement. To that he replied:

Yes, absolutely. It's kind of what I do. It's part of who I am. I can't explain it but I don't feel comfortable just being – come to work and you leave and that's it. It doesn't feel right. It's just always been a part of who I am.

### **Participant Three: Steve Bell**

Steve is 47 years old, has 24 years of professional experience, and 20 years supervising others. He has been with his present company 11 years, five of which have been as a senior vice president of human resources for the media and entertainment company that employs over 10,000 employees worldwide. Steve's academic credentials consist of an engineering degree from one of the military academies, an MBA from a top tier university in the south, and a doctor of philosophy degree from another top tier school that is located in the Midwest. Steve's resume and material success could mislead others to think that he came from a life of privilege. Yet, it was the exact opposite that ignited a commitment of high standards, discipline and legacy in Steve. He is attractive, well groomed, and articulate. He is an intellectual – conceptually expansive in his thoughts. He tends to use metaphors to make his points. One of his notable accomplishments in high school was his involvement in speech and debate.

Steve comes from a large family comprised of his mother, father, and seven siblings. In conversations, I vaguely recall a brother with whom Steve perceived as healthy competition. Competition was a part of his family's culture – the notion of doing

your best and winning. I noted that when I asked Steve about the factors that influenced his career development, he mentioned key relationships, such as his parents, grandparents, teachers, other role models in his community, and former bosses. He did not mention any of his siblings. Perhaps it was intentional or it might have been that he believed I knew about his siblings, since he and I knew each other and had many conversations about his family outside of this research. Still, it struck me as odd when I reflected on the interview. Perhaps the story that provided the most insight into Steve's background was the story of his parents. Steve said:

My mother taught me love on a level that I'll always appreciate, meaning here's a person who gave her whole life to raising her kids and gave her last dollars so that her kids could have better clothes, so they could go compete in my case in speech tournaments. Or they can be a cheerleader or they can go to college. Went to work with no money in her pocket. So that's a level of love that very few people witness. My father had the same heart. While my mother probably gave me my work ethic, my father gave me my heart. So here's a man who reaches into his pocket and gives me his last quarter so I can go buy a soda. So I can't even fathom as a grown man to not have any money at all, but I had a father who would do that. And so I was blessed with people like that. My mother, going back to her, I would listen to the alarm clock go off at 3:30 in the morning and I would hear her scratching her hand on the wall to turn on the bathroom light so she wouldn't wake us up. So I have images of my father giving me money and my mother getting up early because my father got sick and couldn't work. Being that committed to work all day – she worked at a nursing home as a regular

worker – basically a nurse’s aide for 30 plus years – so would serve people all day, come home and cook for her family and be a wife to her husband. And so I got people like that in my life. And so these are images that will be with me for the rest of my life...

I had heard Steve tell the story previously of his mother’s early morning rise to work, but it touched me that he still got emotional while telling it again. I made note to myself that the story of Steve’s parents revealed the heart of Steve. Regardless of the cloak of materialism all around him, his clothes, executive office, position in the company, home, and luxury automobile that he drives, Steve is a humble man with humanistic values and a deep sense of gratitude for all that he has accomplished.

He started his career as a military officer, and after five years transitioned into corporate America. While in the military he realized that he loved working with people, so abandoned his training in engineering to work in human resources. Steve spent his initial corporate career working for a large energy company before taking a broader role at a beverage company overseeing the human resources for three plants. He was at the beverage company less than three years before being recruited by his present company. The perspective he has of his experiences and the experiences of other African American professional men in corporate America is shaped by his dual experiences in the military and in corporations. Through his interview, it was apparent that Steve understood that African American professional men can and often do have differentiated workplace experiences from their White counterparts and even African American women, but he placed more weight on African American men’s self-efficacy and personal agency. Steve stated:

I've had models my whole life. I'll start with my parents. I came from a culture of people who took action. In other words they did not believe that – and they taught me that – that you just stood around and you hoped things get better. You've got to take action. And so if it's to be it's up to me. So I've always believed that....I really believe that as an African American male, and I've lived this, that unless I do something to differentiate myself, and again it could be through my education, my willingness to go back and get some education. But more so it's that I have to take action on the job, I have to implement initiatives, I have to implement change, I have to show success in my job through action that I've taken, not that I just held the seat. Because I don't think I could hold the seat. I think if I'm holding the seat I'm going to be gone sooner than others.

#### **Participant Four: Mike Memphis**

Mike, at 35 years of age, is the youngest of the 14 men that I interviewed. We met at a local eatery on a rainy day, and I remember when I saw him initially, I made note of his youthful presence. Mike and I had had conversations over the phone prior to meeting, and based on his eloquent voice and professional maturity, I was a bit surprised that he was so young. However, this Generation X executive is more experienced than his years would indicate. Mike is a regional vice president of sales for a financial services company that employs over 500 people. Altogether, he has 10 years of professional experience and six of those have been in a supervisory capacity. When I met with Mike, he was in transition. He and his family were in the process of moving to Florida where the company's regional office is located. Mike was well groomed, professionally attired in a dress shirt and dark slacks. He has an outgoing personality, such that it was easy for

me to see how he is successful in sales. When I asked Mike how he had come to choose his profession, he responded, "I think my career chose me." Mike had initially intended to be a lawyer, but his mother became ill when he was applying to law school. Mike recalled that "my life changed when my mother got sick." Mike decided to go home to take care of his mother and eventually began his career as a paraprofessional in the school system. His thought at that time was that he would evolve his career and become a professor. However, after approximately two years, Mike left the school system because he felt that although the teachers cared about their students, many of them were on "countdown." He wanted a way out. One day the phone rang; it was a call from a financial services company recruiting one of his roommates. Mike answered the call and decided he would also interview for the position. From that time, he has been involved in the industry and has been on the fast track in terms of his career mobility. Mike has been with his present company just six years. He was hired into an entry level sales position as a business development specialist. Within four months, he was promoted to assistant vice president of sales and promoted twice over the next two years, both times expanding his sales territory. By the fourth year, Mike had been promoted again to a regional sales consultant responsible for 11 states in the northeast. Then, within the last year he received yet another promotion to his current position as Regional Vice President of Sales where he has responsibility for the southeast region. Mike is not shy about his success. Of his professional accomplishments, he said:

I feel like I'm the master of my own domain. I mean I run my...Florida is mine!

The state of Florida is mine...it's my business. I run it...it grows from my hard work or it fails if I don't work. It's my responsibility. I can make as much money

as...depending on how hard I want to work. There are other people who depend on me...which I take a lot of pride in. So, my job, it doesn't just feed my family, but you know, I have an office with 300 something employees...maybe about 400 employees where what I do out in the field, it decides...it determines whether they are going to get a bonus or not. So, I mean, I like having that kind of responsibility.

Mike's career success was not a guarantee. As much as he acknowledged his success, he also made clear that his background could have led him in another direction. Mike grew up in a poor, inner city neighborhood with his mother and stepfather. He recalled, "It was bad. I mean this is in the early 80s. This is when crack cocaine really just started hitting the streets. This is right after Wayne Williams and the missing children. I mean...I mean...it was bad." Mike found himself getting off track during junior high and high school years, but with the help of his parents and teachers, he was able to stay focused, graduate, and attend college. He attributes his work ethic to his stepfather, who taught him that if he wanted something, he had to work for it – nothing would be given to him. Mike knows he is the lucky one. His brother was not so fortunate. Reflecting on his experience, Mike said:

We grew up in a tough time and I could pretty much see at an early age that, if I wanted something, it wasn't going to be given to me. I mean, I had to go out and get it myself and the choice was; either you're going to work to get it or you're not going to have it. And, I've always been a person that said, "I want it"... "I want it" so, I'm going to work to go get it. And I think...that's where I developed a mentality that...you know...it's tough. It's hard. Yeah, you know, maybe there are

some people out there on this planet who are not having to go through some of the stuff that I'm having to go through to get what I want. Maybe it's a little bit easier for them, but you know what, they're not going to appreciate it as much as I'm going to appreciate it. You know, they are not going to be as strong as I am. You know, when I get it. And...um...that's just...that's just how I've been wired ever since. And if I compare...I mean I can compare myself to my brother; same house, same parents, same challenges, same opportunities...we're in two different places because he didn't look at it that way. He didn't want to work as hard. He wanted to take an easy way out. You know, he did some stuff that I didn't do.

Of all the men that I interviewed, I found Mike to be most optimistic about his career progression. Perhaps it is the lens of his generation or the way he is wired, but it struck me that Mike tended to think in terms of “why not?” One emotional point in our interview was when he recalled Election Day, November 2008, when America elected Barack Obama as the nation’s first African American President. While others may have thought America surpassed its greatest hope, Mike thought differently. He said:

In my mind, I always thought it was possible. I always...I mean , why not? You know, why not? It's kind of like...why am I going to get up in the morning to go to work if I don't think that one day I can be president of this sales department at my company? Why not? I guess I've always felt that it was possible.

#### **Participant Five: Jerome Felton**

I met Jerome at his house located in a well manicured, upscale community located in an Atlanta suburb. I had previous conversations with Jerome over the telephone prior to the face-to-face interview, and from those conversations my impression of Jerome was

that he was sophisticated, serious, and formal in demeanor. I found those things to be true when I met him, but I also found that this is a man who has more depth and range in personality. I remember during the interview when we got on the discussion of fraternities, he asked me to guess to which fraternity he was affiliated. I immediately guessed Alpha Phi Alpha because I perceived Jerome as a smart, serious, business-minded man with an air of sophistication – all the “stereotypes” associated with Alpha men. I was wrong. My second guess was Kappa Alpha Psi because he had an air of confidence that some could misconstrue as arrogance, and he was obviously surrounded by wealth and material success – again, my assumption born out of stereotypes. I was wrong again. Jerome is a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. I would have never guessed because Omegas are often characterized as the Q-dogs, somewhat boisterous, bold, daring, and “nasty.” I saw Jerome as the antithesis of that. My first perception of Jerome was that he was rather genteel, polite, guarded, and “safe.” We laughed. Jerome noted his fraternity helped him improve his ability to persevere – a skill he still uses today. The moral of that story is that stereotypes are quite often faulty and as a researcher, my biases must be checked continually.

Jerome is 55 years old. He has 34 years of professional experience, 28 of which have been with his present company, and 26 of which have been in a supervisory capacity. Jerome is the Division Vice President and General Manager for a global financial services and data processing company that employs over 44,000 people worldwide. He career has included positions in service, marketing, product development and sales, which provided him and his family an opportunity to live abroad when Jerome took an international assignment. He received his undergraduate degree in English within



three years from a state university in the mid-Atlantic region, and his graduate degree in comparative literature from a prominent institution in the Midwest. His Master's focus was on Black literature in English, French and Spanish. Jerome started a doctoral program at a university in California, but stopped after a year. His original career goal was to be a teacher, but he found he needed more money than teachers' salaries.

Jerome defied the odds on the road to success. The story of his childhood is one that he wanted to tell. As we were beginning to discuss his career path, he stopped and asked me, "Do you want to hear about my childhood background?" For some participants, I had to initiate the inquiry. This time, Jerome inserted the question in a manner that I perceived as being extremely important for him to share and to include as part of his biography. From the earlier question about his fraternal affiliation and other stories throughout the interview, I surmised that Jerome enjoyed the surprise element of his life; he derived satisfaction from the unpredictability of his success. He started:

I am one of six children. My father was an alcoholic and he was the son of an alcoholic. He had three alcoholic brothers and two alcoholic sisters. My mother was not an alcoholic; her father was alcoholic. And so there was a high degree of alcoholism in our family and yet of my five siblings none of us are alcoholics that we know of. All of us have at least one degree, some of us have two. [He later corrected that one of his brothers did not have a degree, but had over 30 years in law enforcement]. We're all gainfully employed and have been very successful in various different businesses. One sister is retired, having sold her business five years ago for about a sizable gain.

Jerome recognized they are an anomaly, “especially consider that four of the six are Black males.” In Jerome’s assessment, his success and the success of his siblings are about much more than their education, although education was valued in his family.

Jerome said,

So in our own assessment it’s not about the education we received, it’s really about the home life we had and we believe it has a lot to do with the fact that we had very much the typical southern Black family, a very strong nucleus, very much matriarch dominated.... So we had an environment which on the one hand you acknowledge alcoholism and the fact that it’s a part of your life. However it was not a reason that you could not be successful.

Jerome and his family always lived in a predominantly White neighborhood, at his parent’s choice, and they attended private, Catholic schools. From that experience, Jerome said, “there was no mystique... They were just regular people. It wasn’t a Black or White.” Jerome’s second wife is White, and when he talked about his sons, he talked about them in the context of raising young Black males in this society. I made note that Jerome must constantly navigate across the lines between Black and White cultures, which I thought might have been helpful to him in his career – and just as likely that it has also created some challenges.

#### **Participant Six: Henry Brown**

For a man who admits the early part of his career was largely the result of trial and error, I found Henry’s career movement to resemble more of a well thought out strategic plan. He is 50 years old and vice president of sports production for a large cable media organization. Henry knew he enjoyed this work since his very first television shop

class during his junior year in high school. Still, having grown up in a large family in the Midwest, Henry was not sure college was in his future. That all changed one day when his mother overheard Henry and one of his buddies talking about life after high school.

Henry recalled:

Me and my buddy were leaving my house and we were talking about going into the Army. And my mother and dad were out in the back yard painting the fence and they overheard the conversation. And my mother got almost irate at us for even considering going into the Army. And she stopped painting, sat me and my friend down and said in so many words, you're crazy if you think that I'm going to let you guys go into the Army....I don't care where you go, what you do, go get a business degree. And I just didn't want to do the blue suit, white shirt and tie deal. So I took a moment and it was like okay in my very short life what have I done that I enjoy doing.

Henry's father worked in a factory and though he went to work every day, he did not enjoy his work. From his father's experience, Henry's prerequisites for his career choice were that he wanted to "do something that I will be happy to wake up in the morning and go to work [and] I want to do something that will be different every day." The answer that came to Henry was the work he did in the television shop class. He went to college and received his degree in radio and television broadcasting. He got his first job at his present company right out of college. After approximately three years of successively increasing responsibilities, Henry decided to leave the company. He thought too much of a person's career movement hinged on relationships, not job performance, and Henry was not about to "kiss anybody's butt to get ahead." He took a job with a smaller mom and

pop sports production company that specialized in motor sports. Though he remembered that decision being one of the best decisions he made, he found that after five years, he encountered a glass ceiling. There, he and his wife established an exit strategy that laid out a one-year timeline to find his next opportunity. Henry said, "I said January of '91 I want to be out and January of '91 I quit." After approximately four years of freelancing, Henry took a job with another sports production company in Florida. He rose to the level of vice president at the Florida-based company. Henry had been in Florida for four years when he felt it was time again to develop an exit strategy. His relationship with the owner had soured because Henry felt the owner was not giving them the resources they needed to produce quality work. That's when Henry reached out to a former colleague at his present company. By this time, the former colleague had risen to a senior ranking position in the company. Henry sent a provocative email to the senior leader. Henry said, "I sent him a note, an email, and in the email I think I just said hey, don't you need an African American vice president on your staff, and I think within five minutes he responded and said let's talk." After a few months of exchange, Henry was offered a position with the company and he has been there since. In totality, Henry has 28 years of professional experience, 22 years of which has been in a supervisory capacity, and he has been with his present company for the past eight years. He left his present company the first time because of relationship politics, but ironically, he returned to the company because he learned how to leverage the politics of relationships to his advantage.

**Participant Seven: Gordon Sims**

Gordon grew up in a family where education was “second only to religion.” He attended private school and after graduation from high school, Gordon entered the military. He was not thinking about a career, he just wanted autonomy. Gordon said:

I was not thinking about a career, or travel, or any of those other sorts of things that are normally attributed to young men that go into the military. I simply wanted to get out of [my home town]. I simply wanted to get out of the house. There was no pain or anything there, I just have a high, off the scale need for autonomy. I liked my own space, like to be able to call my own shots, and my parents had provided me with a great education, great environment, but I was anxious to get off on my own.

It was on his own, in the military, that Gordon would encounter a lesson that changed his career. Gordon had been advancing ahead of his peer group and had a great deal of career satisfaction. Then, he was sent to a course for first-line supervisors with fourteen others. In that cohort, Gordon realized that everyone had at least a bachelor’s degree, and some even had advanced degrees – everyone, except Gordon. He was the only one in the cohort that had not taken a single semester hour of college coursework. He said, “That caused such cognitive dissonance because I had this impression of myself.” After leaving the supervisor course, Gordon went on a quest to correct that impression. He said, “I absolutely, positively refused to ever have a picture of myself that was out of alignment with the reality...if I was going to be confident, or arrogant, or whatever, it was going to be based on actual accomplishments.” After that experience Gordon “went to school every single month from June, 1982 until December, 2000, every single month.” Over

that time, Gordon received his bachelor's and master's degrees in human resources and completed his doctor of philosophy degree in public administration. He now teaches as an adjunct professor at a state university and has launched a non-profit organization dedicated to helping doctoral students complete their degrees. Gordon stated, "After I understood the correlation between education and advancement, things started and then that is when the career development piece started."

In his "day job," Gordon is the Director of Diversity for a utility/energy corporation comprised of 8,500 employees. He has been with his present company for 11 years. Combined with a 24-year military career, Gordon has 35 years of professional experience, 25 years of which he occupied supervisory roles. Gordon is 52 years old. He is tall, well dressed, and walks with a bit of "swagger." He is confident and has battled others' perceptions of him as being arrogant. To that he said,

There are people to this day, no matter what, that will still believe I am the poster child for arrogance, you know, and that's never, ever, ever, going to change no matter how humble I get or try to be, it is never ever going to change, that just how it is.

Gordon believes "arrogance" can be a code word attributed to some African American men who are confident. Still, he accepts that he may have attracted that characterization earlier in his career. However, Gordon appears to be comfortable with who he is now. Through his affiliation with various men's groups and community and professional associations, Gordon said, he has found his voice. Through his men's group at church, Gordon stated ,

It's helping me find my voice... I absolutely, positively know who I am and I am so comfortable in my skin, and that means the good and the bad...I am so comfortable with what I know to be the truth that is not just career development that is life development. It has made me a better man. It has made me a better Black man. It has made me a better diversity manager. It has made me a better professor. It has made me a better father. It has made me a better husband. I know who I am...

**Participant Eight: Alfred Martin**

Alfred is 42 years old and is a human resource development professional for a manufacturing company that employs over 7,500 people. He is new to his present company after spending 23 years with a transit company in the northeast. Two weeks following his high school graduation, Alfred got a job working with the transit company. He made note of the relationships between managers and employees. He knew he wanted to be the boss. He said, "I was 18 and if I'm gonna be working here I'm gonna be the boss. So I said well, how do I become the boss? And I started on that path." Though he started his career in a blue collar role as a painter, Alfred was determined to move into management. After five years with the company, he was promoted to his first supervisory position. He also continued to pursue his education. Alfred studied management in college and received his bachelor's degree in business administration. There was a disconnect between what Alfred was learning in his college courses about sound managerial and leadership practices and what he experienced on the job. That is when Alfred knew he wanted to have a career in organization development (OD). He did not know what it was called at the time, but the work of making organizations and the people

within them more effective was something that appealed to Alfred. It would take several years before Alfred would figure out there was a discipline devoted to his professional practice area. He achieved his advanced degree in organization development from one of the leading universities for the field. He referred to his career in organization development as his “calling.”

Alfred is a man with a husky frame, but a soft voice. He looks younger than his 42 years and he could easily be dismissed as not having the depth of knowledge or experiences as some of the other participants. Given, he had worked at one company for 23 of his 24-year career. However, I was impressed with his insight and emotional commitment to the study. For the interview, I met Alfred at a local coffee/bookstore chain on a rainy evening after work. We started the interview around 6:00 PM and did not conclude until almost three hours later, including breaks. He had a lot to say. Alfred grew up amid drugs, gangs, and overall poor socioeconomic conditions. He said, “I grew up in a crack area. When I was a teenager...the guys I grew up with were crack dealers, so don’t tell me I don’t know...but I had to separate myself. It was a choice for me.” On the night before Alfred took his examination to become a permanent employee with the transit company, one of his best friends was shot and killed at a neighborhood Chinese restaurant because he was a drug dealer and other dealers wanted his turf. That was a poignant memory for Alfred because he was on his way to meet his friend at the restaurant when it happened. I told Alfred that I recognize I am studying men who have invariably achieved a level of success, but for each one of them, I know there are hundreds of African American men who are not as fortunate. He responded that it is better studying positive deviance. He explained:



Everyone else is getting stuck, you're better off studying how people got out than studying failure – that will get you quicker to what you want to get as far as how to get out than staying stuck. So if you look at it from a positive light, strength-based, keep looking at what we're doing well versus what we're not doing and you have a better chance of success. The energy is a lot better because if you keep looking at your problems you just get stuck into the rut of trying to solve more and more problems.

With this explanation, I felt a kindred spirit with Alfred. He spoke the language of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. Perhaps it had something to do with what Alfred's father instilled in him at an early age. He said,

My dad said there is no such word as can't – “can't” and “give me” were first cousins and they died long before his father was born, so those were two words we were not allowed to say....No one gives you anything, you have to earn anything you want in life and there's no such word as can't. You can do it. And my dad has always been a man of very few words, so when he says something, you pay attention to it.

#### **Participant Nine: David Minton**

David is 52 years old and is a vice president of client services with a consulting firm of 7,000 employees. He has over 30 years of professional experience, 24 of which have been in supervisory roles. He has been with his current company for eight years. David received his bachelor's degree in economics and his master's degree in human resources management from a top tier university on the west coast. David spent the first two years of his professional career in the military before transitioning to corporate

America. His first job was in underwriting with a large insurance company. Over the almost 13 years with the insurance company, David was promoted four times, ending as a department manager, of which he was one of the first African Americans to ascend to that level. Through his networks, David was offered a job as a national account executive with one of the world's largest information services firms. He stayed there approximately five years before joining a large manufacturing and distribution company as the general manager of a five-state area. David said he never worked harder at the manufacturing company. The company was flat, so there was no opportunity for upward mobility. After six years, David left the company and had a short stint as the vice president of sales with a large non-profit organization. He left the non-profit after two years because he had children in college and he needed to make more money. It was then that David joined his present company as a senior sales consultant. It was essentially the same role he has as a vice president, but David felt uncomfortable coming into the organization with a vice president title. He said,

I was VP level but I didn't feel comfortable going in taking the role and taking on the title of VP because too many other people had been around for a long time. I was sensitive to that. So I took that title initially for about a year or so and then after I felt like I had proven enough I took on the role of Vice President.

David's personality is one such that he is an arranger of people, bringing people together by leveraging the extensive network he has built through his professional and personal contacts. He serves on the board of various non-profits and he understands the power of relationships. David said, "This may sound crazy but I think there is something spiritual about your ability to interface with people."

David talked as if he is a man in the twilight of his career. He said he is happy to be in a position where he can “support, motivate, and guide” and where he does not need to be in the limelight anymore. He seemed comfortable moving toward the role of sage and he made several references to his position as a first generation African American corporate executive. My impression was that part of David’s motivation for participating in this study was to help me put together an accurate record to help those who will come behind him. David was also instrumental in providing the names of several other African American professional men, some of whom became participants in the study.

**Participant Ten: Celica Harris**

Celica received his bachelor’s degree in economics and a master’s in business administration. He understood the principle of supply and demand. He grew up in a loving home, but what he described as an impoverished environment where demand often exceeded supply. Celica knew he wanted a career where he could make a lot of money. When his dreams of an NFL career faded, Celica shifted his sights. He recalled,

One of my motivations was after I decided and kind of realized that I was not going to make a living in professional sports, I wanted to put that same level of commitment and drive into whatever I did. And so in my mind I remember saying I’m going to still have the lifestyle of someone who does enjoy a career like that. So essentially that’s when I started looking around for other career areas that would afford me what I would consider unlimited potential, financially.

When Celica landed a career in sales, he described it as being a fish in water. He has spent nearly all of his 26 years of professional experience in pharmaceutical sales. When I met with Celica he was the Vice President of U.S. Sales for a global pharmaceutical

company comprised of 3,500 employees. Celica had a staff of over 200 and was responsible for over half of the company's revenue.

Celica spent most of his career being one of few African Americans in leadership. He was fortunate enough to meet an African American woman early in his career who served as a mentor. She provided Celica opportunities that enabled him to establish a successful career. He described her as his biggest inspiration. After many years of working for her, the African American woman was in a role that would report to Celica. She and Celica had many conversations over the years about unfair treatment of African Americans and she described the challenges an African American woman faced in the industry. According to Celica, the African American woman described the experience as "it's kind of like being invited to the team but not really being welcome into the locker room." When she left the industry, Celica was determined to make her proud and he became a corporate champion of diversity efforts. He noticed few African Americans were in the home offices and when he was offered a role in the home office he had a conversation with the hiring manager about the lack of diversity. They had socialized together and gone to the gym together, so Celica felt he could talk candidly about his concerns. He remembered the look the hiring manager gave him look that signaled his disapproval. Celica said, "We had that kind of social lingo thing but it was clear that crossing the line to talk about a real issue was not acceptable in his eyes for me." Celica decided not to take the job. He left the company a year later, after being there 11 years.

Celica joined another pharmaceutical company he described as "the biggest and baddest in the world." In the five years there, he was promoted three times. This second company did not have any African American managers when Celica joined the team.

When he ran into challenges there, he decided to interview with the company he was with when I interviewed him. He was the only African American in the commercial division. After being with the organization for a few years, Celica again spoke up regarding the lack of diversity, only to be shunned again. He had been with this last company for nearly four years, when he learned they were planning to reorganize. He said,

Now I say that and my current company is going through a reorganization right now. And what I learned recently is that it came as – I'm not going to say a total shock to me – but it really surprised me that due to restructuring and through a contact that I have that I have a strong belief that they are trying to force me out. So this is real news.

Celica was surprised because he found himself negotiating his employment even when it was clear that he had strong sales performance. He said, "So many African Americans we believe that if all else fails what we're able to do to distinguish ourselves is just outperform our peers in terms of delivery of the measurable results." A few months later, I met with Celica and he had indeed left the company and was in the process of searching for a new opportunity. He is 48 years of age with over 26 years of professional experience, and nearly 15 years in a supervisory capacity. He has been successful in many ways and has stayed committed to making sure the "locker room" was accessible to minorities.

Celica does not regret speaking up on diversity issues, though he knows it might have cost him jobs. He told me that he believes his experiences have a purpose. He said,

That purpose is to show that despite what the majority or others do to you, race being a key element, that you can still succeed, that you can find a way and that

might mean going to another employer where you at some point can contribute greater and create opportunities for others...

Celica impressed me with his resilience. He said, "I have an internal battery that will not allow another man to determine my fate. I think I determine my fate. That's it, period."

### **Participant Eleven: Mitchell Johnson**

Mitchell is 41 years old and a director of human resources for a retail wholesaler. He has over 14 years of professional experience, eight of which has been with his current company. Mitchell has a bachelor's degree in advertising and a master of business administration from a historically Black university in the northeast. Mitchell chose a degree and early career choice in advertising because wanted to help shape the images of African Americans in the media. He said, "I thought that advertising was the psychology of the workplace." One of his first jobs out of college was with a large advertising agency where Mitchell was the only African American account executive at the agency. Of that experience he said he learned if you really wanted to control the images in the media, you had to own the company. Mitchell shared an experience where the ad team was working on a concept for a major client. The advertisement was targeting an African American audience. After the initial concept meeting, the creative designers and illustrators had the task of creating the storyboards. After a few days, Mitchell's manager called him and asked him to see the storyboards. Mitchell said, "I just remember this very vividly, basically caricatures of Black folks at a picnic, to the degree where you had like chicken bones, barbeque sauce, and this is in 1992." His manager asked if he was offended and when Mitchell said that he was, his manager said "That's what I thought." Mitchell recalled that the ad concept never made it to the screen, but it was a stark realization to

him that the people who conceptualized the campaign were just down the corridor and others like them down the corridors of a lot of advertising agencies in the world and that is how they see African Americans. He left the company.

Mitchell grew up in a family where education was important. Both of Mitchell's parents were educators and to ensure Mitchell and his sister received a quality education, his parents moved to the suburbs where there were only four Black students at his high school. Going to a predominantly White school, Mitchell said his parents taught him early that you have to be five times better than your White counterparts. His parents also instilled a positive racial identity and Mitchell said that helped to establish a sense of confidence in him. He stated: "As a young man, that kind of shaped me in some respects, built armor around me I guess because as I face the world and the world would say – well, who are you? And, I look back at you and say, this is who I am." Mitchell's strong sense of self and of cultural identity was evident as I talked with him. He attributed it to his upbringing and to his education at the historically Black university. He mentioned a Black male professor who was a role model and mentor. The professor taught a Black psychology class and one of the lessons Mitchell recalled was on racism and Black manhood. Mitchell recalled, "He said, White men, their manhood is based on you not being a man." Mitchell's response was "that's what it is, bottom line, that's what it is." The dynamic between White males and Black males is something that is discussed throughout the participants' stories. Mitchell said that in corporate America there are only two types of Black men that are non-threats: the jokester or buffoon and the docile Black man. He being neither of the two expects to have challenges. He stated:

I was never the guy to say I have a chip on my shoulder. I was never the guy to say, oh, because I'm Black. You would never hear that out of me. It was almost like saying I'm in the football game. I got hit because I have pads on. No, you got hit because that was part of the game. So, going in the game, I'm expecting to get hit.

**Participant Twelve: Hank Foster**

Hank is 47 years old and is the vice president of media operations for a broadcast company. He has over 25 years of professional experience and has had supervisory responsibilities virtually his entire career. Hank's educational background consists of a bachelor's in mathematics and a master's in business management. He initially attended a historically Black university with a desire to major in civil engineering. After a few years he ran out of money and joined military. While in the military, Hank became interested in an elite nuclear engineering program. He enlisted in the field and earned the money he needed to return to college. When he completed his degree in mathematics from another historically Black university in the northeast, Hank returned to the military as a commissioned officer. He then applied to qualify to become a nuclear engineering officer. He was the first African American from a historically Black university to be accepted and complete the program. That was in 1989. The fact that the award hung on Hank's office wall 20 years later told me it was an accomplishment of which he was extremely proud. Another thing that I noticed while sitting in Hank's office was a whiteboard covered with diagrams and what looked to be mathematical equations. He stated that's just how he is wired to think and he uses the diagrams to explain some of the technical operations to his staff.



Hank's high intellect is immediately apparent. He is a balance between a stylish and somewhat flashy executive and a scientific nerd that would be just as comfortable conducting experiments in a laboratory. He is tall, handsome, well dressed, and has a warm, easy smile. Hank was the first in his family to graduate from college and he became interested in engineering because he had a mentor who was an engineer in the military. Hank thought he would have a full career in the military, but after 15 years, an injury cut his career short. That was when he was offered a job with his first media company. After 18 months at the media company, he was promoted to vice president of broadcast operations. Hank left the company after being there five years to take a vice president role with his present company. At the time of the interview, Hank had also been with his present company five years. When I sat in his office to conduct the interview, I detected a man who was eager to share his story, yet apprehensive. He asked a few times about confidentiality and was visibly nervous when the interview first began. When I inquired about challenges he has faced in his career, he responded, "This is where confidentiality is paramount." Eventually, Hank relaxed and shared his career experiences.

Hank's motivation is his children. He said,

The predominant factor in me working so hard in my career has been to provide for my family. I think that's probably the overwhelming factor. I have kids and I've always had a strong sense of commitment to providing a lifestyle, providing a role model and providing them with what success looks like.

Hank has been successful and he is committed to sharing his success with other Black youth. He volunteers through his fraternity and other professional associations to mentor

Black youth and young aspiring Black engineers. He talked about the importance of leaving a legacy and stated that his greatest sense of satisfaction has come from developing others. He took pride in telling me that he had one of his direct reports promoted to vice president – the only one among his peers to accomplish that.

**Participant Thirteen: Martin Jones**

Martin is 51 years old and has spent virtually his entire career at his present company. He started as a part-time employee when he was still in college. Thirty-three years later, he is still there. Martin is now a vice president of human resources for the transportation and logistics company's U.S. operations. He has spent 30 years as a supervisor and 25 of those years in management. Martin credited his parents for his success at the company that values hard work and teamwork. He said,

And the reason [the company was a cultural fit for him] was, is that my mom and dad – my dad really had a tremendous work ethic. He raised four kids, pretty much a laborer, worked very hard, very long hours, weekends, the typical story of someone that kind of came up in that era. And so I learned about the value of working with people and working hard and keeping your nose to the grindstone, all those things that early on were development opportunities for me. And then my mom had a unique ability, she taught me about people. She taught me about how to talk to people, how to work with people, how to enjoy people, be interested in people, be curious about people. And so when I walked into [my present company] what I found myself, when I think back on that, is that it was very hard work and you had to work in teams...

The next year, Martin was asked to consider a role in management. He said that a theme in his career development has been others recognizing skills in him that he did not necessarily perceive he had and those people putting him in positions of greater responsibility. Major influences in Martin's career were his siblings. Martin is the youngest of four. He has two older brothers and a sister. Martin said he learned from each of his siblings. Both of Martin's brothers were his role models, and his oldest brother gave him a vision of what it meant to be a Black man in corporate America. Martin said,

I had the unique vantage point of seeing a Black man in a suit, doing his work, not physically being at his office watching him, but I got to interact with him because he was at our house a lot and I was in and out and at that time I was still living at home so I can remember him coming from the office. Just the visual of seeing a Black man who is your brother come from the office, driving a decent car, nothing fancy, but nice car, dressing well and then listening to him. He would talk about things he was working on. I had a client meeting, I've got to take this client out to dinner, here's the things I'm working on and I'm listening to all of this and I think back on that and I go, wow what a visual that was for me because I think a lot of Black men don't have that kind of visual that was so close to them.

Over the years, Martin recalled being promoted ahead of schedule and going through various job rotations. He talked about how at times he felt he did not have all the knowledge he needed as he took on greater roles in the organization, but he was a quick study. As I listened to Martin recount the story of his career development, I surmised that his humility had probably enabled his career. He is an average height for a man and conservatively dressed, but what I noticed more about Martin was his openness, his

affable demeanor, and hearty laugh. His personality is the type that you sensed he knew how to navigate across diverse cultural lines because he had the ability to put people at ease. He even mentioned that he believed part of his success was his ability to make people comfortable – comfortable with him – such that junior employees and senior leaders, Blacks and Whites saw him as approachable. That served Martin well as he often was required to work between management and employees on labor and union issues. He also attributed part of his success to having the good fortune of working for successful senior African American leaders over the course of his career. He said, “So I’ve had this interesting opportunity to see, expose and work for African Americans through my career....You know you roll the dice and you hit the lotto. I mean that’s unbelievable.”

**Participant Fourteen: Duncan Davis**

Duncan invited me to his home to conduct the interview. He and his family have a lovely home in a golf community located in suburban Atlanta. He is 50 years old, has 28 years of professional experience, and 25 years in a supervisory capacity. Duncan started his career after completing his bachelor’s in business administration. He accepted a position in a management development program with a life insurance company in a Midwestern state. After several years of going through the program and rising to a supervisory position in the group division, Duncan decided to transition to another insurance company in Atlanta where he took a position as an assistant manager in the annuity administrations department. He did that for a few years before moving to another insurance company to become the director of claims. Duncan recalled the company had major challenges and he was working long hours. He and his wife had just had his youngest child and he said he was at a pinnacle in his career. He decided to leave the

company and take a job at a telecommunications company as a senior account manager. Duncan wanted a job where he did not have to supervise others. His greatest success at the telecommunications company was taking an account from \$200,000 per month in revenue to \$2 million per month. Eventually, Duncan left the telecommunications company to join his present company. He has been with his present company for nine years and is a program support group manager in risk management. When he joined the company, he was hired to be the vendor manager. After four years he had been promoted to senior vendor manager. It was the first time an African American had been promoted to that level in the department. Approximately five years later, Duncan was promoted again to his current position where he is responsible for three departments.

Duncan was the last participant added to my research sample. Once he found out about the study he was eager to participate and after several scheduling conflicts, we finally had the opportunity to meet. He was so persistent; I knew I had to include him in the study. Duncan and I worked together several years ago, so I knew a little more about his work life than some of the other participants. From my experience with Duncan, I witnessed a man who had an incredible work ethic. When I asked him what he attributed to his career movement, he said:

I think it comes down from foundation, from family. My dad was a hard worker and never gave up and so I think I was always a hard worker and always willing to work long hours and always willing to learn and be flexible. I think if you do those things – I do those other things that you have to do in corporate America but I think if you work hard, if you're flexible, if you're willing to learn and if you're

able to communicate fairly well...For the most part opportunities always kind of dropped in my lap because of that.

Another strong influence in Duncan's life is his faith. He talked frequently about his involvement in ministry. In fact, when he was asked about what he wanted to do next, he said ideally he would like to leave corporate America and do something with the ministry. Duncan acknowledged that racism exists, but he also believed that organizations have gotten away from promoting the career development of African Americans. He said, "I think there's opportunities if you want it, you go out and get it. It's not a Black thing; it's not a White thing." He also believed that African Americans at his company "for the most part, they are doing fairly well" although he knows African Americans still face challenges in the workplace.

### **Summary of Common Characteristics and Differences Among the Participants**

The average age of participants is 47 years, the youngest being 35 years old and the oldest 55 years old. All participants had at minimum a bachelor's degree, which was a criterion for participation. Seventy percent of participants had an advanced degree, two of whom completed their doctorate degrees. Participants had an average of 25 years of professional experience, the least amount being 10 years and greatest amount being 35 years. All participants were in a position of mid-management or higher as determined by their respective companies. Participants represented various disciplines and industries, though human resources and media companies were over-represented compared to other positions and industries. I attribute the over representation of human resources and media companies to my professional position as a human resources development leader in a

media company. The men in the human resources and media companies are a part of my extended professional network.

In addition to demographic characteristics, I found most of the participants placed a high value on personal agency and achievement. The majority grew up in households of meager means and where education was emphasized. Most participants had a strong family support system, whether they were raised in two-parent or single-parent households. Several participants mentioned they had a Black male role model growing up, most attributing their work ethic or other positive attribute to a father, stepfather, grandfather or brother. Most participants detailed careers where they experienced progressive career mobility, often times movement ahead of their peers.

I observed differences among generations. Participants over 50 years of age were explicit about not seeking upward career mobility. They talked more in terms of preparing the next generation, creating opportunities for other African Americans, and their legacies. The participants in their 40's seem to be seeking that one last role that would put them at the next level. However, they too are deliberate in their career decisions, with impact to family being a huge consideration. Finally, the participants in their 30's are still aggressively seeking advancement and are the most flexible in seeking opportunities when and where they are presented. The older participants tended to express their experiences as being "first generation" Black corporate executives. They tended to believe the network among African American professionals is not as strong as it was earlier in their careers and they attribute it to a change in the younger generation.

Overall, I found the participants to be strong, smart, resilient, and spiritual. These men are sons, fathers, husbands, brothers, and leaders. They take all of these roles

seriously and understand the responsibilities that come with each. They are not the office buffoon nor are they docile. They have a strong sense of their Black male identity; they are quick to defend the defensible and just as quick to call out “brothers” who are afraid to be Black in corporate America or who are not up to standard and want to play the victim role. Second, the participants are smart. Many of them have advanced degrees; however, their intellect is more than academic. For these men to have achieved the success they have, they have had to be strategic about their careers. It struck me as I listened to their stories that as their careers progressed, these men became increasingly deliberate in their career choices. Many do not like the political environment of corporate America, but they have become students of it. They are well aware of how things work and they have made conscious decisions about when to play and when not to play.

Third, these participants are resilient. Through their stories, it is apparent they are aware of the stereotypes, gendered racism, and all the other repressive structures that impede the career success of African American professional men in corporate America. They do not make excuses; they act. Whether it is continuous learning, making others comfortable, exceeding expectations, or advocating for more diversity in the executive ranks, these men are not to be denied. They have risen to where they are, not because it has been easy, but because they are resilient and have acquired the tools of negotiation to achieve the careers they desire. Fourth, these 14 men are spiritual. Spirituality includes their religious faith, but also includes their strong value system and sense of purpose. Many of the men referenced their experiences in church, which have helped them to cope with the pressures they face in the workplace and to make career decisions. Many of the men also spoke of their greatest satisfaction coming from helping others succeed and in



developing the next generation of Black executives. They referred to their jobs or the roles they play to make the workplace more diverse as their calling or mission. I left each interview and conversation with these men more inspired and more dedicated to this study. Their stories must be heard – not in comparison to anyone else’s. These stories are theirs – unadulterated and up to this point largely unknown.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study aimed to bring to light some of the experiences African American professional men encounter in their career development, the factors that facilitate or inhibit their development, and the strategies they employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. I identified and selected 14 participants using a criterion-based purposeful snowball sampling method. Their biographies were included to give the reader a better understanding of their perspectives and experiences. I included in the biographies information collected from the demographic questionnaires, interviews, observations, and researcher’s notes. I concluded this chapter with a summary of common characteristics among several of the participants as well as my observation of differences.

## Chapter 5

### Findings and Analysis: Repressive Structures

The lack of attention to African American men's career development has rendered invisible the range of experiences and the unique basis of vulnerability they encounter in the workplace due in part to gendered racism – being Black and male. I found this gap in the literature unacceptable and cause for concern given an increasing focus on workplace diversity and a global economy. In my review of the literature, I became even more interested in the phenomenon under study because of the apparent disparity that exists between African American men and their White counterparts. Even when class difference is minimized, as it is when African American and White men share middle-management and executive ranks, there exists an unmerited privilege in favor of White men in the areas of employment, pay, and career mobility. Through this study I aimed to call attention to how racism shapes the career development of African American professional men in corporate America and how the men in this study negotiated race and racism to advance their careers. Career development is defined broadly as the “lifelong psychological and behavioral processes as well as contextual influences shaping one's career over the life span” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002, p. 7). Included in this study's definition of career development are also the outcomes of career processes, namely career mobility and career satisfaction. Race and racism are more contested terms. Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik (2007) stated,

The word *race* is commonly eschewed in favor of less incendiary terms such as *culture* and *ethnicity* (terms which in themselves do not exist in uncontested space). In fact, within mainstream discourse, it has become almost stylish to

suggest that ‘race doesn’t really exist’ – that a color-blind policy is the best policy – that there is no salience to skin color. Unfortunately, such negations and dismissals only serve to downplay the significance and reality of ‘racial existence’ and oppression. As the axiom asserts: denying a problem does not make it disappear (p. 21)

Those authors rightly assert that race and racism are woven into the fabric of our society, “such that next to gender, race is the first thing we notice about people...[and it] regulates interpretations of who we trust, who we identify with and who we intrinsically see as intelligent, athletic, weak, lazy, etc.” (p. 34). In sum, race still matters. I intentionally put forth the question of racism expecting fully that the term will ignite polarizing responses, bringing adulation and support from some and skepticism and fatigue from others. Like the men in this study, I press on toward the mark of excellence until someone can offer a plausible answer as to why racism determines career experience or until it no longer does. Resolving “it’s not as bad as it used to be” is not reason enough to walk away from the question.

Four research questions guided the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?
- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

The first research question inquired into how the African American professional men described their career development in the broadest sense. I was interested in learning the full range of their career experiences, including how their careers evolved over time, factors influencing their career decisions, and their sense of career satisfaction. With the second research question, I wanted to know specifically how racism impacted their career development, how the intersection of their race and gender created experiences germane to them as Black men in corporate America. The third question was an inquiry into what internal or external organizational or contextual factors facilitated and/or inhibited their career development. I thought the answers to this question might provide insight into the role of human resource development practitioners as cultural carriers and purveyors of many career development strategies. I also wanted to know what types of external organizations Black men sought to affiliate with, for what purposes, and how those organizations provided support to their career development. The fourth research question inquired into the strategies African American men used to negotiate in a context of racism and achieve positive career development, namely career mobility and satisfaction. This last question was to provide an understanding of the role self-efficacy and personal agency play in the participants' abilities to negotiate power and mitigate systemic barriers to achieve career success.

Negotiation has been defined in adult education literature as “the process whereby two or more parties with both common and conflicting interests come together to talk with a view to reaching an agreement” (Newman, 2006, p. 129). Inherent in a negotiation is the understanding that “all human interactions are, in part, political” (Cervero & Wilson, 2006, p. 94); so too are organizations. I chose the term “negotiate” partly because

African American men are engaged constantly in interactions where they are vying for power, competing interests and resources, usually impacting their career development in terms of jobs, promotions, pay, etc. The impact of racism on their career development and how African American men are able to negotiate their interests to achieve their desired career development is the aim of this study. I also extend the definition of negotiation in this study. I accept that negotiation is often a process of engagement between parties, but add that negotiation is also about strategy and navigating within a context where there may be daily or situational decisions on whether to engage or disengage. Sometimes the process involves talking as in the definition above, however other times negotiation is about action, withdrawal, or even silence – like moves on a chess board. For example, some participants made conscious decisions about which political activities they would participate and which they would suffer the consequences of disengagement. They constantly assessed when to speak up and when to be silent in addressing the impact of racism on their career development. Still, their commitment was to advancing their careers and doing it in keeping with their values, cultural identity and other non-negotiables.

I organized participant responses into two major categories: (1) repressive structures and (2) facilitative structures. A useful, albeit somewhat oversimplified definition of the term “structures” gleaned from the more complex structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) refers to those social rules and practices that are properties of social systems created and recreated by members within the social systems. Thus, repressive structures are those recursive social rules and practices which constrain the career development of African American men. Facilitative structures are those rules and

practices which enable African American men to circumvent the oppressive force of racism, advance their careers, and achieve career satisfaction. Both repressive and facilitative structures include personal as well as contextual factors. Additionally, these structures are socially constructed and jointly maintained by both the oppressor and the oppressed (Wheeler-Brooks, 2009). Before the structures can be changed, particularly the repressive structures where change is desired, “they must be dispassionately examined so that all parties’ performances may be more fully understood” (Wheeler-Brooks, 2009, p. 135). Dei, et. al (2007) stated it this way – “So let us interrogate the structures and practices through which we are oppressed such that we might better understand how we are oppressed and how we are implicated in that oppression” (p. 10). This self-examination or consciousness-raising is a central theme in critical theories. It is not meant to “blame the victim” or to suggest that social change is the sole responsibility of the oppressed. Rather, the impetus for self-examination is an acknowledgement that real social movement is likely to occur when those oppressed by the rules and practices alter their strategies and performances, which in turn require the more powerful agents to alter theirs. Left alone, the more powerful agent in the relationship is not likely to concede power or invite discomfort on self. For example, White males who are privileged in corporate systems with higher pay, faster promotion rates, and inclusion in power-laden social networks over their African American male counterparts are not likely to relinquish or willingly reduce that privilege without some social kinetic energy that requires more equitable treatment and impact. This phenomenon has been produced and reproduced throughout history to bring about social change (e.g., civil rights movement, women’s movement, etc.). Thus, we must examine racism and its impact on the career

development of African American professional men with the critical lens that the repressive and facilitative structures are socially engineered and reinforced by all parties' performances within the corporate system.

Four repressive structures emerged prominently from the collective narratives of the 14 African American professional men. They were: 1) stereotypes attributed to African American men; 2) subjective and disparate career development practices; 3) differentiated acquisition of socio-political capital; and 4) changing priorities for workplace diversity. The five facilitative structures included: 1) ability to build and leverage key relationships; 2) bicultural strategies; 3) self-efficacy and personal agency; 4) education and continuous learning; and 5) spirituality and purpose. In this chapter, I explore more fully the repressive structures, using examples from the individual and focus group interviews to support my reasoning. After discussing each repressive structure I provide a brief summary and culminate in a chapter summary. In Chapter 6, I examine the five facilitative structures following the same format.

### **Repressive Structures**

During the interviews, participants shared broadly about their career experiences. Regardless of the question, there were clear examples of challenges they encountered in their career development. The four repressive structures – societal stereotypes associated with African American men, subjective and often disparate career development practices, a different opportunity structure for acquisition of social and political capital, and the changing focus of corporate diversity initiatives in light of a more multicultural workforce and global economy – all must be negotiated successfully if these men are to achieve positive career development. The repressive structures identified through their

stories are systemic, created and recreated in this social institution called corporate America. The gravity of these repressive structures is extensive because as Fernandez (1998) reminded us, corporate systems are mere reflections of our larger society. Therefore, these African American professional men are negotiating race and racism in and out of their workplaces. For example, the stereotypes they must dispel are not bound to corporate America, but are long-standing societal stereotypes of African American men that spill over to the workplace and have impact on their careers. Each of the four repressive structures is examined below.

### **Stereotypes**

One of the most prominent repressive structures cited among participants was the stereotypes attributed to African American men, which served as the basis for discrimination in their career development. This finding came up in participants' responses to research questions one, two, and four. Stereotypes is a repressive structure, not solely because of its psychological component – the generalizations, biases, and assumptions a person may hold about another person or group, but because of its social component – how these generalizations, biases and assumptions get acted out and form the basis of interactions, decisions, and resulting outcomes. The overwhelmingly negative categorizations of Black men led to behaviors and actions by the participants, their White counterparts, and those in superior positions who had position power to effect their career development.

Participants' stories about stereotypes and the impact on career development reflect the men's conscious realization of their positionality as Black males in corporate America, the responsibility they have to "represent" other African Americans,



particularly African American men, and the sense of isolation they feel often being the only one in the room. Each participant acknowledged their beliefs that African American men have unique experiences because they are Black and male in corporate America. Ten of the fourteen participants shared at least one experience of being denied employment, promotions, inclusion into social networks, etc., because of negative stereotypes attributed to Black men.

**Examples of stereotypes.** Some men spoke explicitly about the stereotypes while others initially only alluded to having to deal with stereotypes. However, when I probed for specific examples of stereotypes, participants offered a wide range of illustrations encompassing behavioral, physical, and intellectual attributes. Alfred discussed how he always worked so that no one could put him in that “stereotype.” When I asked him what stereotype, he stated: “The thug, pimp, womanizer, lazy.” When I asked Alfred if he thought these stereotypes impacted his experiences in corporate America, he stated emphatically: “Without a doubt. Without a doubt, sure. You’re not given the opportunities.”

Henry described the stereotypes in this way:

I think the negative impact [of being Black and male in corporate America] has been constantly battling the myths, the stereotypes that exist for African American males...not smart enough to handle responsibility, not able to manage people well, not able to handle anger – just not qualified to be executive material. And so when you have to deal with that every step of the way and to combat those types of insinuations because nobody is going to ever come right out and tell you that. So I think that could have a real negative impact on someone who is not

mentally strong enough to process that and manage your reaction to some of those things.

Dallas stated:

It just doesn't make sense to me and it tells me there's some kind of something that's still there that gives White men pause and some kind of fear about Black men. We are strong, aggressive, angry...And so I've learned over time to not take it personally when the [White] counterpart isn't called on the carpet for crap or challenged, but when I am. I have to take it and be positive and use all those things I've learned in order not to appear to be aggressive or defensive or whatever words you want to use, because they use those words.

Bill's example is of a friend whose stature causes him to shrink because he is aware that his size can be intimidating or threatening to others. Bill stated:

I have a friend tell me who is in corporate who said, well Bill, I have a dynamic of being a Black male. I'm a big guy; people are threatened by me just because I used to play football. He said, so I consciously don't stand up when I am talking to people and I have to think about that every day, because I am a big guy because they are threatened by me, and it will cause me at the end of the day to lose potential opportunities because they don't want to deal with that, deal with the angry black guy, and you know, I'm not angry, I'm just a big guy.

The caricature of the "angry Black man" was cited often by participants and was seen as a stereotype that must be dispelled if participants were to be successful in their career development. Alfred said, "We're not allowed to get angry because once you're angry,

then the label will be ‘angry Black man’ or ‘angry Black woman’ and that’s career suicide.” Henry was even more descriptive. Henry said,

If you go into a rant you will now step right into the middle into one of the myths that exists that you are now an angry Black man and that intimidates the hell out of corporate America. If you become an angry Black man and once you get that label you can never shed it. It’s attached to you forever.

Most participants stated that the angry Black man label turns more positive when attributed to their White male counterparts. White males who exhibit like behaviors are identified as “passionate.”

Bill, who works in human resources, offered a candid example of the stereotypes attributed to African American men and how those stereotypes impede career opportunities for African American men. He stated:

I think back to being in HR meetings or discussions where too often they were talking about African Americans and there would be these discussions of their style, and the reason why we can’t give them the next job is, they are arrogant, or they are, and it’s the same things that the White males tend to get viewed as being confident about, so confidence becomes arrogance. And, I saw that very specifically in some discussions about some African American males who had gotten to be in fairly senior jobs, and around discussions about their next steps. They got viewed as having more flash than substance, and the interesting part about that is we would always have to challenge them. Well, let’s go to the record, what are the results in their business unit? Well, the results are good, but this person is so flamboyant. Well, let’s not get into how they got there, and

that's a different style they have, but the results are there. Let's talk about leadership; let's talk about results; and in many cases someone has to push that, but I am thinking okay, why does it always come up with us.

Gordon referred to words such as "arrogant," "flashy," and "flamboyant" as code words meant to perpetuate negative stereotypes of African American men and discriminate against them. These were examples of how negative stereotypes harmed African American men's career development.

Mitchell gave an example of how even positive characteristics exhibited by Black men might be used against them. His personal story was about an interview for which he had prepared diligently. The recruiter had coached him on what the interviewer desired in a candidate: someone who is a go-getter, aggressive, and who is going to take over the market. The recruiter assured Mitchell he would be a great fit. Mitchell, knowing his personality aligned with what the recruiter stated the hiring manager was looking for, felt certain he would do fine in the interview. However, when he walked in and began interviewing, he sensed a chilling reception. The interviewer inquired about Mitchell's experience as a motivational speaker (not his credentials as a human resources professional), asking Mitchell if he thought his high energy might unbalance a team. Then the interviewer asked Mitchell why he wanted the position. Mitchell responded by saying it would allow him to continue to exercise his relationship skills, the position was the next logical progression in his career, and it would position him to take over a chief human resources position in the future. Now, it could have been that the interviewer did not find Mitchell's response acceptable for other reasons (e.g., Mitchell's focus on self); however it was the interviewer's response which caused Mitchell frustration. The

interviewer responded, “It sounds like you just want to take over the world.” Mitchell denied that being his aim. However, Mitchell said he sensed the interviewer, a White male, disconnected and made up his mind. Mitchell was not selected for the position. Mitchell surmised that even when a Black male has positive attributes (high energy, motivational, ambitious, etc.), those attributes can cause a career to stall. He said:

If you are an African American male and you are intelligent, smart, articulate, motivated, driven, you will be seen as a threat.

Steve, who also works in human resources, provided an interesting example of how having credentials can disadvantage Black men. He stated:

If a Black male talks about his credentials often, the arrogance thing is going to come up. If a Black male speaks in a manner that suggests he is smarter or more educated than his White counterparts, I can see that being a source of problem.

Jerome, who also had pursued his doctorate and had taught at a top tier university found it was to his advantage to “dumb down” his credentials when talking with coworkers or when applying for jobs and promotions. He stated:

I stopped telling people I had two degrees. I stopped talking about my Ph.D. study. I never told anybody about the dissertation, never shared it with anyone. I never told people I taught at the University because it only made them feel uncomfortable and I learned that making people feel uncomfortable caused them to reflect on their experiences and suddenly it was all about affirmative action and certainly I must have gotten my job because they had to hire some Blacks or I must have gotten my education because they had to have so many Blacks and that wasn't the case at all.

Steve and Jerome learned that having excellent credentials can be a detriment – not only is it unnecessary to amplify those credentials, but it likely disadvantages a Black man because as Steve expressed, “often times the credentials can be a source of jealousy, envy and additional scrutiny.” Steve, who does have his doctorate and a stellar career in the military and with large Fortune 100 companies, gave a personal example of how competence is questioned for Black males, but is assumed for White males. He said:

I think my color has also been viewed by some with skepticism. In other words, I’ve always felt like I’m going to get checked out a little bit more. It won’t be assumed regardless of my credentials that I’m competent at my job...it’s not a ready assumption...they are usually looking for some explanation as to why you are there [in the senior ranks]. It could be that you are a Ph.D. It could be that you are an MBA. It could be that you are a military academy graduate. It could be all that...I don’t know that an explanation is sought for others.

When I asked who the “others” are Steve became more explicit in his example. He continued:

I think as a Black male, clearly people are looking for an explanation in general for me as to why I’m at the level I’m at versus the White males that are similarly situated...I think again, it’s a unique situation. I feel like my White male counterparts everywhere I’ve been have never had to deal with the same level of scrutiny...I’ve never been involved in a discussion where a new White male arrives in a position and people say how did he get there and what is the basis for him being there...So I think race in this case has been – how it has played out with me is that I usually feel the need – not feel the need – I feel challenged. And,

as a result, I think it has usually taken me a while in the job to address any fears that might be out there about whether I'm actually competent in my role.

Hank also described the extra scrutiny he received from his manager compared to his White counterparts. The only African American on the leadership team, Hank said that he is questioned about every line item on his travel expense reports, who he is meeting with, and his involvement with internal and external professional associations. He stated he knows that his White counterparts are not subjected to the same inquisition. Hank said,

When it comes to deliverables, whether it's managing a project or hiring a new employee, I have clearly been scrutinized down to the nth degree, where is your interview and selection guide? I had to create a document to show how I was interviewing and selecting employees. No other VP on this row has ever had to do that.

The examples provided are just a few of many that participants shared. The examples represent largely negative attributes (e.g., thug, lazy, angry, arrogant, incompetent, etc.); however, even when the attributes were positive (e.g., highly educated, confident, articulate, etc.), they were misconstrued and resulted in negative impact.

**Stereotypes and Black male identity.** Clearly, stereotypes have bearing on how Black men see themselves and how others perceive and relate to them. The degree to which race is salient in a person's self-identity varies and often depends on whether race privileges or oppresses (Brown & Pinterits, 2001; Parham & Austin, 1994; Worrell, Cross, Jr., & Vandiver, 2001). Each of the men were conscious of their positionality as Black males in corporate America, however the degree to which they focused on their

racial identity varied. I found it intriguing that those who stated they did not focus on their racial identity were also the ones who stated that racism did not have a significant impact on their career development. Before delving into participants' stories, a brief review of Cross's model of nigrescence is offered to illuminate participants' responses and offer theoretical understanding of the relationship between stereotypes and Black male identity.

The first stage of nigrescence is the preencounter stage. During this stage an African American may demote his Blackness to gain acceptance or upward mobility. Participants who stated the importance of looking to their White counterparts as examples to follow might have decided that it is more advantageous to their career development to be "less Black" and adopt more mainstream norms (Barrett, 2000). The African American enters the second stage of nigrescence, encounter, when some event or "encounter" with racism has an impact on his life. Encounter is followed by the third stage of Immersion-Emersion. In this stage of nigrescence, the African American operates from a pro-Black/anti-White point of view and desires to surround himself with things that affirm his Blackness.

The final stage of nigrescence is internalization. In this stage, the African American attains a positive self-identity, learns to value and respect other cultures, develops meaningful relationships with Whites, and integrates his positive racial identity in the workplace while also effectively addressing racism and stereotypes (Barrett, 2000; Parham & Austin, 1994; Worrell, et al., 2001). While the stages are presented in linear fashion, they are not so neatly followed, and the African American may take on dimensions of more than one stage at a given time and may find himself skipping or



revisiting stages based on personal experiences (Byars, 2001). In the participants' accounts that follow, elements of each of the stages of nigrescence can be identified.

The first is the preencounter stage. Steve, Jerome, and Mike were three of the fourteen participants who acknowledged their awareness of the existence of racism and even had experiences with racism, but found that racism did not have a significant impact on their career progression. Steve stated:

I have to go on the record saying this – I have not had any overt experiences with racism. So in other words I've never had anybody since I've been in a corporate job treat me badly because of my – obviously a display of race, prejudice or whatever. I've never experienced that. I've never experienced a situation where I did not feel that I can compete for a job at a different level, in other words that there were external pressures or signs were given to me that don't even try for this role. I've never experienced that at all. But I've never looked for it either.

Although Steve acknowledged being reminded daily that he is a Black male in corporate America, he also stated it is something he does not focus on. He said, "I place little emphasis on representing myself because I'm a Black male, but more along the lines of am I doing the best that I can." He also said something that resembled a person who might exist within the preencounter stage – not having experienced overt racism and who still holds corporate America as a White male's dominion and the White male as the model to follow. Steve said,

I think everywhere I've gone I've tried to understand the culture. And you can just simply look at the White executives that are north of you and take a look at what they are doing. So, if I'm wearing a blue shirt and the culture [White males]

says wear white shirts, I don't think I'm going to be able to justify my blue shirt on the basis of "I'm Black."

Jerome, who grew up in a predominantly White community and said he had always competed in an integrated workplace, acknowledged that he had experienced racism, but his career had not suffered because of it. Jerome stated, "For the first half of my career I would say I kept a low profile. I participated, I fit in, and I was part of the group." He recalled accepting an invitation from White peers to go skiing, which he had never done before. Of that experience, he stated, "Because I did go skiing and had a fabulous time – I got invited on other trips – there were other activities and I wasn't Black, I was part of the group."

Lastly, Mike had a similar view of Black men's acceptance of corporate culture and norms established by White males. Like Steve, Mike saw dress as one outward symbol of corporate culture that Black men must adopt. He stated that while each person can add their own flair, Black men must adjust to the norm. He resolved it this way: "Corporate America is corporate America." Mike did not appear to engage in a critical inquiry as to who decides what the norm for corporate America is. Mike also spoke of his desire to minimize the salience of race, particularly favoring a color-blind workplace. He said:

I'm a Black man and I'm doing this job and I'm doing it very, very well. Really to the point that, and I don't want this to come across wrong, when I walk into an office to speak with a financial advisor, or if I'm going to do a seminar and I speak with a group of investors, I don't want to walk into an office saying that I'm going into – I'm going to speak to a group of White investors, or I'm going to

do a seminar with an office of White advisors. And, I want it to be the same way when I walk into that office. There's not a Black wholesaler that's coming to the office; there is a wholesaler...I know my other [White] counterparts, they don't think about that.

Steve, Jerome and Mike are examples of men who acknowledge encounters with racism, but who also tend to play down the impact of race and racism on their career development. Racial salience, the reinforcement of White male privilege, and White males as the culture setters and norm to follow do not imply that these men are not proud of their racial identity. Each spoke throughout the interviews about knowing who they are as Black men and staying true to who they are – as a source of pride and a component of career satisfaction.

Unlike Steve, Jerome, and Mike, most participants recalled one or more distinct experiences with racism that did have an impact on whether they were hired, fired, promoted, or gained access to information through social networks, etc. Their accounts are indicative of the encounter stage of nigrescence. Mitchell's interview example mentioned earlier is an example where an encounter with stereotypes and racism impacted his opportunity for a new job. Celica, who has spent virtually his entire career in pharmaceutical sales, a field where not many African Americans practice, described his experience as an African American male in the industry as being "invited to the team but not welcomed inside the locker room." He provided a vivid example of how performance can lead to certain respect, but race mediates full acceptance into the predominantly White male network. Celica described an incident where he was a candidate for a position at the home office. He was concerned about taking a position in

the home office because he had not seen any minorities in the home office and the company's diversity efforts did not seem to be making strides in increasing the number of diverse employees. He privately voiced his concern with the company's vice president of marketing, who had encouraged him to pursue the position. A backlash resulted. Celica said of that exchange:

I don't remember what he said, but I remember the way he looked at me when I asked him the question. I think I caught him off guard. He and I had social conversations. We had some things in common... We had that kind of social lingo but it was clear that crossing the line to talk about a real issue was not acceptable in his eyes for me.

Celica decided not to take the position at the home office. Approximately two years later Celica was being considered for another promotion until another incident arose between Celica and the vice president, who had by now been named president of the company. Following a speech to kick off a diversity initiative, Celica had a sidebar conversation with the president and another African American female executive. The president asked Celica and the African American woman what they thought of the diversity initiative. The African American woman voiced her excitement and offered her support. Celica stated he was excited; however, he was concerned because the initiative was basically the same as it had been a year prior and since that time three of the five African American managers had left the company. Celica asked the president how the new initiative was going to make a difference in light of the failure of the previous program. Celica said the look he received from the president reflected the president's displeasure. Celica stated: "He looked at me and literally the thing that I thought of that

this person is now saying, ‘Negro, you think you have the right to ask me something like that?’” The result was that despite being named manager of the year, Celica did not receive the promotion. Instead, the African American woman was offered the position and had to decline because she did not have flexibility to relocate. Celica reflects on that experience and surmised that he had been delisted from future opportunities and his career development suffered because he mistakenly thought he could have a candid conversation about race with the White male leader. Celica left the company shortly thereafter.

David offered another example of an encounter, which reflects several of the participants’ experiences. He discussed his experience as a first-generation corporate executive. He entered corporate America in the 1970’s as a result of Affirmative Action. He and others described the policy as providing both advantage and a curse. His personal experience is an example of how the confluence of stereotypes, racism, and identity impacted his experience. David was in a leadership role at a time when African Americans were just entering corporate America and there were not a lot of role models or examples of successful African American leaders. He remembered several colleagues, White and Black, male and female, told him that his stature was imposing and could be a detriment because he appeared threatening to his White male and female direct reports. He admitted that he was not as confident in his leadership role at that time and found himself playing it cautious. When he spoke, he came across somewhat timid because “I knew that everyone was evaluating every word I said...I was very measured in whatever I said. I was even more protective of my image and myself than I might normally be.” David found that his direct reports used that against him and often went around him to his

manager when they disagreed with his directives. David believed that the stereotypes associated with African American men, his attempts to alleviate the negative consequences of those stereotypes, and racism all coalesced to contribute to his White employees' disregard of his position power as their leader.

In the immersion-emersion stage, African Americans promote their Blackness and hold anti-White sentiment. Participants did speak proudly about their Blackness and Africentric culture; however, no participant voiced disparaging sentiments against Whites based solely on race. Instead they acknowledged the existence of White privilege and particularly White male privilege and provided examples of differentiated experiences based on race and racism. They also tended to engage in bicultural strategies, which meant that participants often sought social affiliations with other African Americans, particularly African American men, which affirmed their race and gender identity. Bicultural strategies are covered under the discussion on facilitative structures.

Jerome, who right after he made the statement about fitting in and "I wasn't Black, I was part of the group," followed with a seemingly contradictory statement about his deliberate showcase of racial identity.

Now having said that, I always made it a point in my cubicle or in my office to always have Black artifacts of some sort because I wanted to remind people I am Black. Because major corporations, in my experience have been, they forget you're Black, and then they think you're White, and part of it is by the way I talk. I've been trained to talk this way.

Jerome's statement is conflictive in that it both affirms his identification as a Black person, but also distinguishes himself from other Blacks on the basis of how he talks – implied as he talks like a White person.

Likewise, Mike, who had stated he desired to be seen as just a wholesaler – not a Black wholesaler, talked with disgust about Black men who shed their Blackness in corporate America. He had encountered an African American male manager who “played the game.” Mike described it this way:

In my opinion, he played the game. You know, and he was probably two or three years older than I was, but he was from eight to five – he had one persona, and then afterwards, if we had drinks, he was a different person.

When I probed what he meant by “playing the game,” Mike chuckled and said, “Well, it's kind of funny. It's like his voice was different.” Later in the interview Mike returned to the example of the African American male manager with much more seriousness. He stated, “I saw what I didn't want to be...I mean, I've seen, you know, Black men get into a corporate setting and stop being Black...They don't want to talk about being Black.”

He came back to that point a third time and added:

Just be you. You know, and I think what happens, a lot of people – and I think it's portrayed this way in the movies, they think you have to be a sell-out – that you can't be Black and be successful in a corporate setting. I think you can be.

Bill also shared his thoughts on Black male identity. He said:

I would say be okay with being Black, be okay with being a Black man...when you wake up in the morning and you look in the mirror what do you see? You know, most non-Black males, White females, they will say, I see a mother, or I

see an employee; a lot of White males will see themselves as what they are in their job – I see the head of sales. Black males, I see a Black man. Okay, be okay with that. You don't have to turn yourself into a White guy to be successful in corporate America.

One of the strongest pro-Black male statements came from Steve, who ironically had also spoken earlier in the interview about not focusing on his Blackness. I shared with Steve prior research from Moss and Tilly (1996) that found employers tended to perceive African American men as not having favorable soft skills compared to Whites and African American women and this perspective was a source of job discrimination. Steve vehemently rejected those research findings. He opined:

Well let me go on the record right now. I'd like to challenge the notion that Whites have better soft skills. I wouldn't buy that at all. In fact, I would argue that – let's just talk Blacks in general – we can differentiate males. To be a Black person in corporate America and to have advanced in the ranks, it's a given. If every White male that I think has the same degree of soft skills that a Black male in an equivalent position – I'd say it's 10 to 1 – meaning, I've got to go through 10 White male executives to find one that has the same skill set from an interpersonal perspective because more often than not that Black male or Black female has had to demonstrate the skill set to even get people comfortable enough to allow them to be in the ranks. So, I challenge that. I challenge that wholeheartedly.

The research on soft skills and race does not align with Steve's declaration. Moss and Tilly found:



The emphasis employers place on soft skills disadvantages Black male job applicants...The employers placing the greatest emphasis on soft skills were those most likely to have negative views of Black men as workers. The views employers hold of Black men in this regard were partly stereotype, partly cultural gap, and partly an accurate perception of the skills that many less educated Black men bring into the labor market. (p. 241)

Moss and Tilly noted that nearly a third of the employers surveyed described Black men as defensive, hostile, or having bad attitudes; nearly 40 percent perceived Black men as unmotivated. The authors concluded that in the wake of increased competition and corporate downsizings, employers' perceptions were widening racial inequality in career outcomes.

Gordon, a diversity manager in a conservative, 100-year company, stated that his company rewards conformity. From the type of dress, to the radio station tuned in a person's office, the company frowned upon anyone who departed from the cultural norms. Gordon said he is respectful of the culture, but maintained his Black identity. Citing the number of years he spent in the military wearing a uniform and conforming to that culture, he said he refused to give up his identity for insignificant expectations such as what radio station he listened to in his office or whether he wore a handkerchief in his suit jacket. Gordon said the company expected a person to listen to a Christian station, CNN, or national public radio in their office. He chose to listen to smooth jazz. For something as insignificant as that he had been labeled as "arrogant." However, Gordon said his role as the diversity manager is to broaden what the in-group looked like and

expand the culture to embrace differences so that diverse employees could express those differences without the threat of being labeled and discriminated against.

While the majority of the participants retained a pro-Black male identity and defended Black men as a group against negative stereotypes, there were a few that were critical of Black men and thought Black men's behaviors contributed to the stereotypes levied against them. Duncan expressed that sometimes corporate America or "the system" was wrongly blamed for negative treatment Black men experienced. He expressed that he and his inner circle of other Black male friends had been treated fairly in corporate America because they were not threatening. When I asked him to say more about that, he stated:

Some Black males are angry sometimes and *they* [emphasis added] exude that in certain settings and sometimes they may feel for whatever reason and maybe justifiable that this is owed to them. I think you have to let all those guards down. If you exhibit that, that's threatening to your White counterparts or superiors. I think you have to be more neutral.

Just a short point later in the interview, Duncan added that although there were few African American men in managerial ranks at his company, they did well – and in large part because they had prepared themselves in terms of their skills. Duncan said of other Black men who do not receive the opportunities they want, "I think what happens is sometimes our Black men, some of it is their own fault and some not their fault, they don't go after it. They don't go get the skills necessary." Duncan's use of the word "they" to reference the Black men he described signaled his disassociation from those men.

The last stage of nigrescence is internalization. Of all the stages, this may be the most difficult for African American professional men to navigate in corporate America because it requires them to balance positive racial identities, their relationships with Whites and other racial/ethnic minorities, while also combating racism and stereotypes (Worrell, et al., 2001). The first two – positive racial identities and meaningful relationships with Whites and other minorities are not the bigger problems. From participants' responses, the difficulty was knowing when and how to bring up issues regarding race and how to confront racism without being accused of playing the race card and being the angry Black man. Celica's experience of getting delisted by his company and shut out of any promotion opportunities because he questioned the company's diversity efforts is an example of the backlash participants fear could result from challenging racial inequities. Celica spoke out on numerous occasions when he encountered stereotypes and racism, and he admitted his career may have suffered because of it. He shared examples of how his peers in pharmaceutical sales would have conversations about the health care reform options being debated politically over the past several months. Those conversations would inevitably include implicit and disparaging remarks about minorities and the poor, essentially blaming those groups for being drains on the system. When Celica would ask his peers to be more explicit about whom they were talking, a typical response was, "Well, you know, there's a lot of the minority population."

Dallas shared a similar story of how confronting racism and stereotypes can be risky. He shared a story about his experiences at the Friday morning breakfast meetings with management. One of the vice presidents would regularly launch into a conversation

with the caveat, “I don’t mean to offend anyone, but...” and then would proceed to talk about racially sensitive issues, e.g., the foreclosure crisis, and attribute the problem to “those people” who could not afford the mortgages. When Dallas probed as to who he meant by “those people,” the vice president cited single mothers as an example. Dallas challenged him, letting the vice president know that he had grown up with a single mom. The vice president then admitted that he was also raised by a single mom. Then, Dallas said, “Well, where in the hell are you going with what you’re talking about?” Reflecting on that experience, Dallas stated:

It’s that kind of thing that’s going on and you never know when you are presenting or when your name comes up for promotion or anything, you never know if some of that residual stuff is going on in their heads. And then you’re not this weak Black guy.

Several of the participants stated the biggest challenge was knowing how or when to challenge the stereotypes and racism. Some of the challenge existed because their White counterparts did not perceive them as being like “other Blacks.” Somehow, the participants had transcended their race or were viewed as an anomaly. Duncan stated:

I’ve had people start talking about Black this and Black that, and they think I’m the exception...Like you’re really White; you just happen to have a little color tint to you. And then you have to make a conscious decision, do you fight that or don’t you fight that...I found for me, not fighting it made it better for me, but also gave me an opportunity to do the things I wanted to do. Again, I always wanted to hire the best person, and I’ve hired a lot of Black people.

However, Duncan's use of "they" and "them" to distinguish himself from other Black men signaled that he may also perceive that he is different from Blacks.

Jerome confronted racism by refusing to be the office token. He stated, "I don't believe in any kind of sham representation." When a prospective Black employee was coming in to the office for a meeting, Jerome would often get asked if he would be available to stop by and say, "Hi." Jerome said his response was usually, "No. I'm not the display Negro." He went on to say that when he was invited to engage in the process of evaluating candidates, he was happy to do that, but he refused to be "on display." Jerome also stated that his grandmother taught him that when confronting racism, he always has the choice of either fight or flight. She taught him that he could either rant or consider the possibility of "what if they don't know any better. What if this is the first time they have ever met an African American like you?" In that case, Jerome said he could take that opportunity to educate Whites on what makes him "unique" and once they changed their perceptions of him, he could then educate them on the fact that he is not the exception – that there are millions more like him. As Duncan used "they" to distinguish himself from other Black men, Jerome also used othering language to differentiate himself from African Americans. When I interviewed Jerome, he commented that he was not sure I would want to include his story because he suspected that his experience might be different from other participants. He had grown up in a predominantly White neighborhood, attended private Catholic school, and was raised to not accept racism as a reason to fail. He stated:

So, I've experienced racism in different forms. I tend to deal with it. I've never had an opportunity to say that I didn't get something because I was Black, and

part of that is because I'm not allowed to say that in my family. That's just not how we're built. There is always another reason. You didn't get the job because you were Black and you were not given the job because you were Black.

David summed up what several of the men stated with regard to their decision on when to confront racism. David said:

I think confronting it [racism] head on was one of the things [strategies]. Not total confrontation where everything is a racial issue and I still do this today, the things that just gnaw at your conscience. You say, I know I shouldn't let this go because I know this is going to continue or it's going to be a problem for someone else. Knowing when, if you will, to confront versus when to try to convince and educate folks or influence folks in a different direction – that's the strategy.

Knowing when to confront and when take another action depended largely on the impact of the racism on the participant or in the participant's evaluation on other African Americans.

Lastly, several participants stated they were careful not to bring up race if there were other plausible reasons for the actions. A few participants even distinguished racism as "not racist by intent," even if by impact. Henry shared a story where he had been with a company nine years when he realized he had hit the glass ceiling. He knew the principals of the company were not going to allow him to become the general manager of the business. Henry said, "By no means do I think that they were racist. I don't think they wanted to have an African American in that position." The company was in a division of the sports industry where African Americans did not have a prominent presence on the business side. Henry concluded that because African Americans were not strong players

in that segment of the industry, the principals did not see him as being the face of the company. That was an example where racism impacted Henry's career development although he did not perceive the actors to be racist.

In summary, participant stories revealed the interrelationship between stereotypes and Black male identity. The stories included elements of one or more of Cross's four stages of nigrescence: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization. This is important to understand in terms of the participants' career development because race, culture and identity play integral roles in career development (Cuyjet & Associates, 2006; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002; Parham & Austin, 1994). Byars (2001) underscored the importance of Black racial identity development because of the influence of identity on career interests, choices, and values.

**Stereotypes and racial consciousness.** The extent to which race was salient to the participants, they identified with Black culture and other Black men as an interpretation of self speaks to participants' racial or Black male identity. However, the men's persistent realization of their positionality as Black men in corporate America is more a reflection of their racial consciousness. The concept of racial consciousness stems from DuBois' (1903) conceptualization of double-consciousness in which African Americans are constantly navigating between two worlds – their Black culture and mainstream American culture. In a dialectical existence, African American professional men are constantly aware of their distinct and marginal position at the same time they strive to fit in and succeed in mainstream corporate society.

Under the umbrella of racial consciousness, participants shared stories of their daily awareness of being a Black man in corporate America, the felt need to or

responsibility for representing the race – and particularly other Black men, and their feelings of loneliness and isolation from being the “only one in the room.” Regardless of varied reflections on Black male stereotypes and the impact to the participants’ identities and resulting career outcomes, all participants uniformly acknowledged racial consciousness. Gordon’s and Bill’s statements reflect a common refrain among participants. Gordon stated:

There is not a day that I have ever come in, not a minute that I have ever worked with this company, in particular, because that’s a good length of time, that I am not conscious of the fact that I am a Black male, not one minute; and I remind my White colleagues, my managers, and the leadership of this company, that you have the privilege of coming to work every day, and never having to think about being male or White.

Bill’s statement also supported the reality that the racial consciousness Black men have is not something shared by their White counterparts, unless White men have the occasion of being in a context where they become the minority – which is a rarity in corporate America. Bill recalled such an experience:

Well, I think that as a Black man in corporate America and it may be the same case for Black females, is you remember that every day, and I can tell you an example of being at a National Black MBA meeting, the national convention, and I went there with a White colleague. We went to the reception which is the night before everything gets started, and my White colleague who was a peer at the time, came to me and said, “Bill, you know what, I just realized this is the first time in my professional career that I think there are only three White people in



the room.” I remember saying, “Jeff, this is how it is for us every day...you don’t think about it. You have been working now for twelve or thirteen years in corporate America and today it dawned on you, and for us it is that way every day.”

Martin, a senior human resources executive who worked his way up from entry level to senior management, shared a slightly different story of racial consciousness. He stated that when he and other senior ranking African American executives walked down to the company’s cafeteria, that other employees would watch them intensely. Martin recalled a conversation he had with some of the African American senior executives. He stated:

Everybody is watching. And I said do you realize that when you walk through the cafeteria how many people watch you and I was saying that to all three of them and they said absolutely, you’re cognizant of it all the time. They watch what you do, how you walk, what you say, etc.

When I inquired as to who was watching these senior ranking African American executives, Martin stated he noticed that other African Americans seemed to watch with a sense of pride, while Whites watched in awe that there were senior ranking African American executives. He stated, “But regardless, they are visible” and they knew they were visible. It was interesting that until I asked about his inclusion in the group and whether he felt people watched him, Martin did not see himself in the same light as the other senior ranking African American executives. The other senior ranking African American executives would tell Martin they were quite aware of the visibility they had and the differences in reception. On one hand, it was “we’re glad you’re here and on the other, we can’t believe you’re here.” One senior ranking executive told Martin that he

knew how he did his work was the basis for whether other Blacks would receive opportunities. Martin stated:

White men do not have to deal with all that dynamic, they just don't. There's just all this stuff you've got to deal with. White men don't sit around and think about well I wonder what the pipeline is going to look like. They don't think about well, where's our next candidate going to be – they don't think about that. They don't have any thought around that.

The concept of representing the race surfaced repeatedly in my conversations with the participants. Most participants did feel a sense of responsibility and were conscious of the notion that opportunities for other African Americans, particularly other African American men, hinged on their success or failure. Bill, who has been involved in staffing and recruiting executives, gave a clear example of how an African American's performance may impact future opportunities for other African Americans. He stated:

I have never heard someone say, well, last year, I had a White male account manager, and he didn't perform well, so before I put another White male account manager in position, I need to be careful about that. Okay, I've heard that about women, and I have heard it said about Black people. What that does is it holds you back and I have heard and seen that happen in corporate America many times.

When I asked Bill if he thought his career opportunities had been limited by such thinking and behavior, he stated, "Yes, and generally it's not said to you." Alfred agreed that African Americans serve as representatives of other African Americans whether by intent or de facto, and he expressed throughout the interview his own internal conflict

with representing the race. Initially, Alfred referenced his common experience of being the only Black male in class and how he responded. He said, “For the most part, it just helped propel me to excel. As I said earlier, I always wound up at the top of the class, graduating with honors – just representing my race, you know.” He went on to say that although it was a challenge being the only Black male in class and carrying the burden of representing the race, “It was like you could never put me or my race down in front of me or put me in that stereotype.” Later in the interview, Alfred recalled taking the train into the city for work and encountering three White couples who were, in his estimation, just having fun and acting carefree. Alfred said he thought to himself, “I wonder how that feels, not to have to carry the burden of my race, not to always have that?” He vowed to himself that he would release the burden of always second thinking the stereotypes, his life and actions and what impact they might have on the race. He stated of that experience, “I think part of our dilemma is that we still carry that baggage. So sometimes we are able to move ahead, but we may hold ourselves back.” Later in the interview, Alfred returned to the subject of representing the race and the impact of racism not only on career development, but on Black men per se because as he explained it, fighting racism and stereotypes take extra stress and energy to navigate in corporate America. He said his White counterparts do not even understand that; “It’s out of their realm. It isn’t even on their radar. They don’t have to carry that burden. So, every time I’m doing something, I’m not just doing it for Alfred; I have to represent my race.” He gave examples of whenever something goes wrong with a Black man in society, it is as if all Black males are doing something wrong – “There’s not one good Black male.” Alfred

said, “It’s beyond comprehension that there could be a good Black man...in the workplace you’re carrying that.”

Steve’s comments on representing the race also reflect the inner turmoil many of the participants expressed. Steve stated:

I’m always conscious that I’m a Black male. I place little emphasis on representing myself because I’m a Black male, but more along the lines of, am I doing the best I can do? You see the difference? Because again I think I feel a greater obligation to representing myself and doing the very best I can do than somehow trying to convince others that Black people are special or Black people are talented. I don’t have time for that.

Steve spent a lot of time trying to explain his thoughts. I interpreted his energy around that question as not wanting to come across as not caring about the race, but that he simply did not want to take on that burden. He went on to say, “I think it’s too large for me, meaning I think earlier in my life I probably felt like I was kind of carrying the whole race thing with me. I don’t want to do that at all.” Instead, Steve said that by being the best that he could be, he is representing all of the people who have contributed to his life and who look up to him. He said, “So, it’s less about I did a great presentation and I represented Black people. I just don’t think in those terms.” The difference between Steve’s resolve and most of the other participants is that most participants acknowledged that representing the race and representing other African American men are inescapable. It is not a choice they have the liberty to reject. Mitchell discussed it as the “Black image in the White mind” and how the stereotypes of African American men are used as the

standard by which their behavior, potential, and career outcomes are evaluated and decided upon.

Lastly, one way in which stereotypes and the resulting actions create a repressive structure in which African American men's career development is impacted is by creating an environment where African American men are often the only African American or African American man in the room. All fourteen participants had some reflection or experience of being the only one in the room. Some participants shared how certain responsibilities come with being the only one in the room, as well as the loneliness, isolation, and health issues that result from not having other African Americans in the room with them. Still others discussed the benefits of being in the room and the risks of not having anyone in the room when discussions about career development surfaced. I use the term "in the room" because this is the term that several of the participants used to describe their experience. Martin said many times he is the only African American in the room. He stated:

So what I'm cognizant of is when I'm in a room is that if I'm going to ask a question I need to be very clear about what I say and how I say it. I'm more cognizant of that. I'm more cognizant of what I'm doing because I get a sense of if I'm sitting there you can't lose focus and let people notice that. I may see other people sitting in a room and drifting off and eyes rolling back in their head; they can do that and not be noticed, but if I do it, it's noticeable. I feel that. Maybe that's not true, but I feel that. I also feel I have to be heard. I can't sit there and not say anything. It's almost like I feel this – when is he going to say something – I feel that – like what does Martin feel about that – waiting for me to weigh in on

things. And so sometimes when I'm in a meeting and I really don't want to weigh in – you know sometimes you just want to just take it in. I don't feel like I can do that because if I do I feel like I'm leaving people with well maybe he doesn't have an opinion or maybe he doesn't understand what we're talking about. All that stuff is running through your mind. White counterparts don't think that way, they just don't.

Martin also stated that one of his African American male mentors used to share his experiences of being the only one in the room and how when he walked into meetings and was the only Black in the room it got to be distasteful to him. Martin, in quoting his mentor, said: "I couldn't pay attention because I couldn't stop focusing on what is going on here? I'm the only Black in the room and I'm at the senior job, so what's that telling me about the pipeline." Henry and Alfred also talked about the frustration and emotional toll of being the only one in the room. Henry said:

In terms of true business environment, almost every time I walk into a conference room, it reminds me I'm a Black man in corporate America because I'm the only Black in the room. So, at times that gets frustrating because you talk about all the diversity efforts that may exist around the world and yet when you go into your own company's meetings and especially executive meetings, there are not that many people of color in those meetings or at the decision making table. And so yeah, when I go to those meetings and I look around the meeting and I'm the only one or maybe there is like a Black female there, but like, wow – you are in corporate America. So, I think that is for me the big mirror in the room so to speak.

Alfred recalled a moment that was just as emotionally moving. He was in a graduate course and the exercise called for each person to move to a corner of the room according to their positionality. White men gathered in one area of the room, White women in another, Black women, etc. All participants had moved to their respective areas and Alfred was left standing in the middle of the room. Of that experience, he said: “I was still standing in the middle of the room alone and I never felt so alone in my entire life...that moment was like, wow. It almost brought me to tears.” When I asked him how that experience was similar or different than his experience in corporate America, he stated, “There’s a lot of pressure with that [being the only one in the room]. You have to bring your A game all the time. There isn’t a time when you can relax.”

Duncan also offered his thoughts on the toll that being the only one in the room takes on African American professional men. He and several others discussed the intense scrutiny African American men experience when they are the only ones in the room.

Duncan said:

Diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stress, loneliness, some insecurities, some trust factors mainly because again you’re kind of like on an island by yourself. Most Black managerial executive men, if they really tell you the truth, even though they have friends, they don’t really have friends and most of them feel like they can’t talk to their spouse so they hold it all in.

Duncan said that as first generation corporate executives, African American professional men encounter a lot of pressure to succeed because they are setting the trend for others, including their own families, and everyone is watching. He said, “Sometimes it’s a

fallacy because sometimes you say hey I just wish I could fail so I could be normal. But if you fail there's a lot of people that you're going to take down with you."

When Mitchell shared with a Black female friend his disappointing interview experience and how he felt the White male interviewer denied him the job because he was threatened by Mitchell's credentials and personality, the response that he received from his Black female friend was disappointing. He stated, "As a Black man sometimes, I think you can feel the isolation because really no one knows – if you can't even go to your Black woman to say hey this is what I was dealing with..."

However, just as being the only one in the room generated increased scrutiny, loneliness and isolation, there was also a benefit to being in the room when decisions about career development were being made. Participants posited that if they did not have anyone in the room to speak on their behalf or on the behalf of African Americans, they were not assured fair consideration for employment and career development. Jerome recalled a time when early in his career as a senior grade executive, he attended a meeting with over 100 other senior executives and he was the only Black person there. He had to speak at the event, and when he reached the podium, he said, "You know this morning I wasn't going to come; I was going to sleep in, but I knew if I didn't come I'd be missed." Jerome said he used the platform to tell those senior executives that the company needed to get more Black people and people of color in those meetings, hired, and managed. Dallas said he looks "for people who will be in the room when I'm not in the room in meetings that I don't even know about that can be an evangelist for me." Bill recalled a time when his being the only one in the room made a huge difference in career outcomes for several hundred African Americans. The company was going through a downsizing



where 1200 positions had to be eliminated. The company's policy was to follow the last hire, first fire approach. Bill challenged senior leadership to rethink that policy because the majority of the last hires were African Americans. If the company terminated those African Americans, it would essentially wipe out all the gains the company had made in their diversity efforts. The result was that Bill was able to influence the process so that there was more thought in retaining African Americans. Of that experience, Bill said:

It's one of the first times where you can say, you can have an impact because you are in the room, it's one where very clearly I would say if there were no people of color, no Black folks involved in that, the outcome would have been very different.

**Summary of stereotypes as a repressive structure.** In summary, stereotypes figured most prominently in participants' stories as a repressive structure. The practice of stereotyping African American men based on the intersection of their race and gender, and then using those stereotypes to influence the interactions, decisions, and career outcomes amount to gendered racism. From the participants' stories, stereotypes informed the actions of both the participants and their White counterparts and superiors – supporting the concept that repressive structures are social rules and practices that are created and recreated by members within the social systems – in this case corporate America.

In my examination of stereotypes as a repressive structure, I found it useful to understand which stereotypes surfaced most in the participants' experiences, how the participants responded to the stereotypical projections, and how those stereotypes ultimately impacted their career development. I delved into the association between

stereotypes and Black male identity using Cross's four stages of nigrescence. Of the four stages, I surmise internalization may be the most challenging for participants. They are frequently balancing their cultural identity as African American men against the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes that serve to assault their positive identities and further oppress them. Knowing when and how to confront stereotypes and pathological racism without confirming the stereotype of the angry Black man was cited often by participants.

Lastly, participants' persistent consciousness of their positionality in corporate America was also seen as a factor interrelated with stereotypes. Most frequently, participants recalled daily reminders of being Black and male in corporate America, of carrying the burden of representing other African Americans, particularly African American men, and of being the only one in the room. The solitary experience brought with it intense scrutiny and participants' feelings of isolation, loneliness and health concerns. However, there were times when being in the room altered the career outcomes of African Americans in a positive way – which participants were certain their presence helped to influence. Overall, stereotypes and the actions and behaviors stemming from acknowledging and/or adopting those stereotypes, influenced the interactions between participants and their White counterparts and ultimately shaped their experiences and career development. A closely related repressive structure, subjective and covert career development practices, is discussed in the following section.

### **Subjective and Disparate Career Development Practices**

Career development practices include a company's policies or practices involving such programs as performance and succession management; hiring, promotion and

termination; and selection for key assignments and developmental experiences. The theme of subjective and disparate career development practices emerged from participants' responses to research questions two and three. Under question two, participants discussed how their careers compared with their White counterparts, how open or supportive their companies were in supporting the career development of African American men, and what I would notice if I had access to their company's career development and mobility statistics. Question three asked participants to identify which organizational factors inhibited or facilitated their career development, i.e., their company's career development programs and practices. From those lines of inquiry, participants revealed practices that constrain positive career development for African American men. What often emerged was that companies' policies and practices were not systemized and lacked objectivity, transparency and accountability.

**Comparing career development.** In the discussions comparing their careers to their White male counterparts, only two participants thought their experiences were comparable or better than their White peers. Jerome stated:

I would say my career has been unique in that you would be hard pressed to find a White male counterpart who had the diversity in my career. I've worked for four divisions of one business unit. I've worked on both the West coast and the East coast. I've worked internationally. You'd be hard pressed to find somebody with my career. It had nothing to do with being Black; it had more to do with being smart and again, not Black or White, but green. I make money for the corporation in whatever I do.

Duncan also indicated that his career favored just as positively as his White counterparts. He stated, “I think because of my drive and determination I think I’ve been treated fairly. I think that opportunities have presented themselves to me.” Duncan attributed his success to preparation and a willingness to do things others are not willing to do, for example, engaging in different learning programs and putting in the hours necessary. He said, “My White counterparts haven’t been willing to do that or didn’t have the personality.” Duncan also admitted that he was unique – “a rare person this has happened to.” From the stories of the other twelve participants, Jerome’s and Duncan’s experiences are unique. All other participants reflected on examples of how their career development differed less positively from their White counterparts. While Dallas expressed that he had been able to achieve more than most of his White male counterparts, he acknowledged it was up to a point. He found that once he reached senior director, his career development stagnated while his White counterparts kept advancing. He said:

I see those people who have been on par with me, shoulder to shoulder, progressing ahead of the pack. We’re both at the gates of this VP level, I’m seeing a little bit more of them move to the VP level and I’m still trying to get there. And, I’m like, okay, what’s that about.

Dallas questioned whether his stagnation had to do with his career choice, being a marketing professional. He said he did not believe it had to do with his race, but also stated, “Still in the back of my mind I wonder sometimes does it have to do with the fact that you still may not be able to identify with me and I still got to work on that.” David and Celica also reflected on their positive career development only to find they reached a ceiling. David said his career had progressed “on a steady upward path when I was really

chasing it.” However, David said, “What’s different is that once you achieve a certain level, or at least once I achieved a certain level, I found I lost my sponsorship.” David reflected that White male counterparts have sponsors at much higher levels in the organization than most African Americans. As a result, his White counterparts were able to gain more exposure to senior executives at the highest levels and their career development was able to extend beyond David’s. David said that career development was not based on the performance results, but by factors other than results. He said, “I’m getting better results than my counterparts, but I don’t get the move. I don’t get the promotions. I don’t get the mentor.” Celica’s experience was similar. He stated, “By virtue of my job, most of my counterparts have been White and I have exceeded most of my counterparts in terms of career progression.” However, in terms of long-term career goals and achievement, Celica stated his White counterparts have been able to move beyond what he achieved. He recalled a White peer who he had been outpacing for much of his career and now the former peer was at least one or two levels above him. Celica resolved, “I would say that I have not achieved what I might have been able to had I been a different race...I would have had an opportunity to achieve.”

Gordon and Henry did not feel their career development could compare with their White counterparts. Gordon found comparison difficult because he entered his present company after having had a full military career. Conversely, most of his White peers had entered the company after completing college and had significant tenure advantage. As a result of tenure and their specializations, his White counterparts had received positions in the core business operations. However, Gordon did make comparisons on the amount of struggle he experienced compared to his White counterparts. He stated:

The only thing I have to compare, the only thing that I know is, I know what my story has been and I know some of the struggles that I have had, and I know that these struggles would not have happened if I was not a Black male. They just would not have happened.

When I pressed Gordon to explicate the struggles, he said,

We are just talking about accomplishing certain goals, trying to get budgets approved, trying to get certain programs and initiatives through – all of which benefit the company. Just the amount of energy and effort it takes to achieve the same outcomes – that is where I see the difference between my White counterparts.

Henry was not able to make a comparison to his White counterparts for a different reason. Henry stated:

My first thought is that it's hard to compare the two because I've never felt that it was on equal playing grounds. So you can't necessarily compare point to point. The measuring stick for me I think is always different. I try not to compare really, because if you compare you piss yourself off, you really do.

When I inquired as to what was different, Henry said, "Exposure. You would be fighting to gain exposure to certain things, certain business skills earlier in your career, getting exposure to the senior level of thinking for executives." Hank also cited the differences in exposure to senior executives as one way in which his career development differed from his White counterparts. Hank also stated that he had to have twice as much to achieve half the career development his White counterparts achieve. An engineer by trade, Hank has comparable years of experience and in many cases more varied experiences than his

White counterparts. Additionally, Hank said that he is the only person among his peer group that has an advanced degree – not even his manager has an advanced degree. He attributed the lack of comparable career development to feelings of jealousy or intimidation by his White female manager and his White peers. I also asked Hank if there was ever a time when he thought he was advantaged or that his career development had exceeded his White counterparts. Hank said, “In no uncertain terms do I see how I have been advantaged by being a Black man.”

Alfred was also explicit that his race was a determinant in how his career development compared to his White counterparts at his previous company. He said that for starters, “I had to get the education to even get on the playing field. They [White counterparts] would just get promoted.” He also stated that the rate of promotion was different. While Alfred spent nine years in the same position, his White counterparts were promoted after three years. He stated, “If I was a White male, I might have been the president by now...with the effort that I put in.” Mike also commented that who gets promoted and when they get promoted were sometimes not equitable. He said, “Well, I’ve worked with people and I look at them and I say, ‘you know, what in the heck are they doing? Who do they know?’ And, I think that pretty much says it.” He admitted that he has gone through career development and has grown because of it. In comparing his career development to his White counterparts, Mike stated:

I started at square one and I’ve had to work my way up to where I am. I’ve come across some people who I think they’ve come into the game on the fourth floor.

They never had to go to the basement and work their way up. They came in on the fourth floor.

Steve also noted that the starting point can be the greatest difference in career development between African American men and their White counterparts. Even tracing his path back to his time at the military academy, Steve developed a metaphor for the variance in experiences between him and his White counterparts. He learned to think of the difference in terms of preparation. He said:

I've always viewed myself as just as good as anybody else, maybe not as prepared, maybe not as well positioned as my White colleagues. Again, well positioned, meaning they understand the lay of the land in terms of how promotions work and who are the people, whatever. So, it's incumbent upon me to get prepared....So no hate for them, it's just that I've got to work my game now. I see that I started the race five laps back, so I've got to run faster. And that's the metaphor that's in my head. I just started five laps back.

Martin used a similar metaphor to describe how African American men's career development differed from their White counterparts. He said that African American men and White men are running the career development "race," and both are advancing in comparison to other participants on the track with them. However, when African American men look across they see their White male counterparts running on a different track. In essence, their career development is not the same and will never be the same because they are inherently separate and unequal.

**Abysmal support for African American men's career development.** When I asked participants how much support their companies provided for the career development of African American men, most responses indicated very little to abysmal support for their career development. The most promising response came from Jerome,



who said, “The organization does not [support the career development of African American men]; Individuals working through the organizations do.” The lack of a systemized approach and support for career development was found throughout participants’ responses and is partly what represses the career development of African American men in corporate America. Other responses shed a much bleaker light on career development support. Hank said:

I would say very, very, very poor with all those areas. At the VP level since I have been here, there has only been one African American male that I know of that has even been promoted – one. He’s the only vice president promoted to SVP that I know of in six years. I can’t think of another. And they managed [name withheld] out.

Steve stated:

I don’t think they have done a good job. By virtue of the fact that as I sit today, I’m one of two Black males, African American males, who have reached the SVP level. I’ve been here since 2003...there has been little progression. So I can honestly say in my twelve years, with respect to upper ranks, the number has actually gone down.

When I inquired whether the lack of career progression was attributed to the fact that organizational structures have gotten flatter versus a lack of interest in developing African American men, Steve said,

No. I think it’s the latter, the lack of interest. The flatter works for everybody. So the problem is you don’t see large numbers of executives or even moderate numbers of executives of people of color in the executive levels. You don’t see

that. And, there is no commitment to understanding why...no one has even engaged me. So no, this organization gets no credit, certainly nothing exceptional.

It's been average to marginal in its advancement of African American men.

David said African American men's career development is not a conscious effort at his company. Duncan similarly stated, that "Corporations have gotten away from any of that kind of stuff. I think there's opportunities. If you want it, you go out and get it. It's not a Black thing; it's not a White thing." Gordon concurred in that opportunities specific to African Americans or African American men are not available at his company. Of the company's commitment and support to African American men's career development and to identifying African American men as successors in the leadership ranks, Gordon stated, "There is no intentionality." He noted that in the company's 100-plus history, they had just promoted their first African American female vice president last year. He said the succession practice is an identification practice, not a development practice. He stated that the process of determining participants for leadership development is arbitrary and concealed. He stated, "They go behind a black curtain and decide who is going to go where."

**White male privilege in career mobility.** Just as the participants discussed the lack of support or intentionality for African American men's career development, they also talked about who received the most support for career development. They answered overwhelmingly that White males are still the recipients of most career development in terms of opportunities, promotions, strategic assignments, etc. Bill stated that some of the biggest inhibitors to African American men's career development are weak succession plans, few assignments to strategic roles and profit and loss accountability, and not

getting selected to attend leadership development programs. Without those types of career development experiences on their resume, African American men are excluded from consideration into executive ranks. Bill said companies need to identify African American males to go through those types of career development experiences – in Gordon’s language, to be “intentional” about African American men’s career development.

I asked participants if I had access to their company’s career development and mobility statistics, what I would notice. Hank said, “It is White male dominated.” David said, “You would probably notice that it’s still for the most part for White males...if you looked at the internal development of those who are being internally promoted, they would still be White.” Henry said, “There are not very many African American men that have been elevated to the senior levels of management throughout its history.” When I asked Henry what the written documents would say compared to what he knew to be true, he said, “The written document says they couldn’t find qualified candidates, which I find that very difficult to believe over a number of years. And, on top of that, if you can’t find them, then grow them.” Of all the responses, Duncan’s response stood apart. When he thought about his company’s mobility statistics, he said I would notice that it was more females advancing than males.

**Constraints to African American men’s career development.** Participants revealed practices that constrain positive career development for African American men. The most significant factors found to inhibit the career development of African American professional men were the lack of systemized and transparent policies and lack of objective and accountable practices carried out by those in authority to make career

development decisions. As the head of his company's diversity office, Gordon had access to the company's succession data. As mentioned in the previous section, the company had promoted only one African American woman to vice president in its 100-plus history. Additionally, that promotion was the single promotion of an African American in the last eight years. He asserted that without leaders' intentional focus on increasing the number of women and minorities into the executive ranks, it would not happen. When I asked why, he stated that the company's career development processes were not structured and connected to the company's diversity and development efforts. Gordon said, "People simply don't know what it takes to get ahead." He also compared his military experience with corporate America. He stated that in the military the promotion opportunities and requirements were documented and applied to everyone; and there was connectivity and transparency. Conversely, in his company, managers were allowed to make decisions in silos and there was no open vetting by which the managers were held accountable for their decisions. Of the processes, Gordon admitted, "It does impact Whites as well as it impacts Blacks; it just impacts Black males more disproportionately."

Steve, who also spent part of his career in the military, reiterated Gordon's point of the transparency of the military's promotion practices. In comparison, Steve stated that in his company, the process is not manifest. He said, "In this culture in particular...whereby the factors used to promote people...where they are not manifested and they are not clear, then people begin to say let me not do something to get myself disqualified for advancement." I asked how that impacts African American men

differently than their White counterparts. Steve said because African American men *must* do things to differentiate themselves or they will not get the promotions. He posited:

If me and five guys are taking a conservative posture, in other words we're playing the game of none of us have made mistakes. I think at the end of the day my personal belief is that I'm the guy to go, meaning as a person of color, and again I've lived it, meaning I've watched others being in the position, but I believe that if I have no way to differentiate myself from my peers, then for other subjective factors I'm less likely to get ahead.

Mitchell stated that in his role as a human resources manager, he has had to give warnings to managers about their subjective hiring and promotion decisions. He also related his personal experience with being impacted by subjective promotion practices. In a career development conversation with his manager, the manager stated that before Mitchell could receive a promotion he needed to gain more exposure to certain leaders. Over the course of a year, Mitchell sought out the leaders and established great relationships with them. Then, in a follow up career conversation, he inquired again about his promotion. The manager then stated "we're not comfortable." When Mitchell challenged him, his manager then stated his promotion was delayed because of business reasons. Mitchell stated that the average tenure before promotion was six or seven years for his White peers. He had already passed that mark. He said, "You're just like, "Hey look, I'm a man. At some point you've got to look at the guy and say, look, you're B.S.ing me." The criteria for promotion were nebulous and not manifest; therefore, Mitchell's manager was able to change them at each career conversation. Celica shared a story about some Black colleagues who realized that they could not do enough work to

succeed at the companies and their leadership was unwilling to give the men the same opportunities as their White counterparts. Celica's colleagues decided to leave their companies. Celica said, "The light bulb just kind of cuts off. It is not going to happen for you." He stated it is not about the job description. Even when performance is good, "you get these very hard to quantify descriptions of your issues" such as, leadership or innovation. When he asked for specifics on how to improve in those areas, Celica said nothing ever happened. He said, "Essentially, that's the blow off is what it is." Hank recalled his frustration with hitting the glass ceiling and not getting clear feedback from his manager. He stated:

I would say probably in terms of shaping my career I clearly feel that there is a glass ceiling. There is a ceiling that okay I don't want you to feel like you can get too far out of your slot. And I use that word – it's like it gives me a visual. It's like a race horse; you know you have a slot that you are in and I don't want you to feel like you can get in a different slot. You need to recognize and be happy that you are where you are. How or when do I see that? When I restructured my organization last year all of my direct reports got pay increases. I rewrote everybody's job description and everybody had greater responsibility and everybody got an adjustment in terms of their salary. I went to my boss at the end of the restructure and asked for my new contract, if I would be considered for higher compensation too and was told that I'm highly compensated now and that I should be happy with what I'm getting now. And then was told but I'll look into it and almost a year later that has never been revisited at all. That's a clear example of stay in your lane.

When I asked if he felt he received that treatment because he was African American, Hank said he did not know, but that he tries to give the benefit of the doubt. Hank later shared another story of how his White counterparts got tapped for high visibility projects over him and were set up to meet with senior executives in the company at the same time he had been reprimanded for meeting with internal senior executives, one of which had hired him into the company. Hank said, “Those are clear indications of who is being polished for the next level.” Dallas also shared his thoughts on respect and fairness and the different standards of performance between African American men and their White counterparts. He said,

When I look at some of my counterparts, it doesn't feel like they have the same standard. They do mediocre shit and they still get accolades and get promoted.

But me, I have to come with it, even from the questions that are asked of me in certain situations. I'm like, you threw softballs at that guy. Why am I getting these hard questions?

More than half of the participants talked about the dichotomy of potential versus proven skills in decisions involving career development. They stated their White counterparts are promoted based on potential, while African Americans have to prove they can do the job before they are given the opportunity. Specifically, African American men must already be doing the job before they officially receive the associated title and compensation.

**Summary of subjective and disparate career development as a repressive structure.** Bill stated, “I think for many of us who are in corporate America, if you can work in a situation where you take out the subjectivity, it sometimes makes it a bit easier earlier on in your career.” Subjective career development practices result in disparate

career development for African American men. There is little intentionality to African American men's career development, just as there is little intentionality to studying African American men's career development in the literature. The result is the same – African American men's experiences are invisible and neglected in corporate America. Meanwhile, White males continue to be the most chosen for strategic assignments, leadership development, and promotions. A leading factor is that the majority of those in position to make decisions about career development are White and it is replete in the literature that people tend to hire and promote those most like themselves. Therefore, if African American men are to navigate through the subjective quagmire of career development processes, they must make their White counterparts comfortable with them and be able to differentiate themselves in a way that will be perceived positively by those making decisions. The call to action for human resource development practitioners is to help create and facilitate more objective, transparent, and accountable processes that dismantle the separate and unequal career development practices, which marginalize African American men in corporate America.

### **Differentiated Acquisition of Socio-Political Capital**

Organizations are social and political arenas. For executives to be successful, they must become adept at using their socio-political capital to navigate the corporate arena. This section focuses on the different opportunity structure that exists for African American professional men to access and leverage their socio-political capital compared to Whites, particularly White men. It also emphasizes the importance of developing the skills through career development. The differentiated acquisition of social-political capital is a repressive structure because of the informal and unwritten rules and mores



that govern social and political interactions, which serve to disadvantage African American professional men's career development. The different opportunity structure is largely influenced by gendered racism, which research has shown African American men to be the least advantaged compared to Whites and African American women (Parks-Yancy, 2006).

Participant responses to all four research questions indicated their challenges with social and political capital. In describing their career development, a few of the participants admitted that as first-generation corporate executives, they often learned about informal social networks and the unwritten rules through trial and error. David recalled a time when he sat in a board meeting for the first time and did not know what to say or how to conduct himself in that meeting. He admitted rising to senior levels at two companies only to find that he was not adept in corporate politics. When I asked participants how racism had shaped their career development, several mentioned the good-old-boy network, tangible examples of when their White peers gained access to information that was unavailable to them, and the extra energy they have to exert to make their White counterparts comfortable with them – something they said was a necessity to receive consideration for assignments and promotions. The third research question inquired into organizational factors that facilitate or inhibit African American men's career development. Participants said teaching African American men about socio-political capital would facilitate their career development and the absence of any formal approach to ensuring African American men gained that knowledge and skill was a constraint. Lastly, in sharing some of the strategies they have used to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development, participants discussed relationships they formed to

enable them to be more socially and politically savvy. The general consensus among participants was that gaining socio-political capital enabled them to navigate their careers more successfully.

**Overview of social capital and career development.** James (2000) examined two alternative explanations for the disparity in reported work-related experiences and outcomes between Black and White managers: treatment discrimination because of race, and differences in human and social capital. Human capital was defined as access to and participation in education and training. James (2000) described social capital resources as:

The qualities that characterize the network of relationships one has with organizational peers, subordinates, and superiors. These relationships are important because they can be used to facilitate career advancement and the receipt of organizational support such as career-related and psychosocial support.

She also reiterated empirical evidence that has consistently shown that individuals tend to interact with members of their own social group (race, gender, status, organizational affiliation, etc.) than they do with members belonging to other social groups and these interactions form the basis of organizational consequences. Relevant to this study, individuals who are racially similar are more likely to form relationships with one another than those individuals who are racially dissimilar. Parks-Yancy (2006) also studied the effects of social capital on careers. Specifically, she looked at the process of differential access to and the returns from social capital resources by Blacks and Whites in an effort to understand what contributes to inequalities in career outcomes. Social capital resources include such assets as information, influence, and opportunity. The

ability to leverage social capital has a direct impact on career trajectories – hiring, promotions, and earnings (James, 2000; Parks-Yancy, 2006). Parks-Yancy’s study is especially useful because there is limited research available on the effects of the differences that exist between Blacks’ and Whites’ access to and outcomes from social capital. Her research goes beyond looking at a single point in time to the effects of the differences over time – in this case over two time periods. Parks-Yancy (2006) held, “Longitudinal studies are needed because early access to social capital resources can translate to later career advantages (Granovetter, 1985) and, thus, can contribute to long-term inequalities” (p. 518).

Combining elements from the definitions of social capital presented by James (2000) and Parks-Yancy (2006), I conceptualize social capital as the network of relationships consisting of peers, subordinates, and superiors, which provide access to social capital resources (information, influence, and opportunity) that lead to successful career development. Career development is defined as the “lifelong psychological and behavioral processes as well as contextual influences shaping one’s career over the life span” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002, p. 7). Thus, successful career development involves the attainment of career mobility (promotions, earnings, etc.) and career satisfaction (individuals’ subjective judgments about their careers, including sense of accomplishment, pride, and purpose) over the career span.

**Overview of political capital and career development.** Political capital is closely related to social capital. Both are needed to be effective (and even thrive) in the political arena of corporate America. Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, & Anthony (2000) held: “We see a key component of political skill as the development and leveraging of social

capital needed to promote effectiveness in achieving one's goals" (p. 117). Mintzberg (1983, 1985) was the first to conceptualize political will and political skill as necessary for individuals to be effective in organizations (Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar, & Ferris, 2005). He defined political will as the willingness or motivation to expend personal resources for the purpose of engaging in political behavior. The companion, political skill, was defined as the ability to execute those behaviors effectively. Perrewé, et al. (2000) defined political skill practically "as a construct that combines knowing what to do in a particular work situation with how to execute the behaviors in a convincing manner" (p. 117). The majority of the discussion on political behaviors is focused on political skill, which I refer to as political capital. The ability to demonstrate political capital has been positively related to many of the same extrinsic rewards as social capital, and additionally to managerial performance ratings, team performance, and leader-member relations (Treadway, et al., 2005). Mainiero (1994) as cited by Perrewé et al., (2000) found that "political skill is a necessary, even vital, aspect of women's career advancement – that breaking the glass ceiling without shattering hopes for a promising executive career requires delicate political skill" (p. 116). This finding is also true for African American professional men, who encounter the glass ceiling and other roadblocks to career success due to the intersection of their race and gender. To a lesser degree, but just as important is a discussion on political will because some participants in this present study conveyed a lack of motivation and even disdain for "office politics." Their unwillingness to expend energy in political behaviors may be a sign of the participants' frustration and stress, a lack of confidence in their political capabilities, or an indication of their conscious disavowal of corporate requirements. The paradox is that

effective use of political capital can reduce job stress (Perrewé et al., 2000). Therefore, acquiring political capital may alleviate frustration and stress and boost confidence. The refusal to enact political behaviors may signal participants' intentional choices to negotiate their careers on their own terms.

The themes emanating from participants' stories indicate that Whites have more opportunities to acquire socio-political capital than African Americans and that African Americans often have to expend more energy to acquire socio-political capital than their White counterparts. The different opportunities to acquire socio-political capital and the disparate outcomes even when participants exercise socio-political capital are discussed below.

**Differentiated access to socio-political capital.** Socio-political capital is gained when resources (information, influence, and opportunity) are exchanged among group members. As previously stated and for purposes of this discussion, group members are more likely racially homogenous. That means Whites are more likely to exchange socio-political capital with other Whites and the same is true of African Americans. The difference is that when the knowledge shared is about the norms and mores of corporate America, Whites likely have more resources to share because their social ties to corporate America have existed longer than the ties African Americans have. Participants frequently discussed their lack of knowledge about corporate America due to being first-generation corporate executives. Participants mentioned they seldom had family members or role models to teach them about corporate culture and expectations. Conversely, they perceived their White counterparts were advantaged because of early exposure to corporate America through family members or other associations. Bill stated:

It's important for this topic to understand where many of us who are African American males in corporate America, where we come from. For those who are in my generation, and I think you asked, but I'm forty-nine, and growing up I did not have exposure to anyone who was in corporate America....so there is not a development roadmap; certainly I have created what that meant. I didn't have a vision as a youth that someday I would be a corporate officer.

Henry's and David's comments also reflect what nearly every participant stated – that as first generation corporate executives, they have different access to socio-political capital. Henry, in discussing the differentiated opportunity to acquire needed business skills and exposure to senior executives found that his White counterparts had an advantage over him. He stated:

To be quite honest, I think it starts in their homes because most African Americans are first generation executives, but for White Americans their parents and their parents' parents have been somewhere in the corporate chain of something – if it's a family-owned business or corporate America or something. They've got that business acumen very early on, and so here we are being that first generation that is kind of jumping into the game of executive thinking.

David said that as a first-generation corporate executive, he learned about corporate America through trial and error because he, like the majority of participants, spent most of his career being the only African American male at his level in so many organizations. He did not have access to the same socio-political capital as his White counterparts. David mused:

They've been playing golf, they've been around the board room, the country club conversation, and I find that's a reality. They have been schooled in what they should say and what they shouldn't say and how you do the chit chat. They watched their fathers do it and the like. So, they have a tremendous advantage when it comes to that [politics]. And whether you look at etiquette, whether you look at the casual conversation, on and on, they are just advantaged. And quite frankly, I would say that the societal norms are still normed from them. They are developing the norms. Therefore, unless we learn the rules of the game, we're going to always be outside the norm.

Since evidence has shown socio-political capital is gained through intra-group sharing, being the only one or one of few African American executives in corporate America clearly disadvantages African American professional men. Martin was the only participant who had the advantage of having early exposure to a family member in corporate America. Martin talked about what it meant to have a brother in corporate America. He said:

I had the unique vantage point of seeing a Black man in a suit, doing his work....Just the visual of seeing a Black man who is your brother come from the office, driving a decent car...dressing well and then listening to him. He would talk about things he was working on – I had a client meeting; I've got to take this client out to dinner; here's things I'm working on – and I'm listening to all of this and I think back on that and I go, wow, what a visual that was for me because I think a lot of Black men don't have that kind of visual that was so close to them.

Since Whites tend to have larger networks and longer ties to corporate America, African American men must gain access to White networks in order to develop socio-political capital that will lead to desired career development. Treadway et al. (2005) found that individuals likely to expend energy to engage in political behavior are those who see that engaging in the political behavior will yield organizational benefits (e.g., performance evaluation, pay, and promotion). To the extent that African American men are not likely to be in a position of power to grant the organizational benefits, they could find it difficult to gain access to socio-political capital held by their White counterparts for two reasons: their different racial group and having no socio-political capital to exchange. Basically, African American professional men have may be viewed as takers or recipients, but not having significant clout to give to their White counterparts. Thus, they find themselves outside of the corporate in-group. Several participants mentioned feeling isolated in corporate America. Gordon spoke explicitly about the in-group/out-group status. He said White males are gatekeepers to the in-group and they decide who they grant access. According to Gordon, White males are threatened by diversity efforts that attempt to level the playing field by promoting more women and minorities. Thus, the access to the in-group, and socio-political capital, are tightly managed. In describing the sentiment he has experienced from White males in his role as diversity chief, Gordon stated:

There are those White males that say, “It took me too long to get from the out-group to the in-group. Now that I’m in the in-group, I am not letting the rest of y’all in” – and that is intentional. So there is this thing of privilege and



intentionality of not sharing power...a reluctance to understand that change is happening.

Gordon's description supports the notion that the good-old-boy network is still a powerful structure that must be navigated effectively.

Participants provided several examples of experiences where they did not have the same access to information, had to meet a higher set of requirements to acquire a job or promotion, and were often left out of invitations to informal social gatherings. Alfred talked about unwritten rules that govern access to information and promotions. He said that in order to get promoted, African American men have to do things that a White male would know to do, but that African American men do not because "we're not privy to those conversations." Jerome also provided an example of the different opportunity structure for promotions that exists for Whites at his company. He stated, "By and large for the positions of real importance, we still do it the old-fashioned way." He described that old-fashioned way as accessing the network of relationships to find out more information on a prospective hire. He said the exchange of information is collegial because there is mutual sharing and no one wants to "pass off bad baggage." The process and subsequent outcomes for Black applicants are different. Jerome said,

The problem for Black applicants is that nobody knows who they are so when they post for a position, because they are not recognized and acknowledged, they are not excluded because they are Black; they are excluded because they are not known. They don't have anyone who is pushing their resume.

My thought is that they are not known because they are Black and do not have the same opportunity to acquire socio-political capital (e.g., information, influence, opportunity) as

their White counterparts. Therefore, they have disparate career development, i.e., promotions to the positions of real importance.

Bill's example was particularly striking because it corroborated several of the participants' intuitions that their White counterparts engage in informal social networks with superiors that serve to advantage White males. Bill recalled being in a staff meeting with his manager and peers – all of whom were White males – and his manager asking him about a project that was past due. Initially, Bill questioned whether he had overlooked a letter or some communication because he was not familiar with the project. He apologized to his manager for not recalling the assignment. The manager became “perturbed,” and mentioned that he had received the assignment from Bill's peers. At first the peers remained quiet, but after the manager continued to chide Bill for not completing the assignment, one of the peers spoke up on Bill's behalf. Bill said, “Finally one of my peers spoke up and said, John, you told us about that at your house on Saturday when we were watching the ballgame. Bill wasn't there.” Bill continued to make meaning of that experience. He said:

Those are the social networks that they have that often times we don't have.

When you think and when it comes into play in the workplace that is just a kind of blatant example of it. Here's a guy who was viewing me as lacking in my responsibilities because of something he shared with my coworkers over the weekend at his house.

The tightly held social networks make it difficult for African American professional men to have the same access to socio-political capital as their White counterparts. Stereotypes that depict African American men as threatening or lacking

effective social interaction skills also create a barrier to socio-political capital. Perrewé et al. (2000) found that effective social interaction skills were essential to accessing socio-political capital because of the increasingly social nature of organizational settings. They stated, “A leading cause of managerial derailment, identified in studies at the Center for Creative Leadership, is lack of good interpersonal or social skill” (p. 116). That spells trouble for African American men, who have a major hurdle to overcome in terms of employers’ assumptions and perceptions that African American men are socially inept (Moss & Tilly, 1996). Participants were well aware of the stereotypes and strikes against them and virtually every participant spoke of the need to make others, particularly White males, comfortable with them. Mitchell explained the impetus for African American men to make their counterparts feel comfortable with them stems from slavery. He posited that African slave mothers taught their sons to be subservient as a survival technique – that if slave masters were threatened by the naturally assertive Black male, they could be killed. Mitchell surmised that even today, African American men are conscious of others’ perceptions of them and thus, they see it as their burden to make others feel comfortable. Mitchell said of his own relationship with his White male manager, “I almost instinctively knew I had to make him feel comfortable. And, I think what’s really interesting with conscious Black men that there is that role, that line you have to kind of balance yourself.” Dallas referred to the instinctive obligation to make others comfortable as “the code.” He said, “There is a code. There is a code that you should be able to talk the talk, walk the walk, make them feel comfortable with you.” He said if you don’t know the code you are not going to “get in.” When I inquired with participants as to why they felt it was their sole responsibility to make others, particularly White males,

comfortable with them, the answer was unanimously the same – it was White males who held the power to career advancement.

At the same time participants took ownership of making White males comfortable with them, they also reflected on their frustrations with that as a reality. With the constant desire to maintain their Black male identity and be true to who they are as Black men, a few of the participants told stories of how they refused to play the political game. Hank said he has been told that he is not politically savvy. His answer to that criticism was that he is at peace at this point in his career although political turmoil hinders that. He said, “I want to feel like I don’t have to worry about where the next knife is going to come from or where that blind-sided conversation will come from that really shouldn’t be a part of my performance.” David commented that early on in his career, he was not politically astute and it negatively impacted his career development. However, later on, he made conscious choices of when to engage in political behavior. Of one experience David said:

It was do you play golf, do you know how to speak the lingo, the boardroom talk, the chit chat, because at a certain level everyone can do the work. It’s how well do you assimilate. And, as an individual, you have to want to assimilate. I found I had to want to be a part of the group. I found myself, if I’m being honest, not really wanting to play the game. And so, I chose not to.

David said that he felt his work should speak for itself without having to play the political games. Consequently, he made the decision to leave the organization. Henry made a similar decision early in his career. He had been a part of the social network, but found it laborious and inherently biased. Even having social ties to the network of relationships did not guarantee fair consideration for assignments and promotion opportunities. Henry

said, “My thing at the time was I’m not going to kiss anybody’s butt to get a position.” He too left his company after tiring of the politics. What these men learned later in their careers was that corporate America is a political arena and they must learn to navigate their careers effectively in light of the political landscape – that leaving a company because of office politics was not smart for long-term career mobility.

**Summary of differentiated acquisition of socio-political capital as a repressive structure.** There is a different opportunity structure for the acquisition of socio-political capital for African American men than there is for their White counterparts. Individuals tend to share socio-political capital with members in their own group. Thus, Whites tend to naturally share information, influence, and opportunity with other Whites. This leads to African American men not only have less opportunity to acquire, but different ways in which to acquire socio-political capital. One way in which African American men have determined they can acquire socio-political capital is by making their White counterparts comfortable with them. Given the stereotypes and assumptions that depict African American men as socially inept, this is a hurdle situated in gendered racism, which results in disparate impact to African American men’s career development. The stories shared by the participants are supported in empirical studies. Parks-Yancy (2006) conducted a longitudinal study designed to look at the process of differential access to and career returns from social capital resources by gender and race – Whites and Blacks. The results of the study found that Whites have greater access to social capital resources than Blacks and were more likely to be promoted as a result of leveraging those social capital resources than Blacks. Blacks were more likely to gain access to information, promotions, etc., through formal means (e.g., job postings) than

through their social networks because they lacked strong social ties that could offer assistance and because they were often excluded from White social networks. Bill's poignant example of being excluded from attending the weekend event at his manager's house along with his White counterparts is emblematic of African American men's experiences of being in the out-group and away from conversations and assignments their peers have the privilege of access. Most telling in the Parks-Yancy (2006) study was that it confirmed White men and women were more likely to be promoted than Black women, but that Black men were less likely to be promoted than Black women. Even when Black men used personal ties to obtain jobs, they were still less likely to be promoted than Black women who also used personal ties. Parks-Yancy (2006) held, "Whites are more likely to advance faster and further in their careers than Black women, and Black women hold similar advantages over Black men" (p. 542). Summarily, Black men were the least advantaged from access to social capital resources. Remarkably, the participants in this present study have navigated through the political arena of corporate America with appreciable measures of success. Learning from their stories is a central aim of this study. What is not well understood is the cost to their health due to the energy expended and stress associated with building and leveraging socio-political capital. Enhanced political skill has been shown to reduce job stress (Perrewé et al., 2000). Some of the actions called for include greater intentionality in the training and development of African Americans' socio-political skills and increased investment in mentoring and socialization programs (Parks-Yancy, 2006; Treadway et al., 2005). Parks-Yancy (2006) held: "Without these interventions, career, and thus, socioeconomic inequalities between social groups will probably continue within and across generations" (p. 543).

## **Changing Priorities in Workplace Diversity**

Approximately 40 years ago, workplace recruiters aggressively sought African American men to fill their corporate rolls, often enticing them with elevated titles and attractive salaries (Collins, 1997). Today, they are the least likely to be hired or promoted. What happened? Did African American men fail corporate America or is the converse true? In this section I examine the changing priorities of workplace diversity and the impact on African American men's career development.

From affirmative action policies which yielded first-generation African American corporate executives, to today's dynamic and multicultural workforce, African American professional men find themselves on the losing side of a zero-sum game that threatens their existence in corporate America. Participants discussed the disappointment in their companies' diversity efforts and how changing priorities have shifted the focus and the opportunities away from African American men.

This theme emerged from participants' responses to research questions two, three and four. In question two, some of the discussion centered on the lack of commitment to African American men's career development. In question three, participants said companies needed to have an authentic interest and commitment to a diverse workforce, and the general consensus was that most companies did not have any plausible strategies in place to attract, hire and retain African American men. In response to question four, several participants had concerns about how the changing priorities in diversity would impact the next generation of African American professional men.

**From heyday to disappointment.** The civil rights movement and ensuing affirmative action policies were catalysts that led to the diversification of corporate

America. Amid social and political pressure, companies increased the ranks of African Americans in professional and managerial roles. Collins (1997) found, “Employed Black men, in particular, were in greater demand for prestigious occupations in the labor market” (p. 55). Between 1970 and 1980, the number of African American men holding executive, administrative, or managerial jobs increased each year at twice the rate of their White male counterparts (Collins, 1997). Many of the participants in this study described themselves as first-generation corporate executives. However, access has never translated into equality. In Collins’ study of African American professional men in corporate America, she found, “Despite gains in entry, African-Americans clearly stagnate in their climb up the managerial hierarchy, thereby failing to make inroads into key decision-making positions and in the racial redistribution of power” (p. 55). In that study, the assignment of African American men into racialized roles with limited career growth potential led to the men’s stagnation and eventual decline in corporate America. For the present study, the changing priorities in diversity have led to similar results. Three factors have contributed to the changing priorities: erosion of many affirmative action policies; multiculturalism; and flatter organizational structures. First, with the repeal of many affirmative action policies, companies that diversified just to comply with the law have relaxed their standards. Many of the participants stated their companies were not even committed seriously to diversity. Jerome initially stated that his company did not believe in affirmative action. When I later confirmed this statement with Jerome through member checks, he clarified that his company does track and report affirmative action data, but the company has no program for promoting minorities and women into significant management roles. Second, with a more multicultural workforce and a global economy,



there is more racially and ethnically diverse talent from which to select. If a company seeks diversity, they can attain that diversity beyond looking at Black and White. Third, flatter organizational structures mean there are fewer jobs, particularly at the executive ranks. The combination of the three have increased the competition for a smaller pool of jobs and African American men being the least desirable hires (Moss & Tilly, 1996; Parks-Yancy, 2006) find they are no longer the minority of choice for hire. They are increasingly losing jobs to women and other professionals of color.

The participants in this study know the diversity paradigm has changed. Whether it is from a lack of commitment to diversity or the targets for diversity are different, the men shared how the changing priorities have impacted their career development. Dallas said he left a company because of its lack of commitment to diversity. He said, “It was [company name withheld] talking the talk, but not walking the walk in terms of diversity. I said, ‘I can’t flourish here. You guys say you want diversity, but you really don’t’.” Of that same company, Dallas remembered attending a company event where the CEO and his staff were on stage to talk to employees about a recent organizational change. Dallas recalled:

They had us in several movie theatres; there were so many employees they couldn’t fit us in one auditorium and they broadcast this thing via satellite from the headquarters... There was not one woman or one person of color on that stage, of all the senior leaders, not one. I looked and said, wait a minute, we’re global? You don’t even have a woman up there? This is crazy.

Celica’s candor with White male leaders about the lack of diversity in the managerial ranks cost him job opportunities. Although pharmaceutical sales have traditionally been a

profession staffed largely by White males, Celica's disappointment was in his company's lack of commitment to diversity and failure to retain the African American managers that were in the ranks. He stated the next time he looks for an employer, "I'm really going to think about the culture of that company." Steve said "I think nowadays for a company to not have these Black executives in their ranks is an embarrassing fact." Yet, Steve, like so many of the participants, talked about the changing priority and the impact of multiculturalism and globalization on corporate diversity efforts. Steve said:

The world has gone global over the past 20 years in particular and that trend is increasing. There are going to be so many diverse people in the workplace; if you don't have a Black male – so what? It will become less of an issue because you've got five Asians and you've got three Indians. Nobody is going to get caught up into that. In other words I don't think people are going to really care...it's not the whole Black and White paradigm. I think that's going to be gone...I do believe the civil rights paradigm is going to be a dated paradigm. Not that civil rights in any way should not be taken up, but you're going to be hard pressed in a global society to make the civil rights argument.

No one would argue that embracing diversity and expanding opportunities to a more broadly defined talent pool are not good for business or even for individuals. Why the changing priority is a repressive structure for African American professional men is because with so many other racially diverse peoples, employers can continue to diversify their workforce without confronting their inherent biases against hiring and promoting African American men. The threat to African American men is that they will continue to have a declining presence in corporate America and particularly in the executive ranks.

The end result is that African American men's career development is adversely impacted due to gendered racism.

**Preference for women.** As a Black feminist conducting research on the gendered racism African American men face in their career development, I have been determined to avoid the competitive victim argument that serves to juxtapose African American men's experiences against the experiences of African American women. I believe strongly that position does not serve either African American men or African American women and diverts the attention away from the structures that oppress both groups. Prior research, much of which has been cited in this study, indicates that African American men do not consistently benefit from gender privilege. In fact, as Parks-Yancy (2006) and others have found, African American men are the least to be hired and promoted when compared with White men, White women, and African American women. Participants' stories corroborate Parks-Yancy's findings. The participants in this study discussed the preference employers tend to show toward hiring and promoting women, and they spoke particularly about African American women. However, when I asked participants who were their main competitors for jobs or promotions, the majority of participants stated that White males remain their primary competition. All participants who stated they had competed directly with a woman for a job or promotion reported that the woman was selected. The majority of the time the woman selected over the participant was White. More than half of the participants stated they have had a woman manager during their careers. Five of the fourteen participants stated they have either had a manager who was a woman of color or had lost a job or promotion to a woman of color. This pattern follows that White men are most likely to be hired or promoted, followed by

White women, and then by women of color. From the participants' responses, the women of color were mostly African American, but also included an Asian woman and Latina woman. Steve rationalized that White males are more comfortable with women. He said:

I think this company is more receptive to African American women in high positions. I think we've got some skilled women who have been able to more effectively create a greater comfort level, I think, with advancement. That's just my sense...It might simply be because there might be male dynamics at play here, competitive male dynamics...Perhaps it's associated with just the rise of women in general at this company, so as women rise, so too are African American women...Having spoken to African American women and male executives, they would generally agree that there is a greater comfort level, again partly because of the rise of women in general and African American women are caught up in that wave. Or, it could simply be a preference from a power perspective. There might be greater comfort with yielding power to African American women than African American men. I believe that is the case.

Dallas also touched on employers' preference for African American women and the perception that African American women are less of a threat to White male power. Dallas said, "I think a lot of times women are accepted because – oh, she's a woman. I think they feel more comfortable with women. They are more comfortable with Black women from what I said before – this fear." Later in the interview Dallas discussed the relationship between African American men and African American women in the workplace. He reiterated his perception that African American women are preferred over African American men. He said:

I do feel like White men are more comfortable with Black women than they are with Black men only because I feel like they wrongly – White men wrongly feel superior to Black women – so, “I don’t have to worry about her.” Whereas with Black men, it’s like this gender thing... White guys say “I’m the one in charge and you’re less than I am.” But as far as women, it’s the whole – “Well, you’re just a woman, I’m a man. I don’t have to worry about you and I can get a double check in the box so you’re good. You’re not a threat to my power. You’re fine.”

When the participants talked about how African American women were being promoted more frequently and at a faster rate than African American men at their companies, they did not levy any fury against African American women, although I did sense frustration. It is possible that they tempered their responses because of my positionality as an African American woman.

**Summary of the changing priorities in workplace diversity as a repressive structure.** Over the past 40 years a major shift has occurred in workplace diversity. African American men find they have gone from outpacing their White male counterparts in securing executive, administrative, and managerial positions to being the least likely hired or promoted. Today, White males still occupy the majority of executive positions and are the most likely to be hired and promoted. White women and African American women follow White males in that order in securing jobs and promotions. The changing priority is attributed to an erosion of affirmative action policies, multiculturalism, and flatter organizational structures. The result is a wider, more culturally diverse talent pool for a limited number of executive positions. The shift in diversity priorities is a repressive structure because the power brokers and organizational decision makers, who are mostly

White males, can avoid confronting their inherent biases against hiring and promoting African American men and still lay claim to their commitment to a diverse workforce. Bill stated, “The issue that is most challenging is at the mid-level, that director level, White male who is challenged, threatened, intimidated, and views diversity initiatives as reverse discrimination, and that is why they are not at the next level.” The fact that African American men are the least hired indicates how the increase in diversity has shifted the behaviors and actions away from hiring African American men over the past four decades. The participants in this study determined that the preference for women employees had more to do with White males’ discomfort with African American men than it did with women having superior qualifications over African American men. The participants’ findings are supported by Parks-Yancy’s recent study to understand the inequalities in career outcomes by race and gender.

### **Chapter Summary**

I organized the research findings into two main categories, repressive structures and facilitative structures. Using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, I defined structures as those social rules and practices created and maintained in social systems by members within those systems. The actions and behaviors by all parties in the system enable the recursive nature of the structures. The focus of this chapter was on the four repressive structures that serve to constrain the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. The first repressive structure, societal stereotypes of African American men, is insidious to their career development because of the long-standing psychological and behavioral aspects that trace back to slavery. Overwhelmingly negative stereotypes are attributed to African American men that impact

how they see themselves, the career options available to them, and the interactions they have with others – especially their White counterparts. From participants' responses, it was clear that stereotypes affected their perceptions and actions relating to their racial identity as Black men, the responsibility some feel to "represent the race," and the constant daily reminder of being a Black man in corporate America. I gathered from the collective responses of the participants that they experience inner conflict trying to maintain their Black male identity and dispel the stereotypes associated with Black males, while also finding acceptable ways to fit in to the White corporate structure where White males are the norm against which success is measured. This dialectical dance reflects what DuBois (1903) terms "double consciousness." I sensed feelings of anger, frustration, loneliness, and mistrust among the participants, but was unclear as to the object of those feelings. While many spoke of their White male counterparts as their targets, it was also clear that they believed the racism they experienced was larger than White men; it was systemic – woven into the fabric of corporate America. Newman (1994, 2002, 2007) stated, "When we ask who the enemies are we should try to prevent our learners from retreating into abstractions and sheeting problems home to depersonalized concepts such as society or hegemony or the unequal distribution of wealth" (p. 120). The failure to clearly identify agents of oppression will impede social action to change the oppressive acts. From the stories they shared it was evident that White managers held stereotypes against African American men and enacted those to deny employment and promotions. In some cases even when the stereotypes were positive attributes, the outcome was still a loss of opportunity.

The second repressive structure was subjective and disparate career development practices. Career development practices included such processes as performance and succession management; hiring, promotions, and terminations; and selection to key developmental assignments and experiences. Many of the processes were not consistent and lacked objectivity, transparency, and accountability. One participant remarked that leaders went behind a dark curtain and decided who would get selected to certain development experiences. Another described the practices as creating separate and unequal career development. The research is replete in finding that managers tend to hire and promote those who are most like themselves. Since White males hold the majority of senior management positions in corporate America, the recursive pattern generally holds that they hire and promote more White males than women or professionals of color. Only two of the fourteen participants indicated their career development was more favorable than their White counterparts. However, even they admitted their experience was unique. Others stated their career development was comparable to their White counterparts to a certain point, and then their White counterparts continued to advance, while they remained stagnant. This is illustrative of the glass ceiling that still exists for African American men in corporate America. Most participants acknowledged that White males still enjoy privilege in their career development due to their race and gender while Black men are not equally privileged by the intersection of their race and gender. In fact, African American men encounter additional obstacles because of gendered racism. The research by Parks-Yancy (2006) and others validate that assertion because African American men are least likely to be hired and promoted even controlling for education



and experiences – trailing White men, White women, and African American women, respectively.

Much success in corporate America is attributed to acquiring social and political savvy. However, the findings indicate that African American men have a different opportunity structure to acquire socio-political capital compared to their White counterparts. Just as Whites are more likely to hire and promote other Whites, the same holds true for access to social and political capital. Empirical evidence has shown consistently that individuals tend to interact with members of their own social group (race, gender, status, organizational affiliation, etc.) than they do with members belonging to other social groups and these interactions form the basis of organizational consequences. Within these member groups, information, influence and opportunity are exchanged. African American men often find themselves on the outside looking in when it comes to White social networks and the good-old-boy network of White males. Invitation into the social network is only likely if there is an intentional action by some White members to be inclusive or if the African American male is perceived to have some capital of value to exchange – thus, a negotiation. Gordon provided an example of this in his story. He stated that one member from the company's board of directors with whom he had an external personal relationship came to his company to visit. When the other senior executives observed that Gordon and the board member had a collegial relationship, Gordon received newfound respect from the senior leaders. From that day on, they begin to refer to Gordon as "Doc" as a show of respect for having his doctorate. Essentially, Gordon's capital was perceived or real board member influence.

Overall, African American men were the least advantaged from access to social capital resources. Poor political skill has been associated with poor health. Conversely, enhanced political skill can reduce job stress. While participants demonstrated an appreciable ability to gain and leverage socio-political capital, some discussed their frustration and refusal to play the political game. I surmise that their repudiation of corporate politics is akin to a return on investment principle. With the amount of energy exerted, African American men still do not reap equitable returns in the form of career trajectories. Thus, they are exhausted and at times have made intentional decisions to refrain from engaging in socio-political activity – even when it may have undesired outcomes. This is an example of the extended definition of negotiation. The intentional and situational choices that African American men make to engage or disengage are strategies used to negotiate or navigate around the hurdles of racism in their career development.

Finally, the fourth repressive structure is the changing priorities in diversity due to increased multiculturalism and a global economy. The tide has changed over the last four decades where African American professional men were once the celebrated diversity target for hire in corporate America. The civil rights movement and affirmative action policies yielded a substantial crop of African American executives and Black men were rewarded with prominent titles and lucrative salaries. Today, as I stated throughout this chapter, African American men are the least likely to be hired or promoted. The preference for women hires is due in part to White men's discomfort with Black men.

The changing priority in diversity is repressive to African American men's career development because hiring managers, who are principally White males, can and do skirt

their inherent biases against African American men employees and tap into a widely culturally diverse talent pool. Therefore, they can still reap the benefits and acclaim for being an employer of choice that values diversity without ever confronting the systemic gendered racism held against African American men. This structure is dicey for African American men to navigate because as some participants noted, the paradigm has changed. African American men will have a tougher time making the argument of race discrimination if an employer has an otherwise racially and ethnically diverse employee population. They will have and historically have had a tougher time making the gender argument in a society where the male gender is often privileged. The discrimination they face due to the intersection of their race and gender – gendered racism – is not widely recognized or accepted in law or practice. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the five facilitative structures that African American men leverage as they negotiate and mediate the negative impact of racism on their career development.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Findings and Analysis: Facilitative Structures**

In Chapter Five, I identified the two main categories of findings that give light to the impact that racism has on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. The two categories are: repressive structures and facilitative structures. Using Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, I defined structures as those rules and practices that are properties of social systems created and recreated by members within the social systems. It is important not only to interrogate the structures, but it is equally important to understand all parties' performances that have the effect of maintaining those structures. Self-examination or consciousness-raising is an important element in critical theories, where the aim is to expose inequities for the purpose of inducing change (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2007; Wheeler-Brooks, 2009).

The focus of this chapter is on the five facilitative structures. These are rules and practices, exhibited largely by the participants that enable their career development. The five facilitative structures that figured prominently included: 1) ability to build and leverage key relationships; 2) bicultural strategies; 3) self-efficacy and personal agency; 4) education and continuous learning; and 5) spirituality and purpose. In this chapter I explore more fully the facilitative structures using examples from the individual and focus group interviews to support my reasoning. The chapter concludes with a summary of all the facilitative structures.

## **Facilitative Structures**

Despite the challenges participants' faced in their career development, each has been able to advance to mid-management or higher in their companies. Many participants enjoy a great deal of autonomy, are responsible for other employees and budgets, and are expected to develop and execute strategy that has impact to their companies' bottom lines. Practically, these 14 participants have learned to employ strategies that allow them to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development and achieve career mobility and satisfaction. The participants will quickly state that each day can bring an obstacle that they must navigate, and though that is a source of frustration, they have developed a set of tools and internal and external resources that facilitate their career development. Through their stories, the five facilitative structures emerged explicitly or implicitly.

Instructive to the discussion on facilitative structures is Goodly's (2007) research on the role of agency and structure in the upward mobility of African American men. Goodly sought to address the argument over the primacy of agency or structure by resolving that it is the commingling of both agency and structure that enables the advancement of African American men. He did not focus his research on the existence of structural constraints (repressive structures) that impede African American men's advancement, but instead chose to examine and highlight the agency they must employ to overcome the structural constraints. The contribution Goodly makes to this study is his finding of 10 agency factors and five deep structural factors that contributed to the men's upward mobility and success. The ten agency factors include: perseverance, bravery, adaptability, ambition, strategic planning, continuous learning, gratitude, self-awareness, meaningfulness, and self-efficacy. The five deep structural factors include: family,

community, education, spirituality/religion, and athletics. Goodly's research was not set wholly within a corporate environment, as the 15 men he interviewed had careers across multiple contexts (private and public, government, and entrepreneurial entities).

Additionally, Goodly's research was not situated in career development literature, but intentioned to look broadly at the men's careers and life experiences in assessing their success. Lastly, while some of the participants in Goodly's study shared stories about their encounters with racism, it was not a central theme in his research. Still, his findings inform this present study and the hope is that this study will join his in adding to growing knowledge about African American men's career mobility and success. Each of the five facilitative structures is examined in more detail below, some of which corroborate Goodly's findings.

### **Key Relationships**

Most of the stories that emerged about relationships were in response to research questions one and four. The first research question asked participants to describe their career development. The goal of that question was to gain a broad sense of what mattered to participants in their careers and how their careers had evolved over time. The fourth research question inquired into the strategies the participants used to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. The ability to build and leverage key relationships was cited more often than any other structure as a method for navigating around the destructive impact of racism to achieve positive career development. The relationships mentioned most often were family, mentors/sponsors, and other African American role models – several of whom were Black male role models. Through these relationships, the men established their identities, developed their agency and work ethic, learned about

corporate culture, defined their value systems, and garnered support and guidance to navigate their careers. Just as stereotypes seemed to be a thread that ran through all the other repressive structures, the ability to draw upon key relationships is a thread that was essential to the other four facilitative structures.

**Family.** Perhaps no other relationship equates to the familial relationship. It is within the family structure that we first learn about ourselves, develop our beliefs and values, establish role models, and form the image we later project to the outer world. Family includes parents, siblings, grandparents, and other extended family members. During the interviews, participants shared stories of family members who shaped their careers in some way and enabled their success. In reflecting on his career, Martin stated that it was a relationship that his brother had with someone that led to Martin securing the entry level position at his present company; and, it was the key lessons from his mother and father that have contributed most to his success. He said:

When I think back on my career, what was interesting, even at the beginning, [company name withheld] was a good, cultural fit for me. The reason it was is that my mom and dad – my dad really had a tremendous work ethic. He raised four kids, pretty much a laborer, worked very hard, very long hours, weekends, the typical story of someone that kind of came up in that era. And so, I learned about the value of working with people and working hard and keeping your nose to the grindstone – all those things that early on were development opportunities for me. And then my mom had a unique ability. She taught be about people. She taught me about how to talk to people, how to work with people, how to enjoy people, be interested in people, be curious about people. And so, when I walked

into this company what I found was that it was very hard work and you had to work in teams.

Alfred also mentioned his father as an early influence that taught him the value of hard work. Alfred said his father taught him:

No one gives you anything. You have to earn anything you want in life and there's no such word as *can't*. You can do it. And my dad has always been a man of few words, so when he says something, you pay attention to it.

Henry attributed his decision to go to college to his mother, who despite being of meager means, instilled the importance of education in him. Henry's mother, who was raised by a single mom after her father was murdered by a group of White men, decided she could not put the strain of college on her mother. Years later, after she was married and had children, Henry's mother returned to night school and eventually received her bachelor's degree. It was his mother that led him to college, and it was his father who influenced his career choice. Henry said that his father was a factory worker and though he did not enjoy his work, he went every day. Of that lesson, Henry said, "And so my prerequisite was I want to do something that I will be happy to wake up in the morning and go to work. Two, I want to do something that will be different every day." Over Henry's career span, he talked of developing exit strategies from companies when he did not enjoy his work any longer. It is evident that these early influences from his family stayed with him and shaped his approach to work.

Many of the participant stories about their family's influences on career were highlighted in their biographies in Chapter Four. Each story reflects a strong causal link to the success these men have had in their career development. Whether it is their work



ethic, interpersonal skills, ethics, high expectations for achievement, positive cultural identity, or other attribute, family has been a key relationship that has facilitated these men's success.

**Mentors and sponsors.** When I asked participants what stood out as being most helpful to their career development, they unanimously answered – mentoring. Studies have shown that mentoring relationships can have a significant impact on an individual's career development, including such advantages as faster promotion rates, greater compensation, and higher feelings of career satisfaction (Palmer, 2005; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). A mentor is generally defined as someone who has a position of authority and influence, and whose experience is such that he or she can guide the career of a junior employee. Thomas (1993) found the mentor-protégé relationship provides career support, psychosocial support, and help with overall development, self-esteem and professional identity. He also identified a second type of developmental relationship – the sponsor-protégé relationship. The sponsor provides instrumental career support such as advocacy for promotions, performance feedback, coaching, protection, and challenging work assignments. While the mentor is someone who may or may not be within the same corporate environment with the protégé, the sponsor is within the same organizational system. From the participants' responses, they described relationships that fit within the definition of either mentor or sponsor, and in some cases the person served both roles. Most of the participants' mentors resided outside their company, which limited the amount of influence the mentor had on the participants' corporate culture. Participants' also remarked that finding an African American mentor at the senior levels was becoming increasingly more difficult. Jerome, who serves as an executive sponsor of his

company's affinity group for African American employees was helping the group to design a company mentoring program. He found there were not enough African American mentors to support the program. Therefore, the group solicited White and other racially diverse mentors to meet the demand.

The mentor/sponsor relationships participants described were developed informally versus being a part of a formal, corporate career development program. Palmer and Johnson-Bailey (2005, 2008) found that African Americans are less likely to be chosen as participants in a formal mentoring program. Palmer (2005) also found that the lack of a mentor with political savvy, political influence, and power in the organization could have the most profound impact on the career development of African Americans. The relationships participants developed with mentors and sponsors were effective in enabling the men to negotiate their career development and mitigate the negative effect that racism has on their career success. Hank described a 20-year relationship with his mentor that developed when he was still in the military. Hank's mentor was influential in his decision to become an engineer. Hank said,

I had no one in my immediate family who had ever completed college before. I had no one in my immediate or extended family that was an engineer and so it was not a dream that I could have had by myself. It was something that I had to reach outside of my circle to even dream about.

Hank's mentor, an African American male and former commander in the Navy, recommended that Hank apply for an elite Naval engineering program. Following the advice of his mentor, Hank became the first graduate from a historically Black college or university to ever qualify for the prestigious nuclear engineer program. Twenty years

later, Hank's mentor travels to visit him once or twice a year just to meet with him and provide coaching and support to his career development.

Dallas shared how he has used mentors and a board of directors to enable his career development. Board of directors refers to a collective group of mentors and sponsors where each person may serve a slightly different role in supporting the individual's career development. Dallas stated:

Even at my present company, moving from Product Manager to Director, being promoted by my boss to come here, there has always been this kind of personal board of directors, formal and informal mentors that have helped give me kind of the inside knowledge.

When I asked him to expand on the concept of his personal board of directors, the composition and the board's function, Dallas added:

I look for the winners. I look for the people who are moving, who are progressive. I recognize too that I can't hitch my wagon to one star because if that star falls out of the sky then you're gonna fall right with them and I've seen that happen to other people. I also look for a diverse group of folks and I also look for people who will be in the room when I'm not in the room in meetings that I don't even know about that can be an evangelist for me....I use them to kind of give me the keys to their success, the secret sauce so to speak. Those unwritten, unspoken do's and don'ts. And again, to help me in that way and also to be my mouthpiece when I can't be in the room in those meetings that you don't even know about. I use them when I'm trying to choose another job or I've got this

opportunity or have an employee issue. I use each one for different things. I don't go to all of them for the same question.

Most of the participants stated that having a Black male mentor was important because they can share experiences first-hand. Palmer and Johnson-Bailey (2008) support participants' beliefs by finding "the relationship between a mentor and protégé works best when both share similar experiences and cultural background" (p. 46). Dallas talked about the advantage of having a Black mentor and sharing similar experiences. He said:

I definitely think that one of my greatest assets that I wish everyone who was like me had is some kind of role model that they could be paired up with and I'm not talking about a White mentor who is a senior leader because I've had those. I'm talking about somebody who has been there and can say, "Look boy, this is the trap right here. When you see this, this is the trap. Don't go down that road." You can't tell me that as a White professional, if you've never experienced that. You can't break it down that way.

Bill and Martin also shared how valuable it was to their career development to have Black males as their direct managers and mentors. Bill said, "I have actually had some Black bosses; everybody doesn't get that. That is rare in corporate America, but I think more Black males need to get that." Martin characterized his ability to work for at least three senior ranking African Americans, two African American men and one African American woman, as "an amazing story."

A few of the participants also thought it was advantageous to have a White mentor. Alfred said that if he had to construct a career development program for African American males, he would assign the African American male two mentors, one White

and the other African American. When I asked why both a White and African American mentor were necessary, Alfred said,

It's one thing to have our perspective, but it is another to have theirs. I think that is important and to have someone who would pull for them [African American males] because it's relationship building and you want to meet that high level White male, female, whatever the case may be to learn the unwritten rules, things that they need to do, things from their experience.

Mentoring across racial lines is fraught with historical tensions (Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). While Alfred conceptualized the ideal state of having same-race and cross-race mentors, the reality is that African American men and White men have a history together that is a barrier to the development of a close, trusting mentor-protégé relationship. Furthermore, the notion of White males being more comfortable with African American women extends to mentoring relationships as well. Consistent with literature, Palmer and Johnson-Bailey (2008) found,

White males tend to be better mentors to African American females than they do African American males (Cox 1993; Morrison, 1992). There appears to be greater comfort in the mentoring process between African American females and White males than between African American males and White males. (p. 50)

**African American role models.** In addition to family and mentors/sponsors, participants attributed their career development success to other prominent African American role models, such as community leaders and teachers. Mike stated growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, he was exposed to a plethora of positive Black role models. He said,

I think a Black kid growing up in Atlanta might have an advantage over, you know, a kid growing up elsewhere...I mean, here in Atlanta, when you can actually look up and you see successful Black people. When you turn on the news, you have a Black mayor, and she's not the first – and it's a she! You can't replicate that...And in the school system, all of my role models – they were Black teachers. You have HBCUs here. If you just take the blinders off and stop looking at half empty and see half full, then I think that Atlanta is the ground to really see it [positive role models].

I asked Mike how having exposure to so many positive Black role models translated to success in his career development. He responded: "I just developed a mentality that my race is not going to keep me from being successful because if I look around me, there are a lot of people who look just like me who are doing things." He expressed gratitude to Black teachers who put positive Black role models in front of him. Similarly, Alfred noted that the lack of education about positive Black role models has an enduring and negative effect on African Americans because it blights their self-esteem and has consequences for what they perceive as career options and their ability to achieve the career they desire. He says his exposure to great Black leaders in college drove him to succeed.

Steve acknowledged one of his teachers for preparing him to take the standard college entrance examination that allowed him to gain entrance to the military academy. He also attributed his success in part to his baseball coaches who served as role models. He said what he learned from his role models translates to how he approaches his career. Borrowing an often quoted phrase, Steve said, "The work that I do bears the mark of

others.” He said that he has stayed away from big mistakes because he wants his role models to be proud of him, such that “not positioning myself for advancement would be almost to dishonor their memory.” The influence of African American role models, many of whom extend back to participants’ childhood experiences is telling and signals that career development is a lifelong process that begins early in life and evolves over the lifespan (Super, 1980).

### **Bicultural Strategies**

Mike’s comment regarding African American men who stopped being Black in corporate America is illustrative of the dilemma African American men experience in straddling two life structures – their primary culture and that of the dominant mainstream culture (Alfred, 2001; Darder, 1991). Alfred (2001) held, “culture and identity play a vital role in the career development of minority professionals in majority organizations” (p. 123). For African American professional men, their bicultural experience involves balancing between their Black culture and the corporate culture which is predominantly White. Bell (1990) in studying the bicultural life experiences of career-oriented Black women, held: “The challenge for Black women is to manage the tensions between these two cultural worlds” (p. 461). Bell’s study is closely associated to the aims of this study in that she was attempting to investigate the perceptions and experiences of African American professional women in corporate America and how they navigated between two cultures. A critique of the hegemony of corporate culture provides a lens into the strategies that the participants implemented to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development.

**Hegemony of corporate culture.** Most often participants discussed their experiences in relationship to those of their White male counterparts. However, they also spoke frequently about the challenges they face in the abstract entity of “corporate America.” Mike, in justifying the expected dress code, resolved as a matter of fact, “corporate America is corporate America.” Gordon also spoke about the expectations for dress and the choice of music that is played in his office. He resolved that in his corporate culture, conformity was valued. Celica, the subject of discrimination because he was outspoken about his company’s lack of diversity in the managerial ranks, stated: “The next time I look for an employer or the next time I look at what’s really next, I’m going to think about the culture of that company.” What then is this abstraction, this powerful, intangible entity that holds people at bay of being their whole selves at work? What exacts of African American men to operate with a double consciousness? Ogbor (2001) described corporate culture as “a discursive practice that legitimates a group’s claim to power....an instrument for the universalization of managerial interests, the suppression of conflicting interests and the perpetuation of corporate and societal hegemony” (p. 591). From this description, I conclude that without intervention, corporate America is a structure that is socially created and maintained to perpetuate White male privilege and America’s capitalist economic system. One of the ways in which corporate America is maintained is by rewarding conformity to the values, practices and behaviors of the dominant group – White males. White women and professionals of color are complicit in sustaining the corporate culture because conformity brings reward. Terms used to describe those who display the behaviors needed to sustain the corporate culture are “organizational fit,” “team player,” and “politically correct.” Those members who rebel



or exhibit behaviors that threaten the culture are punished with unemployment, demotion, non-promotion, and humiliation (Fineman, 1999; Ogbor, 2001). Hence, the hegemony of corporate culture is antithetical to the goals of diversity. Willmott (1993) found, “Cultural diversity is dissolved in the acid bath of the core corporate values” (p. 534).

The participants’ consciousness of their Black male identity in corporate America is an indicator that their cultural identity is often in contrast to the corporate culture in which they work. Ogbor (2001) stated, “Participation in a corporation in effect entails the replacement of one’s identity with that of the organization. In the process, individuals encounter an identity problem – how to reconcile individual identity with that sanctioned by the organization” (p. 597). The individuals within corporate systems in effect reconstruct their corporate identities to fit into the norms and values of the system. However, this reconstruction or denial of identity is not required of White males. Kersten (as cited by Ogbor, 2001) held:

Although blacks are required to reproduce “white consciousness” as a condition of participation in society and in organizations, and continuously find their consciousness contested in day-to-day interactions, no such requirement exists for whites, who can assume the naturalness of their reality without consequences or repercussions. Being “white” in an organization becomes the invisible norm for how the dominant culture perpetuates itself in the workplace. (p. 601)

Why would a person straddle two distinct life structures – structures that can often be at odds in terms of value systems and behavioral expectations? The answer lies in the competing interests of cultural identity and professional identity. In American society, a person’s status is often defined by his or her occupation/career. For men, being able to

work and provide for their families are central to the definition of manhood. Hence, the African American man “ever feels his twoness, An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 1989, p. 3). Biculturalism involves strategies that allow African American men to function in two distinct worlds. For many, employing bicultural strategies provide strength, affirmation, and authenticity. One of the factors that contribute to the career success of African Americans is finding a safe space where they can reclaim and reaffirm their identity, which may have been threatened as a result of their interactions in the White-dominated culture (Alfred, 2001). The strategies participants most discussed included internal and external resources. Internally, the participants established and leveraged an informal, “underground” Black network and participated in company-sponsored affinity groups for African Americans. Externally, participants immersed themselves in Black culture through participation in church, professional and fraternal associations.

**Underground Black network.** In principle, the underground Black network is not very different from the good-old-boy network associated with White males. While Blacks may not have the same power and influence to effect promotions and increase pay to the same degree as the good-old-boy network, they have other capital that is exchanged. The commodity of the underground Black network is information, which is gained either through legitimate or illegitimate means. This type of informal social network is highly purposeful. It is designed to inform, warn, or help fellow African Americans be successful. Entry into the network and the openness in which information is shared is tested over time. Several participants alluded to their internal network of

informants. Bill, Dallas, and Celica provide vivid examples of how the underground Black network operates. Bill, in describing the underground Black network said:

It was good to see successful Black males who were in significant roles, who got good results, and who were willing to share some of the nuances, and to tell you things like you can go up to them and say, “Richard, I’m working on this project and I’ve got to present to these people; you know them. Can you help me, what are some of the things they like?” And they might answer – “Well, this person is very detail oriented so you need to talk in details; if you talk about details to this person, they are not going to be interested.” – Little nuances that you didn’t get necessarily from your direct boss.

When I asked Bill how these conversations get initiated, he said, “They don’t happen in formal meetings for the most part. What I found generally speaking the formal meetings are the formal meetings.” He continued by saying it might be initiated by an invitation to attend an event away from work, the two parties will share stories as a way to build the bond and test the trustworthiness of the other. Then, the sharing of information commences. Another example Bill provided was a two-hour informal meeting held at seven o’clock in the evening at company headquarters. A group of African American men, a mix of senior and junior executives, sat around and had a discussion “amongst Black men that would not have been had in just the regular work setting.” They shared information about senior White executives and examples of experiences that happened at work, asked each other questions, provided advice on approaching certain White executives and warned against liaisons with others.

The underground Black network is not limited to hierarchical status. Dallas talked about the information he gained through secretaries, custodians, and hourly factory workers that has helped him be successful. He said:

I had those people in the factory that knew the players from the factory side and could tell me – “That guy, you watch him because he’s like this, because I have seen how he acts at meetings. This woman, watch out for her – she’s a good person.” Several people – secretaries watching my back – would say, “I heard this person saying such and such.” My experience is that the admins were Black and the people in the factory were Black, and so they saw me as someone who was positive and progressive and genuine and open to being my authentic self to them and not having this air of “I’m an executive and you’re in the factory.” Even the cafeteria people, they would just tell me, “Hey Dallas, watch out for such and such.” It was almost like the underground kind of chatter so that when I went into certain situations, I knew what they liked, what they didn’t like, what to say. I think that helped me; it even helps me now.

Celica was able to leverage his underground Black network to negotiate his exit strategy from his former company. He said, “I’ve made some pretty good contacts in HR that tend to tell me what’s going on.” At another point in the interview, he expanded on the information he gained from his HR contacts. He stated,

From a human resources perspective, I’ve been given two interesting pieces of feedback because I have a contact that’s been providing this information to me and I nicknamed the person my little angel because the person said I just think right is right and wrong is wrong. She said even in slavery there was those house

Negroes. They couldn't do anything, but they heard the scuttlebutt and they could at least share...and so this person has taken a lot of risk to share this with me.

**African American affinity groups.** A second internal resource is a formally organized affinity group for African Americans. Thomas (2005) defined affinity groups as “formal ‘same group’ networks established by employees or the organization to facilitate the networking and subsequently the career development of a specific group” (p. 87). The benefits of participating in affinity groups include gaining access to career development information and resources, as well as increasing employee morale by networking with coworkers who share their culture and similar workplace challenges. There are two primary differences between the underground Black network and affinity groups. First, the underground network is informal and clandestine. The affinity groups are formal and visible corporate-sponsored organizations. Second, the underground network's commodity is generally information that is unavailable through formal means. The affinity groups share information and resources sanctioned and/or endorsed by the company.

When I asked employees which organizational factors contribute greatly to African American career development, affinity groups was one of the most frequent responses. Gordon referred to them as grassroots organizations because employees in his company can structure the programs to meet their career development interests. Henry and Jerome serve as executive sponsors of their company's African American affinity groups and lead the groups' mentoring initiatives. Henry said, “Having those types of groups in place gives people the ability to feel comfortable with asking career

development questions and knowing they are going to get first-hand accounts that have been taken by others to reach their particular goals.”

**Church.** The Black church has long been a place of inspiration, fellowship, and affirmation of Black culture. Every participant, at some point throughout their interviews referenced their affiliation with church as integral to their growth and maturation and as a way they deal with the pressures of corporate America. Mitchell said, “It [church] was kind of Afro-centric in its nature and teaching and what it did was it confirmed a lot of my mom’s teachings I guess in terms of being proud of who you are.” Many participants attended church throughout their childhoods and some attended private Catholic schools. The church was also seen as an organization that contributes to career development by building skills transferable to corporate America. Duncan acknowledged that he has built his leadership skills through his involvement in his church. He said, “I think part of my development is that I got a chance to try a lot of things out in the church by being a leader and I got a chance to be a part of different organizations within the church and hold key positions throughout my career.” Bill said, “For Black folks to take on responsibilities in their churches, and in their community organizations, are a way to start to build some of your leadership skills, and your ability to interact and to negotiate.” Celica said, “Church is an outreach, that vehicle to community. Aside from just the pure spirituality, that vehicle to be able to give back has been big.”

**Professional and fraternal associations.** Alfred (2001) found that knowing the professional culture and becoming visible within disciplinary and organizational cultures are important bicultural strategies that contribute to African Americans’ career success. When I asked participants if they were affiliated with any external organizations that

contributed to their career development, participants identified the church and a number of professional and fraternal organizations. I noticed that most, if not all, the organizations they identified were predominantly Black organizations. That signaled to me that when given a choice, participants did seek affiliation with their same group and those affiliations were not only rewarding personally in terms of affirmation, they were also constructive in helping participants develop professionally. Nine of the fourteen participants mentioned they were members of Black Greek letter fraternities. However, what was interesting is the majority stated that those fraternal relationships were more for “fun” or community involvement. They did not leverage their affiliation in the fraternities as a strategy for developing critical career skills or networking for career advancement. Most participants said they did not use their fraternal relationships for deeper level career conversations. A few participants also stated they affiliate with non-Greek men’s groups, either at church or a group of friends. Henry stated that having a core group of male friends is important because “those are the ones who have nothing to gain from telling you anything but the truth.” Martin referred to a group of male peers internal and external to his organization as a “brotherhood.” He said, “I felt like I could talk to them, I could hang out with my boys as I call them, on the weekend or when we had a chance to get together and that didn’t interfere with things I had to do on the job.” Bill described a gesture that is used by Black men to acknowledge and affirm one another. He said:

There is that nod that the brothers have. You can’t pick it up on your recorder, but it’s that, what’s up nod [gesturing] and that nod says a lot of things. That nod says I see you; I recognize that you are here. I’m a good brother; I’m the kind of brother you can talk to. It says all of that just in the nod. So, we kind of get that.

These types of fraternal affiliations also provided an environment where the men could talk about an array of topics, such as sports, their families, and other interests.

Martin and Mitchell summed up what I heard from many of the participants who were straddling the two cultures – one Black and the other White. Martin said:

I felt I could live in both camps. I felt like I could straddle that line and be fine in both arenas and I always did. I would hang out with the guys I worked with and I could still go do my work and I never felt like I had to make those choices. I don't know if it was me or if I just made the decision that I'm not going to live in that world. I'm going to be true to who I am.

Likewise, Mitchell talked about the ideal of not having to reconstruct or change identity from one environment to the next. He said:

I think Black men, depending on who you are, depending on your lifestyle, it's almost like you're schizophrenic because what would go down in the workplace would never go down at home. It just wouldn't happen. So, I think success comes when someone can leave their house and how they deal in their culture doesn't change much when they go to work. In other words, you can go right from here, from this environment to that environment with your culture intact – how you act, how you respond – that's healthy, that makes sense versus you leaving culture A or environment A and going to environment B and you literally have to transpose and shift all the priorities in terms of behavior, how you think, how you respond.

### **Self-Efficacy and Personal Agency**

Throughout my conversations with the participants and as I got to know them over the months of the data collection period, what struck me as remarkable was their



high degree of self-efficacy and personal agency. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's capabilities, is one of the building blocks of career development and the fuel that enables a person to exercise agency (Alfred, 2001; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). In turn, personal agency is the notion that people are active agents in shaping their career development. I found that the participants, above all, believe in themselves, refuse to be defined or limited by the negative stereotypes attributed to Black men, and who understand their capacity to act to change their circumstances and achieve the career development they desire – despite racism. As Steve so eloquently stated,

I came from a culture of people who took action. In other words, they did not believe that – and they taught me – that you just stood around and you hoped things get better. You've got to take action. And so, if it's to be, it's up to me.

More than any of the other facilitative structures, this is the most essential because this is about who these men are at their core. I made note of key personal attributes of these men that enabled their career success. Among others, the following stood out as qualities each of these men exhibited: ambitious, competitive, strategic, and adaptable/resilient.

**Ambitious.** These men set their sights high. Mike and Alfred provided examples of the ambition resident within the participants. Mike said:

Why am I going to get up in the morning to go to work if I don't think that one day I can be president of this sales department at my company? Why not? I guess I've always felt that it was possible. I think numero uno, that's just the way I'm hard-wired. Call it a can-do attitude, call it driven. I mean it's just why not? That's really what it comes down to, that's just been ingrained in me. I mean from an early age, I think you are what you decide to be.

Likewise, Alfred discussed his desire to be the boss beginning with his first job out of high school. He said,

Starting two weeks out of high school, starting as a painter and five years made it to supervisor, but I was already preparing myself to be a manager of supervisors...when I joined I knew I had to be the boss, so I started that right away.

Alfred also stated that his career satisfaction has been predicated on his ability to identify high goals, reach them, and then aspire for even higher levels of achievement. He said,

I guess setting a goal and reaching it and it has been long-term goals and reaching those. I'm happy and content to reach a stage, but I keep going for the next one. Once you reach one stage, always a high achiever, you've got to keep going.

**Competitive.** The participants often spoke about the need to differentiate themselves, to stand out from their peers. Their love of competition helped shape their career development. Dallas and Hank provide examples of this quality of competitiveness. Dallas said:

I've always been one of these kinds of people that seize the day, takes charge of my career. So, I've always had this innate sense of I needed to be a go-getter and wanted to achieve. And I've had that since I can remember, I mean my mom must have instilled that in me when I was in the womb because I just remember I'm going to be the best. I'm gonna beat you out. I'm going to be nice about it; I'm not going to step on your neck trying to get there, but I'm going to be the best. I've always remembered having that "thing."

Hank developed his competitive spirit playing sports at an early age. Now he uses his love for competition as fuel to advance his career. He stated:

That's probably what influenced – it's made me strive to want to get more, to achieve as much as I can to be a great example to my son and daughter as well as fulfilling my own internal drive to want to be the best person that I can be. I've always been competitive. It's always been, whether it was sports or whether it was academia...whatever it was that was competitive, I'd be involved in it...I've had a couple of 360s done on me and it's clear that even in my 360s that I'm competitive. So I have to recognize at work how do I use my desire to be competitive in a positive manner?

**Strategic.** Being strategic entails developing a plan for career development, such that you are able to make deliberate decisions that enhance career mobility. Many of the participants discussed how they navigated their careers, made choices about which jobs to take and which to avoid. Duncan said his success is attributed to the fact that he looks for the “right” opportunities. He said,

I just don't want to ask for everything. I just made a conscious decision last year to look for a new job. There were all kinds of positions that were open in our company. But, I did my research and I focused on – this is the job that I wanted.

Henry provided an example of how he strategically planned his career development by developing exit strategies from companies when it became obvious that he had reached the glass ceiling. He said:

I had reached a glass ceiling and they were not trying to help me grow any further than what I had already accomplished....And so I talked to my wife and probably

through the conversations with my wife who was also a professional, we developed an exit strategy...And so I developed an exit strategy and I gave myself a year to put in line things that would allow me to leave...I said January of '91 I want to be out and January '91, I quit.

Henry took a job as a freelancer for several months until he secured a new position, which after two years advanced him into the executive ranks as a vice president. He would repeat his exit strategy again with the same result five years later. Henry's ability to stay in tune to his career development and the signals given by those in leadership regarding his growth potential allowed him to manage his career so that he was able to advance and increase the scope of his responsibilities with each move.

**Adaptable/resilient.** Steve, Celica, and Jerome shared their thoughts on the importance of adaptability in their career development. The ability to rebound from setbacks and adapt to different circumstances and sets of expectations was viewed as a critical competency. Steve said:

I can't emphasize enough the importance of adaptability...Things aren't going to happen the way you planned them. And so you have to be adaptable. So, the job might be different, the people might be different, the situation might be different. A lot of times I've watched people, they get a map in their head and they cling to their map. I've always been willing to change the map and I think that's been very important and it has served me well.

When I asked Celica how he was able to negotiate the impact of racism on his career, he said:

I really believe that when God made me, He made someone that is very capable. And so, I'll go back to the term "intestinal fortitude," but I am absolutely unwilling and I'm probably more determined because of my children, that could then understand that obstacles, whether they are racism, other happenstance, don't make you who you are. It's what you do about those obstacles. And I have an internal battery that will not allow another man to determine my fate. I think I determine my fate. That's it, period.

Jerome has had a successful career that spans over thirty years, with one of the career paths being sales management. However, an early failure in sales and Jerome's ability to rebound from that setback is a differentiator in his career development. Jerome recalled:

It was the first time in my career that I failed actually. I spent a year in sales and I was horrible as a salesperson. But, as I like to tell people, if I hadn't had that year where I failed as a salesperson and that I couldn't feed myself much less my family, then I wouldn't have achieved since that point.

Jerome left the company on his own volition, but out of embarrassment and disappointment because after a track record of continuous success, it was the first time in his career that he failed. However, 33 months later, Jerome was asked to return to the company and take a sales leader position. He recalled his return to the company and to sales:

I convinced my family to support me to go back into sales even though they were all painfully aware that it was probably the darkest time of my professional career. But I did take the role. I was a vice president of sales. I had a team of five people and a product quota of \$2.6 million. When I left that role seven years later, I left

as a division vice president with about 85 people in the organization and we had a quota of \$70 million. And, I always tell people, the time I spent as a salesperson, I didn't realize at the time, but I learned some very valuable lessons that I retained and utilized in building my sales team.

The participants' stories demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between self-efficacy and personal agency and how they utilized both to facilitate their career development. Many of the agency factors Goodly (2007) found through his research were also found among the 14 participants in this study. The underlying quality in each story is the positive personal identity these men have, which has been found to be a contributor to career success (Alfred, 2001).

### **Education and Continuous Learning**

Perhaps the strategy that has had the most direct influence on changing the condition of African Americans is education. The African American community has a history of valuing education. Education and a white-collar career served as evidence that an African American had achieved middle class status (Durant & Loudon, 1986; Frazier, 1997). Additionally, Du Bois's educational philosophy was founded on the premise that the primary function of education was the making of men – the Talented Tenth – college educated men who would uplift the African American community. While accomplishment of the Talented Tenth aspiration is debatable, what is generally held as verities is that education and continuous learning do indeed create very different social positions and experiences for African Americans. When asked about what has been the biggest differentiator for them, participants resoundingly said that education has been their “ticket into the game.”

**Formal learning.** Several of the participants' references to education and continuous learning are noted. Each of the participants has at minimum a four-year degree from a college or university, which was a criterion for participation in the study. However, 10 of the 14 men also have advanced degrees and two of those men have terminal degrees. Most participants recalled teachers' influences in their lives and counted them among their role models, which likely had a positive impact on their involvement in formal education programs. Mike said the most influential people in his life have been teachers. Of education, he said, "I always knew I wanted to go to college. I knew I was going to go to college. That was my ticket into the game. It was like really no other option besides going to college." In addition to his college degree, Mike's profession requires several financial licenses, which Mike has achieved to become a full-service financial advisor.

Gordon found out during his military career that despite his good performance, he was at a disadvantage compared to his peers. Gordon had attended a course and discovered that in his cohort, he was the only one that did not have a college degree. He said, "I absolutely, positively refused to ever have a picture of myself that was out of alignment with reality." Gordon said the epiphany occurred when he realized "after a certain point, education becomes the absolute separator to get promoted in the military." Following completion of the course, Gordon embarked on an educational journey that lasted from June, 1982 to December, 2000 and ended with Gordon receiving his doctorate. He still attributes education as the "life changer" and his biggest learning coming out of the military.

**Informal learning.** Steve, who also has his doctorate, emphasized the importance of education and continuous learning. He said, “I was always a continuous learner. I was always looking to do something to prepare myself.” Several participants made a distinction between formal degree programs and continuous learning through professional development programs and key experiences. They engaged in both and when asked what advice they would give to other African American professional men to help them achieve success in their career development, participants highly encouraged continuously learning through company educational and training programs, including tuition reimbursement, learning through professional associations, and through selecting key experiences, such as international assignments and job rotations. Jerome, after spending nearly three years working internationally, returned to the U.S. to assume broader leadership responsibilities. Jerome gave an example of how he uses learning in a role to prepare him for the next role. He said:

I used to refer to myself as a professional student. I like to learn. I like to grow. I get bored and so typically in any role, the first year of the role is the most enjoyable because you don't know anything necessarily. And so, you experiment and you look for what works. You find what works. So the first year is the foundation. The second year is building on that foundation and really starting to generate some return, looking for what others can't see or won't see... The third year is the finishing year where the success is there... and it's in the third year that I start looking for my next opportunity.

Two of the participants approached education critically as a process or experience that has failed African American boys. Alfred and Mitchell stated that in compulsory



education, the full range of Black achievers are not taught, thus African American children (and other cultural groups) do not receive the message that African Americans have been successful and instrumental in the development of America. In the absence of role models, this proves detrimental to African American educational achievement – which has ramifications for the likelihood of long-term professional careers. Particular to African American boys, Alfred said:

As a Black male, if you are intelligent, but feisty, then you get sidetracked into the special ed classes. As long as you got that motor going, and then take away the gyms and things of that nature, they begin to label you by second grade. And by second grade, if you're labeled as special ed, the best you can hope to have is vocation – to work with your hands. So, they start tracking us right away.

With education being such a strong facilitative structure, discriminatory and disparate early education experiences are a direct threat to developing the next generation of African American professionals. Assuredly, this is of extreme concern for Black boys, who studies show are especially vulnerable (Noguera, 2003, 2007). Two-thirds of all African Americans in higher education are women. Schools do not have sole accountability here. Government, parents and whole communities are also critical to the academic achievement equation.

**Spirituality and purpose.** In answering research questions one and four, participants also shared their sense of career satisfaction and the advice they would offer to other African American professional men. In sharing the degree to which they were satisfied, they shared sparingly about the extrinsic accomplishments (promotions, financial status, etc.). However, most of their conversations centered on intrinsic values, which included

such things as staying true to themselves or being authentic, being able to develop others, making a difference or leaving a legacy, paving the way for the next generation of African American executives, and giving back to their communities. These responses represent traditional, Africentric values of collectivism – a high value placed on community. Most often, the participants’ responses included references to spirituality, church, or faith. One or more of these were also discussed as central to career decisions.

Tolliver and Tisdale (2002) in defining spirituality found that “First, ‘spirituality is an aware honoring of the Life-force that’s happening through everything (Riddell, cited in Tisdell, 2000)’ (p. 391).” Other assumptions they apply in their definition are that “spirituality is about how people make meaning and about experiences that get at the wholeness and interconnectedness of all Life” (p. 391), that spirituality is about authenticity, and that spirituality and religion are not the same, although for many people they are interrelated. One or more of these assumptions are relevant given participants’ responses. David, Celica, Steve, and Alfred shared reflections that represent many of the sentiments I heard from all the other participants as well.

David discussed his satisfaction with being in a position where he can support, motivate, and guide. He said, “I like doing that where I no longer have to be in the limelight; I’m there automatically, but I can support other people. I’m not seeking the praise myself anymore.” While he was also satisfied with being financially comfortable, he said he was at peace with his decision to either play the political game or not because “I stayed true to myself through all of that.” David added:

I’m a believer that you’ve got to take life as it comes and say, one, did I make the decision that I am still comfortable with today even though it may have been a

mistake at the time, but I learned from it. Was I true to myself? Was I true to my religious beliefs? And was I true to – my whole thing is trying to do the right things for people.

David, like so many of the other participants, equated success with “staying true” to who they are, being authentic, and in David’s terms, “I did it my way.”

Celica talked about his career success and satisfaction in terms of fulfilling his mission, which often meant facing challenges. He said:

I’m always taken back to my Christian beliefs and what my family instilled...And that is that we really believe that these experiences have a purpose. And that purpose is to show that despite what the majority or others do to you, race being a key element, that you can still succeed, that you can find a way and that might mean going to another employer where you at some point can contribute greater and create opportunities for others because to be candid with you, my personal mission and I talked about this before about the vice president was so that I could eliminate some challenges, so that I could start to bring forward what I believe is a true fairness evaluation of people based on their performance, the content of their character, the things that really limit the measurement of things such as race...it has been a confirmation that my mission is much larger than myself...and I can never give up my values and beliefs.

Steve talked about always enjoying his work because it was about helping others. He said, “What I do love about working in human resources and particularly as a leader is I’ve gotten a chance to really develop people.” Other factors that allowed him to enjoy his career were having autonomy, being creative, and feeling like “I’m a part of

something larger.” When I asked him to expand on that statement, he said, “I kind of feel like my work serves a larger purpose.” Alfred recalled that after years of searching for the right fit in terms of his career choice, he finally stumbled across organizational development. He reflected on that moment:

I said, this is it. I liked all the other stuff and I could do that other stuff, but this really seems to be it...In 2000, I went to the conference and it was like the heavens opened up. This is it. This is what you’ve been looking for, this is where you belong amongst those people and like minds...this is your calling; this is what you need to be doing.

Overall, participants enjoyed a great deal of career satisfaction, despite the challenges, and a big part of their satisfaction came from altruistic accomplishments, which they largely attributed to their spirituality and having a sense of greater purpose.

### **Chapter Summary**

Overall, the participants are satisfied with their careers. While each day may bring a challenge and racism is certainly inculcated in the hegemony of corporate America, these men have learned to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development and enjoy successful careers on their own terms. They have learned to leverage social rules and practices that facilitate their career development – many of which have cultural relevance to African Americans. The five facilitative structures that figured prominently included: 1) key relationships; 2) bicultural strategies; 3) self-efficacy and personal agency; 4) education and continuous learning; and 5) spirituality and purpose. These five structures included 18 attributes that were important to helping the African American men in their career development efforts.

The ability to build and leverage key relationships was seen as essential to career success. Key relationships included: 1) family (helped to establish personal and cultural identity; learned work ethic; set high expectations for achievement); 2) mentors and sponsors (mostly informal; African American male mentor most able to relate to experiences; provide psychosocial support, career support and coaching; influential in career decisions; be an advocate “in the room”); 3) African American role models (“There are a lot of people who look just like me doing things;” “The work that I do bears the mark of others.”).

Bicultural strategies help African American men to deal with the double consciousness of living in two life worlds. The second facilitative structure included those actions participants took to navigate between two cultures – one centered in the Black culture and the other the White male dominated culture of corporate America. Finding those safe spaces internal and external to their organizations where they could express their cultural identity and receive affirmation proved to be helpful to participants. Bicultural strategies they employed consisted of: 1) the underground Black network (informal, clandestine; commodity is information gained legitimately or illegitimately); 2) African American affinity groups (formal, corporate-sanctioned; career development and networking); 3) church (place of inspiration and affirmation of Black culture; opportunity to build leadership skills through volunteerism; “vehicle to community”); and 4) professional and fraternal associations (Black by choice; networking; enjoy the “brotherhood;” “That nod says I see you; I recognize you are here; I’m a good brother; “I’m the kind of brother you can talk to.”).

The third facilitative structure was self-efficacy and personal agency. This structure reflects the men's belief in their capabilities and in their self-determinism to be the masters of their own destinies. The attributes associated with self-efficacy and personal agency include: 1) ambitious (set high standards for achievement; "You are what you decide to be." "I knew I had to be the boss."); 2) competitive (differentiate self from peers); 3) strategic (career plan; exit strategy; deliberate career choices); and 4) adaptable/resilient (rebound from setbacks; "I've always been willing to change the map;" "intestinal fortitude;" "I determine my fate;" learning from failure).

Career development is a lifelong process that begins in early education and continues throughout adulthood (Super, 1980). Steve characterized his career development as "iterative" and he acknowledged that he is a continuous learner. Education and continuous learning is the fourth facilitative structure and include: 1) formal (educational degree programs); and 2) informal (learning through experiences and job assignments; professional associations) learning. Participants characterized education and continuous learning as the "ticket into the game," "the absolute separator," and a "life changer."

The fifth facilitative structure reveals the altruistic motivators and rewards the participants attribute to their career satisfaction. Spirituality and purpose is about how the men make meaning of their lives – and in this case their time spent in developing their careers. This structure includes: 1) staying true to self/authenticity ("I did it my way"); 2) developing others ("I can support other people"); 3) making a difference/leaving a legacy ("my mission is much larger than myself;" "my work serves a larger purpose;" "bring

forward what I believe is a true fairness evaluation of people”); and 4) giving back to the community (Africentric value of collectivism).

In my analysis, I noticed several of the facilitative structures were also identified in Goodly’s (2007) and Hunter and Davis’s (1992) research. The comparison among the three frameworks is listed in Table 2. Many of the facilitative structures are captured in Goodly’s (2007) study as agency factors or deep structures. I found family and other African American role models were important structures facilitating the career development of African American professional men. Likewise, Goodly reflected family and community as deep structures that enabled the career development of the 15 professional Black men included in his study. Spirituality and purpose, ambition, adaptability, education and continuous learning, self-efficacy, and strategic planning are other facilitative structures reflected in Goodly’s agency factors or deep structures. The similarity in findings between the two studies makes a compelling case for the validity and reliability of this present study.

I also found there was alignment between the facilitative structures and Hunter and Davis’s (1992) four domains and fifteen clusters reflecting African American men’s conceptualization of manhood. Hunter and Davis’s domain of self-determinism and accountability aligns to the facilitative structure of self-efficacy and agency. The findings from both studies suggest that African American professional men want to take charge of their lives and believe they are the authors of their destiny. The centrality of family, connectedness to the community, self-betterment, and spiritual and moral principles highlighted as defining characteristics in African American manhood also figured prominently as facilitative structures in the present study.

Table 2

*Comparison of Facilitative Structures to Other Models*

Facilitative Structures	Goodly's (2007) Agency Factors and Deep Structures	Hunter and Davis's (1992) Four Domains and Fifteen Clusters of African American Manhood
Key Relationships	Agency	Self-determinism and Accountability
Family	Perseverance	Directedness
Mentors/sponsors	Bravery	Maturity
African American role models	Adaptability	Economic viability
	Ambition	Perseverance
	Strategic planning	Free will
Bicultural Strategies	Continuous learning	
Underground Black Network	Gratitude	Family
African American affinity groups	Self-awareness	Responsibilities and connectedness
Church	Meaningfulness	Equity in male and female relationships
Professional and fraternal associations	Self-efficacy	Fulfillment of family role expectations
	Deep Structures	
	Family	
	Community	
	Education	
Self-efficacy and Personal Agency	Spirituality/religion	Pride
Ambitious	Athletics	Pride
Competitive		Self-betterment
Strategic		
Adaptable/resilient		Spirituality and Humanism
		Spiritual and moral principles
Education and Continuous Learning		Connectedness to human community
Formal learning		Respect for womanhood
Informal learning		Sensitivity
		Belief in human equity
Spirituality and Purpose		
Staying true to self/authenticity		
Developing others		
Making a difference/legacy		
Paving way for next generation		
Giving back to the community		



## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusions, Discussions, Implications and Recommendations**

More African Americans have careers in corporate America than at any other time in the nation's history. However, even with greater access and participation, studies indicate African Americans continue to encounter racism and disparate treatment, which impedes their career development. African American men are especially vulnerable, though little research has focused on their experiences. Overall, career development literature has not addressed sufficiently the impact of race on career development. When researchers have studied African American professionals in corporate America, they have tended to focus on African Americans as a monolithic group or on the intersection of race and gender as it pertains to African American women's career development. The lack of attention to African American professional men in corporate America is problematic because it has rendered invisible the range of experiences germane to them as they too encounter gendered racism, meaning they are subjects of prejudice, negative stereotypes and oppression because they are both Black and men – "blackmen" (Mutua, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Four research questions guided the study:

- 1) How do African American professional men describe their career development?
- 2) How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
- 3) What factors influence the career development of African American professional men?

- 4) What strategies do African American professional men employ to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development?

A critical qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it allowed for a rich, thick description of the career development experiences of African American professional men. Furthermore, the theoretical framework that shaped the study included the conceptualization of African American manhood, critical race theory, and career development theory. Approaching the phenomenon under study with these three critical lenses kept the focus on issues of race and gender, patriarchy and male privilege, voice and emancipatory consciousness, and the applicability of career development theories to African Americans. I used purposeful sampling to obtain the 14 participants included in the study. Specifically, the sampling techniques I employed were criterion-based and snowball sampling. Criteria for this study included race, educational attainment, professional status, longevity in corporate America, and company profile. Semi-structured interviewing was the primary data collection method and included both individual in-person interviews and focus group interviews. To the extent that interviews also allow opportunities for observation, observations were then an indirect, secondary data collection method. I used the constant comparative method of data analysis, which began with the very first interview and continued until the final version of this dissertation was complete.

The findings were the answers to the research questions inquiring into the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. The first research question inquired into how the African American professional men described their career development in the broadest sense. I was

interested in bringing to light the full range of their career experiences over their career span and how they made meaning of their careers in totality. The second question delved more specifically into how racism shaped their career development, particularly issues that were germane to them as African American men. The third research question was an inquiry into the internal and external organizational or contextual factors that influenced their career development. Their answers could range from career development strategies offered by the organization to external affiliations that provided support to their career development. The fourth question delved into the strategies the participants employed to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. The term “negotiate” was used to reflect not only how African American men engage with other parties within corporate systems for the purpose of reaching agreement around common and conflicting interests (Newman, 2006). The term was to also explain how African American men engage in different behaviors and actions (i.e., silence, withdrawal, bicultural strategies, etc.) which allow them to navigate around the barriers caused by racism that otherwise would derail their careers. In that vein, to negotiate is also to mitigate or lessen the impact of racism on their career development. Many of the strategies the men used reflected self-determinism more so than the political interaction between parties vying for competing interests in the hopes of reaching mutuality (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Newman, 2006).

The findings revealed two distinct categories of structures that help to understand the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men. They are: repressive structures and facilitative structures. Repressive structures are those recursive social rules and practices which constrain the career development of African American men. Facilitative structures are those rules and practices which enable African

American men to circumvent the force of racism, advance their careers, and achieve career satisfaction. Both repressive and facilitative structures include personal as well as contextual factors. There were four repressive structures found to constrain the career development of African American professional men. They included: stereotypes attributed to African American men; subjective and disparate career development practices; differentiated opportunities for the acquisition of socio-political capital; and changing priorities in workplace diversity. The five facilitative structures that figured prominently included: 1) ability to build and leverage key relationships; 2) bicultural strategies; 3) self-efficacy and personal agency; 4) education and continuous learning; and 5) spirituality and purpose.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

From the findings in this study, I conclude four things about the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. First, personal identity and cultural identity influence the career development of African American professional men. Second, gendered racism constrains the career development of African American professional men in ways not experienced by White men or African American women. Third, African American professional men's careers develop through internal and external organizational resources and through formal and informal learning. Fourth, African American professional men learn to employ a range of strategies to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development.

**Conclusion one: Personal identity and cultural identity influence the career development of African American professional men in corporate America.**

This study confirmed that race still matters and racism is more than perception. It is real. African American men encounter racism and disparate treatment in corporate America because of the cumulative effect of being Black and male. When describing their career development, participants referenced their positionality as Black males, the stereotypes attributed to Black males, and the unique experiences they encountered due to the intersection of their race and gender. They shared their daily awareness of being a Black male in corporate America, the feelings of isolation, their felt responsibility to represent the race, and the challenges of knowing when and how to confront racism. One of the measures of career satisfaction was the extent to which participants perceived they were able to “stay true to who they are” as Black men and to their cultural values, many of which are reflected in traditional Africentric values and in Black men’s definition of manhood (Hunter & Davis, 1992). The salience of their Black male identity and racial consciousness led to the conclusion that personal identity and cultural identity influence career development and enable African American men to negotiate the impact of the racism on their career development. This is consistent with similar research on the career development of African Americans and studies calling for more culturally sensitive career development theories (Alfred, 2002; Barrett & Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Barrett, Cervero & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Bell, 1990; Cheatham, 1990; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005; Hartung, 2002; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Parham & Austin, 1994; Parks-Yancy, 2002, 2006; Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007).

Parham and Austin (1994) studied the utility of racial identity and nigrescence as a framework for understanding the career development attitudes and behaviors of African Americans. Through their research Parham and Austin cited a host of other researchers

whose works support the significance of racial identity and nigrescence in the lives of African Americans. Summarizing the collective findings of those scholars, Parham and Austin stated:

The lives of African people in America have been characterized by experiences with racism and discrimination. In the context of that social oppression, African Americans are believed to adapt by psychologically constructing for themselves a set of assumptions and beliefs about: who they are, how they feel about themselves, other African people, White people, and people from other cultural groups; what opportunities are available for them in life; and what strategies must be employed to meet their needs individually and collectively. (p. 140)

Parham and Austin concluded, "Career development theories, perceptions of opportunities, value orientations, and workforce diversity issues are all influenced by the environmental context (either oppressive or supportive experiences) in which one's identity is shaped" (p. 152). In sum, culture and identity play an essential role in career development and they help African American men cope with the very real presence of repressive structures.

The conclusion that personal identity and cultural identity influence the career development of African American professional men is not just reflected in the career psychology, perceptions and behaviors of the participants. The actions and behaviors of others also led to this conclusion. The stereotyping of African American men and then using those stereotypes as the basis for career decisions, the organizing of social networks along racially homogenous groups and then exchanging social capital that advantages career development within those groups are examples of the pervasive repressive

structures African American men encounter in corporate America. The participants' stories depict these experiences and the value personal identity and racial identity played in enabling them to navigate past the repressive structures to achieve positive career development (Parks-Yancy, 2002, 2006; Taylor, 2004). Taylor conducted a case study with four African American professional men who were senior leaders in their respective organizations. He sought to find out the individual and organizational factors that led to the men's ascension to chief executive ranks and the cultural tradeoffs they sacrificed on their climb up the career ladder. His findings indicate the salience of individual and cultural identity, particularly in the early career experiences of his participants. The men in his study, similar to participants in this present study, found that family history, socioeconomic background, religion/spirituality, multi-racial support networks, and suspicion of prejudice were some of the cultural factors that influenced their ascension. Likewise, misalignment between individual identity and corporate culture was cited as a tradeoff they sacrificed as they advanced in their careers.

Alfred (2001) conducted a study of the career development of five Black tenured female faculty at a predominantly White research university. The experiences of those women professionals parallel some of the experiences mentioned by the participants in this study. For example, negative stereotypes, loneliness, and isolation were common experiences. Alfred found, "These women experience problems when their values and ethnic group cultural orientation are not recognized as significant and when they are forced to deny their own culture and adopt the majority culture" (p. 110). The women, like the participants in this study, were able to achieve professional success by creating positive images of self-definition and rejecting stereotypical images of themselves and

finding safe spaces that affirmed their identities. Alfred (2001) held that race, identity, and culture intersect to form a basis for understanding the career development of African Americans. She concluded that culture and identity play a vital role in the career development of African Americans working in predominantly White cultures. She asserted that studies of career development should take into account personal and group identities on the developing career. For African Americans, their group identity is shaped by the unique history of slavery and by the experiences of racial segregation and widespread discrimination. This leads many African Americans to adopt values of community and common purpose over the Eurocentric values of individualism and competitiveness, which has ramifications for African Americans' behaviors at work.

Cheatham (1990) also examined cultural influence on career development. He acknowledged that African Americans, to varying degrees, have Africentric values that influence their career development in ways not accommodated wholly by Eurocentric-based career development models. He advocated the inclusion of Africentric values and perspectives in career development theories because African Americans' career choices and behaviors are culturally based. The heuristic model Cheatham proposed shifted away from the universal or etic perspective of career development that strove to apply universally to all cultures toward the emic or culture-specific perspective model that incorporated the values and "truths" of both cultures – Africentric and Eurocentric. While some progress has been made, there are still few career development models that link both culture orientations. Alfred (2001) held, "It has been established that the missing links in these grand theories are the voices and career developmental experiences of those who are non-White males" (p. 123).



**Conclusion two: Gendered racism constrains the career development of African American professional men in ways not experienced by White men or African American women.**

The four repressive structures provide evidence of the effects of gendered racism on the career development of African American professional men. It is these differences in career development that contribute to the scant literature available on the career development of African American professional men (Collins, 1989, 1993, 1997; McElroy & Andrews, 2000; Goodly, 2007; Humphrey, 2007; Moss & Tilly, 1996, 2001; Parks-Yancy, 2002, 2006; Taylor, 2004). Participants were aware of the stereotypes associated with African American men and they admitted their frustration with having to exert energy to constantly dispel those stereotypes because of the impact the stereotypes have on career development. Moss and Tilly (1996, 2001) found African American men suffered most from employers' perceptions of their soft skills compared to Whites and African American women. In turn, these perceptions based largely on employers' stereotypes of African American men, negatively impacted hiring and promotions of African American men.

Discrimination against African American men in career development is not new. The Harvard Law Review (1991) found that Black men, like Black women experience discrimination that is peculiar to their history and social position. However, unlike Black women, many employers refuse to extend to Black men the same equal employment opportunities they extend to Black women. Moreover, the law does not extend the same protections for race and gender discrimination to Black men that they provide to Black women. That same article points out that while White men are incumbents in upper and

mid-level White-collar fields, African American men are the least represented overall compared to Whites and African American women. Employer discrimination against African American men was cited as a factor contributing to the finding. The writers found that workplace tensions and discriminatory practices are grounded in cultural differences. They stated:

There are several possible ways to explain the discrimination against black men. Differences in cultural styles often lead employers to conclude that black men have attitudes and personal characteristics that conflict with a predominantly white social atmosphere. Many black men – although certainly not all – are more verbally direct, expressive, and assertive than white men, who provide the standard against which black male behavior is measured. (pp. 756-757)

Another way in which African American men experience gendered racism in their career development is through subjective and disparate career development practices. Participants stated their White male counterparts are benefactors of subjective and covert career development practices. For example, the criteria for job assignments and promotions were often vague or unknown. The result however was that White males tended to receive strategic assignments and were promoted ahead of the participants based on relationships or some other unmerited privilege. Comparatively, participants stated they were met with increased scrutiny and a glass ceiling that left them in positions longer than their White male counterparts. Collins (1997) also found disparate career development practices in her study of the effects of race on the career mobility of African American men in corporate America. Like several of the men in the present study, the men in Collins' study were first-generation corporate executives. She found that African

American men experienced disparate career patterns distinct from their White counterparts. In her study, African American men were diverted to racialized roles that severely impacted their career trajectories into key decision making executive roles. Comparatively, their White counterparts advanced through operational roles central to the company's profitability. While in the present study participants enjoyed diverse occupations which did not meet Collins' definition of racialized roles, they did find themselves cut off from certain job assignments and experiences given to their White male counterparts. Over time, this disparate career development practice limits their exposure and skill development and can have negative consequences for African American men's career development.

James (2000) and Parks-Yancy's (2002, 2006) studies support participants' perceptions and experiences of a differentiated opportunity structure for acquisition of socio-political capital and resulting benefit to their White counterparts. James held,

It is reasonable to conclude that blacks are closed out (intentionally or not) of opportunities to develop useful network ties. In short, the data suggest that blacks in this sample were treated differently than whites, and this differentiated treatment adversely affected important work-related experiences and outcomes.

(pp. 503-504)

Participants in this study discussed their perceptions of structural White privilege because of their counterparts' early exposure to corporate America through their fathers or other family members and because of their strong social ties (i.e., good-old-boy network). Conversely, most of the participants in this study stated they had no exposure to corporate America before their arrival. They stated they learned corporate culture and

politics through trial and error. James found that African Americans tend to have less social capital than Whites and this correlates positively to the receipt of psychosocial support they received; thus, weaker social ties, less psychosocial support. Parks-Yancy also found one of the consequences of limited exposure is weaker and fewer social ties, which affects African Americans' access to job information, influence, and opportunity. The result is that African Americans tend to learn about career opportunities through formal and less influential resources (e.g., job postings) while their White counterparts used their social networks (family, friends and acquaintances) to acquire jobs and promotions. African Americans are also likely to be excluded from White social networks where capital pertinent to career development is exchanged.

Most remarkable from Parks-Yancy (2006) study is that "Black men are disadvantaged with regard to getting promoted at all, and it appears that promotions are even less likely for Black men when they use social connections for employment" (p. 538). This finding is at the heart of gendered racism because it reveals that even when African American men use personal ties, they still fall behind White men, White women, and African American women in career development. Parks-Yancy concluded race and gender do impact career development and African American men appear to be most vulnerable. She stated,

If whites are more likely to be promoted than black women and black men are less likely, whites are likely to have more socially and financially rewarding careers than black women, and black men seem to be the least advantaged. (p. 538)

Lastly, the effects of gendered racism or Black male disadvantage are reflected in the changing priorities in workplace diversity. Several participants voiced a great deal of frustration over their companies' lack of commitment to diversity efforts. Generally, all participants stated their companies lacked any meaningful strategy to attract, develop or retain African American men. Instead, African American men exhort that they are on the losing side of a zero sum game where the increased diversity in the workplace has a direct correlation to their diminished value to employers. This was a concern over a decade ago when the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) found that African American men executives predicted they would receive less consideration for jobs as the workplace became more diverse. Some of the decrease in hiring of African American men is expected and normal when the pool of available candidates is expanded to reflect more diverse, qualified employees. However, the apprehension is in the sociohistorical tensions that exist between White men (the predominant hiring managers) and African American men. The perception held by participants is that with a wider pool of diverse candidates White managers, who already hold stereotypes against African American men, can avoid hiring or promoting African American men and still meet the company's diversity objectives without confronting and being accountable for their inherent prejudices against African American men. Notwithstanding qualifications, participants believed that White males prefer to hire other White males because they are more comfortable with them. However, when hiring diverse candidates, participants perceive White males prefer women over African American men because women represent a diminished threat to White men's power. African American women or other women of color represent even lesser threat because they are twice removed due to their gender and

race. Moss and Tilly's (1996, 2001) and Parks-Yancy's (2002, 2006) studies support the participants' contentions.

**Conclusion three: African American professional men's careers develop through internal and external organizational resources and through formal and informal learning.**

Participants participated in company-sponsored career development programs, such as African American affinity groups, mentoring, leadership development, and tuition reimbursement for graduate studies. Likewise they involved themselves in external organizations such as church, professional, and fraternal organizations. These internal and external resources enabled participants to develop valuable networks and skills that benefitted their career development. James (2000) and Parks-Yancy (2002, 2006) depart in their conclusions on the value of human capital investments on career development. James found that an investment in human capital does not appear to be a meaningful determinant in the career mobility of African Americans – at least to the extent that it is for Whites. She concluded that race mediates the effects that would normally be gained from human capital investments. Parks-Yancy (2002) found that human capital does pay off for Blacks in terms of career outcomes and offsets to some degree the absence of social capital or family background. Alfred (2000) found that having visibility in one's professional community provided opportunities for career advancement. The visibility was gained through participation in internal and external organizations deemed important to the professional community.

Participants invested in their education and continuous learning through formal and informal programs. Ten of the fourteen participants held advanced degrees and most

all participants mentioned their involvement in certification programs, company-sponsored leadership development programs, mentoring, or self-directed learning. The accessibility of corporate learning programs is something that needed greater attention in this study because who gets selected to attend company-sponsored training or leadership development programs can create disparate career development opportunities and outcomes. Gordon stated that individuals in human resources went behind curtains and selected who was to attend which programs. Humphrey (2007) studied the role of learning in the career development of African American male principals. He concluded that formal and informal learning helps shape their career development. Specifically, all participants experienced formal learning by earning the foundational credentials requisite for their careers as African American educators and principals. However, even after attaining their degrees, the principals continued to engage in informal learning experiences through workshops and seminars. Like the principals in Humphrey's study, the participants in this present study placed a premium on learning beyond academic preparation. Work experiences served as the method of active experimentation and continuous learning. For example, David talked about the importance of career experiences as a method of continuously learning and developing his career. In my interview with Steve, he stated he was foremost a continuous learner. In addition to achieving his doctorate, he learns through reading and trying new things. He attributed his career success to his bias for action and differentiating himself by making value-add contributions to the company. How that bias relates to learning is that Steve stated he has introduced several human resources practices to his company over his tenure (e.g., succession management, executive assessment center, and competency development).

Jerome stated he approaches any new role as a learning experience. He said that in his first year, he is learning and trying new things; by the second year, he starts to see results; and then by the third year, he is preparing for his next role. Jerome also gave the poignant example of learning from failure. He stated that his subsequent success in sales management would not have been possible had he not learned from his earlier experiences as a struggling salesperson. As a sales manager, he used what he learned to develop a sales methodology that led to his team's success.

Participants also shared that some of their greatest learnings came from observing role models and from informal conversations and sharing of information within social networks. Martin discussed the afterhours meeting he participated in with a group of other senior and junior-level executives where they shared information on strategies and tactics to navigate within their corporate cultures, advice about engaging with certain senior executives, and other information pertinent to their careers. Humphrey (2007) found, "Being able to make a link between learning and career development adds to the literature base for both career development and adult learning" (p. 118).

Fenwick (2000) posited that "meaningful work and learning are inseparable" (p. 295). She offered three alternatives to workplace learning that support how participants learned over their careers. These alternatives depart from the performance-based models often shaping formal and company-sponsored human resource development programs. First, an individual's attempt to understand and express self is intertwined with their impulse to learn and develop. Through this relationship, learning is woven into an individual's attempt to "name, appreciate, and recover the power of their 'authentic self'" (p. 299). For participants, this learning was revealed through their stories of learning to



achieve career success while remaining true to their values and who they are as Black men. Several of the participants learned over time and in concert with their Black male identity and stages of nigrescence, how and when to confront racism tactfully. Fenwick studied women's workplace learning and found that the women "talked of learning to trust their inner voice of this self, of breaking free of workplace structures that repressed this self, and above all learning how to compose a coherent, strong self amidst the chaotic environment of workplaces" (p. 299). She concluded that people long for the integration of self and meaning into their work.

A second framework for learning in the workplace is situated learning and development. Situated learning maintains that individuals learn in the situation in which a person participates. Therefore, using Jerome's example, situated cognition would restate that Jerome learned not from his experience, but in his experience. This active learning while doing is a central component of situated learning and development. Thus, Steve's statement that he learned as he was introducing new programs to his human resources organization is an example of learning in the moment and in the context that had meaning to Steve and the organization. Ensuring African American professional men have equitable access to job experiences and challenging assignments will enhance their opportunities for learning and skill development. A third framework for learning in the workplace involves critical analysis of cultural politics. Learning to critically examine issues of power provides clarity to identity struggles and patterns of dominance and resistance. Fenwick, in citing several scholars, posited that "when we learn to name the mechanisms of cultural power we can find ways to resist them" (p. 303). Participants in this study displayed varying skill at critical analysis of corporate culture. Mike's response

to corporate dress requirements that “corporate America is corporate America” is but one example of an absence of criticality as to what gets defined as normal and acceptable and by whom. Participants also displayed varying awareness of the hegemony of corporate America. Through their ongoing decisions and strategies used to negotiate the racism impacting their career development, these men are learning to critically evaluate issues of power and dominance.

**Conclusion four: African American professional men learn to employ a range of strategies to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development.**

Participants in this study used a range of strategies to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. These strategies or practices were listed as the five facilitative structures that enabled their career success. I have discussed education and continuous learning in the previous section. The other four facilitative structures include: ability to build and leverage key relationships, bicultural strategies, self-efficacy and personal agency, and spirituality and purpose. Each of these is discussed briefly to exemplify the various strategies African American men employ.

**Key relationships.** First, participants shared how the influence of family members impacted their career development. Parents were often cited as the ones who taught participants the importance of education, their values, work ethic, spiritual foundation, and self-esteem. Goodly (2007) identified family as one of the five deep structures that influenced the lives and career mobility of the 15 African American professional men in his study. He defined deep structures as broad, dominant schemas and resources accessible to his participants. Of family, he stated, “Their family members served as role models and provided positive images that served to develop and shape these men’s

values” (p. 203). Humphrey (2007) also found that encouragement from family and friends was a personal factor influencing the career development of African American male principals. The early influence of family provided a foundation for participants that remained with them throughout their careers (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). Second, mentors and organizational sponsors were other key relationships found to facilitate the positive career development of the participants (Palmer, 2005; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Thomas, 2003). The benefits of mentoring can lead to greater psychosocial support, professional identity, faster promotion rates, and a higher degree of career satisfaction. Palmer and Johnson-Bailey (2008) found that race does play a role in the mentoring relationships between mentor and protégé. In their study, there were no instances where African American men and White men were engaged in a mentoring relationship with one another. This may be reflective of the longstanding tensions between White men and African American men. What Palmer and Johnson-Bailey found is that White males tend to be more effective mentors in terms of career advancement, not so much because of capability but because of their access to power and influence in the organization. African Americans tend to have less referent power due to their limited access to corporate elites. However, cross-race mentoring relationships have mixed findings (Phelps & Constantine, 2001). The majority of the participants in this study thought that having a Black male mentor was more advantageous to their career development. Few participants acknowledged having a sponsor. A sponsor provides instrumental career support such as advocacy for promotions, performance feedback, coaching, protection, and challenging work assignments. Thomas and Gabarro (1999) assert that in companies where minority advancement is supported, managers are more

likely to act as sponsors of minorities or to take personal responsibility for the diversity climate in their organizations. Henry and Jerome lead their company's African American affinity groups' mentoring programs. They and other participants have become active agents in their respective organizations to work at ensuring access to career development for other minorities. Having a Black role model was a third type of relationship participants identified as being integral to their career development. In most cases, participants were introduced to role models at an early age and those models shaped their adult lives. Role models consisted of family members, teachers, community leaders, and other colleagues within the participants' professional networks. Goodly (2007) found that positive role models tended to provide his participants with images and values the men could emulate.

***Bicultural strategies.*** A second facilitative structure is bicultural strategies. Participants learned how to navigate between two cultures – their Black culture and the predominantly White culture of corporate America (Alfred, 2001; Barrett, 2000; Bell, 1990). Participants found safe spaces and cultural affirmations through an underground Black network where information was exchanged, through African American affinity groups where formal career development resources could be accessed in a supportive environment with other African Americans, through their churches that served as respites and places of inspiration and affirmation, and through predominantly Black professional and fraternal affiliations where their needs for continuous learning and social networking were met. Much like the career-oriented women in Bell's (1990) study, the participants' private spheres were embedded in the Black community. Participants' career successes hinged on their abilities to adapt to the different cultural contexts of their lives (Alfred,

2001; Barrett, 2000; Bell, 1990). Though Mitchell stated his desire to be able move from one environment to the next without adjusting who he is and most of the participants emphasized the importance of staying true to who they are and their cultural values, participants also realized that the cultural values and politics of corporate America are distinct from many of the cultural values of the Black community. Their ability to navigate their bicultural worlds was a competence that served them well in their career development.

*Self-efficacy and personal agency.* Embedded in the narratives of the 14 participants were an underlying belief in self and an orientation toward action. Self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals are considered the three building blocks to career development (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Chen, 2003, 2006; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). Self-efficacy is defined as a person's beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute action to attain their expected outcomes. The participants in this study set high goals for themselves and enacted their personal agency to achieve those goals. Through their stories, I characterized participants as having the following personal qualities that aided their agentic functioning: ambitious, competitive, strategic, and adaptable/resilient. Martin started as an entry level employee and has progressed to a vice president of human resources for U.S. operations. Gordon and Steve achieved their doctorate degrees while working full-time, ascending in their careers, serving roles as husbands and fathers, and active leaders in their churches and communities. Dallas was valedictorian of his high school class and was the first African American vice president at his predominantly White university's student government. Hank was the first African American graduate from a historically Black university to be

accepted into an elite naval nuclear engineering program. Mike is the youngest and only African American regional vice president of sales at his company. Henry has strategically orchestrated his career advancement by successfully implementing effective exit strategies when he felt he had reached the glass ceiling. The biographies of the participants read like a “Who’s Who” list. What is even more remarkable is that most of these men grew up in homes of meager means, some in two-parent households and others in single-parent headed homes. Some grew up around negative influences, such as gangs and drugs. Yet, they leveraged their self-efficacy and agency and the other facilitative structures mentioned in this study to achieve successful careers. The premise of Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (2002) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is that people are “active agents in, or shapers of, their career development” (p. 255). Those authors found,

People help construct their own career outcomes; that their beliefs (for example, about themselves, their environments, and possible career paths) play key roles in this process; that we are not merely beneficiaries (or victims) of intrapsychic, temperamental, or situational forces; and that behavior is often flexible and susceptible to change efforts. (p. 255)

The authors note that career development is not just a volitional endeavor, but that there are internal and external barriers to choice, change, and growth. This theory moves positively along the continuum of career development theories that account for cultural influences on career development. Goodly (2007) posited that self-efficacy contributes to the development and maintenance of the agency and structural factors identified in his study. He resolved that “self-efficacy beliefs are collectively the ‘engine’ that propels the upward mobility vehicle of African American men” (pp. 254-255).

***Spirituality and purpose.*** Participants equated career satisfaction with extrinsic rewards of career mobility and financial/material “comfort” and with intrinsic rewards of remaining true to their authentic selves, developing others, leaving a legacy, paving the way for the next generation, and giving back to the community. In essence, participants’ definitions of career success were grounded in their cultural values – values reflected in Africentricism. Tolliver and Tisdale (2002) found that spirituality is about making meaning of one’s life, of the interconnectedness of experiences, and authenticity. Though religion and spirituality are not the same, they are often interrelated. Participants spoke about gaining their spirituality from their faith and affiliation with church (Goodly, 2007).

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has practical implications for African American professional men, corporations and managers of African American professional men, and human resource development practitioners. First, this study offers insight into the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. Thus, current and future African American professional men will gain a better understanding by reading this study of the factors that may influence their career development in corporate systems and the competence and strategies that might be useful for them to employ as they navigate their careers in corporate America. For those African American professional men who work in corporate America without exercising a critical cultural awareness of corporate hegemony and inequity, I hope this study brings about an emancipatory consciousness that leads these men and others to examine critically systems of inequity. Then, and only then, will we have hope of resisting them and bringing about

corporate entities where humanistic values are embraced. So little research is available on African American professional men; and that which exists does not delve into the core issue that shapes the career experiences of African American men – gendered racism. This study provides readers with the emic perspectives of African American professional men ranging in age from 35 to 55 years old and representing a variety of industries, professions, and corporate sizes. This study may also be helpful to African American men working in other contexts and to other professional men of color who want to gain a better understanding of the role of identity and culture in career development. The implications extend beyond the workplace. If African American men are thriving in their careers, that has positive consequences for their economic, physical, and mental/emotional health and the health and welfare of their families and the African American community.

Second, the findings of this study revealed information helpful to managers of African American professional men who often serve in the role of coach, counselor or mentor to these men. From this study, managers will learn the unique social position which African American men occupy in this country and the systemic, gendered racism they face daily. Managers can engage in self-reflection regarding their own perceptions, assumptions and underlying biases that impact their interactions with African American men and the decisions they make that affect African American men's careers. In particular, White male managers should examine the intentional and unintentional consequences of their actions on African American men's careers. The relationship between African American men and White men has a storied history marked by contempt and unhealthy competition that is still present in many of their relationships today.



This study identifies specific areas that constrain the career development of African American professional men and what strategies managers may be able to take or suggest to African American men who are experiencing difficulty navigating their careers in corporate America. The hope is that by reading this study, managers will become more conscious of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that exist in the social rules and practices within corporate America; that they will adopt anti-racist practices and contribute to changes that will mitigate oppression wherever it exists. Those managers in senior executive positions, most of whom are White males, must confront the role they play in shaping or allowing racism and disparate treatment to exist throughout the corporate ranks.

Third, there are implications for human resource development practitioners who are often in roles accountable for the design and implementation of career development, learning and development, and organization development strategies. As a human resource development practitioner, I believe those of us practicing ethically have an inescapable responsibility to expose inequities in corporate practices. An examination of corporate culture and coaching and training for managers on leading and managing in a diverse and culturally inclusive workplace may be the first need to address. The findings from this study tell us much about how we should approach career development in a multicultural workforce. The study confirms that without intervention corporate America is not an inherently inclusive environment. Rather, the structural ideologies and practices promulgate White male privilege and cultural assimilation. Trying to apply the traditional career development theories universally across all audiences is not only outdated, it is insensitive. This study screams loud the need for culturally relevant career development –

career development that takes into account unique social positions and cultural values of African American professional men and other women and minorities.

Practitioners will gain a better understanding of the repressive structures (constraints) on African American professional men's careers in corporate America and the facilitative structures (enablers) of African American men's careers. The findings suggest there is much work to do in examining current career development practices to ensure they are objective and transparent and that managers have accountability for implementing them equitably and ethically. Drake-Clark (2009) found that "because White privilege operates invisibly, human resources practitioners need to examine programs for evidence of hidden bias and to ensure that the programs are not operating in ways that maintain the status quo" (p. 135). This includes: performance and succession management, eligibility criteria for high potential development and leadership development programs, job assignments, and hiring and promotion practices. Mentoring relationships and strong networks have been shown to have positive effects on the career development of African American professional men. Such relationships can ameliorate the alienation and isolation experienced by African American professional men. Courses and/or mentors that enable African American professional men to learn how to build key relationships and leverage socio-political capital would be useful. Helping to facilitate formal and informal mentoring and organizing same member affinity groups can create safe spaces where African American professional men (or any other group) can express their racial and/or cultural identity freely.

The findings and conclusions of this study hold implications for corporate diversity programs. The need for education that speaks to the real issues facing women

and minorities in corporate America must be deployed. Corporate diversity programs have been largely ineffective and diversity as a research topic has been routinely ignored by HRD scholars and practitioners (Bierema, in press). Bierema (in press) also held that diversity programs “rarely challenge or change the status quo” (p. 4). She stated:

A comprehensive review of 31 years of data from 830 mid-size to large U.S. workplaces found that the kind of diversity training exercises offered at most firms precipitated a 7.5 percent drop in the number of women in management. The number of black, female managers fell by 10 percent, and the number of black men in top positions fell by 12 percent. Similar effects were seen for Latinos and Asians. (p.4)

The need for more critical human resource development in corporate systems is evident from this study. Corporations are political systems where the distribution of power and capital are constantly being negotiated. Human resource developers must be critically conscious of the overt and covert ways in which power and assets are extended to some and withheld from others based on race, gender, position and other social demarcations. A part of their ethical practice is to make visible the structural inequities and advocate for change.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There is still a dearth of research available on the career development of African American professional men. This study confirms what other researchers have stated – the career development of African American men and African American women are different and each deserves special attention (Bingham & Ward, 2001). Thus, this study adds to the literature by examining the impact of racism on the career development of African

American professional men in corporate America. More studies of this kind are recommended. This study was conducted in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. I recommend this study be conducted in other geographic regions of the country. By doing so, information on the salience of race and cultural identity outside of a city with a significant population of African Americans and outside a historically southern state where racism is very much intertwined in its history might yield new insights.

Second, I recommend further investigation into African American men's experiences with gendered racism. Mutua (2006) found that "black men, like black women, had unique experiences of gendered racism" (p. xvi). The study provides vivid illustrations of structural barriers that serve to constrain the career development of African American professional men for no other plausible reason than the fact that they are Black men. Still, these findings are met with some skepticism by those who believe by virtue of his male gender Black men do not experience subordination by both race and gender. While this study looked at career development broadly, future research may begin to probe in ways more specific to African American men's career experiences. For example, what is the impact of gendered racism on African American professional men's leadership or on the relationship between White men and African American men, or between African American men and African American women in corporate America?

Third, I recommend more critical research on the repressive structures identified in this study. Unless the spotlight is kept on these well-entrenched practices, they will continue to disenfranchise African American men and perhaps women and other professionals of color without any deliberate assault.

Fourth, I recommend further research into the generational differences. In this study, I noticed slight differences in perspectives between the younger participants than those in their fifties. However, because the numbers were so small, it was hard to gauge whether there was a shift in racial salience and cultural identity from one generation to the other. I think it would be worthwhile to know because it could have new implications for the development of culturally relevant career development theories based on generational identity and values. To that end, HRD's lack of scholarship on diversity must be addressed. Corporate America is multicultural and that trend is only increasing. If human resource development scholars and practitioners are to be relevant, they must face their responsibility of enabling managers and employees of both genders and all ethnicities to deal with the most significant change impacting corporate America today – the diversity of today's workforce.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reflects the culmination of years of study, months of data gathering and analysis, and a lifetime of learnings. My aim in this study was to add to the meager research available on the experiences of African American professional men in corporate America and the impact of racism on their career development. I was most interested in making visible those repressive structures that serve to constrain the career development of African American professional men in ways unknown to women and other minorities. I wanted to highlight successful African American men in corporate America who in dealing with the repressive structures enacted facilitative structures to negotiate the impact of racism on their career development. I wanted to indict corporate America and challenge managers, fellow human resource development practitioners, and African

Americans themselves to examine their roles in reinforcing the status quo. A critical study is by definition “critical” because it shines the light on systemic oppression, openly discusses the isms that tend to be ignored or denied, brings out emancipatory consciousness to both the oppressor and the oppressed, and advocates for change and more equitable systems. With that in mind, I am both satisfied and restless with the outcome of this study. I am satisfied that I pursued and delivered research that informs, enlightens, and challenges us all to face the ugliness of racism. These men have been largely invisible and their experiences ignored in corporate America either because it was assumed they benefitted routinely from gender privilege or because as the workplace has become more diverse, Black men have become less important in the diversity equation. Either case is abhorrent. This study challenges us to examine our ignorance and or our complicity in maintaining the stronghold of racism and systemic inequities.

The challenge to self-examine, continue the discourse, and bring about structural change is at the core of the restlessness I feel at the close of this study. In highlighting the recommendations and implications for practical application and future research, I recognize my journey along this path has not ended, my voice must not disappear with the granting of the degree, and my work as a human resource development practitioner must become even more critical in bringing about more equitable systems and culturally relevant career development practices.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Participant Solicitation Letter

##### **An Invitation to Participate in an Important Study:**

*“A Critical Examination of the Effects of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America”*

594 Wind Rush Ct.  
Stone Mountain, GA 30087  
770.879.4697  
tcornileus@aol.com  
date

Dear Prospective Research Participant:

I am a doctoral candidate in Adult Education at the University of Georgia. Under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, I am embarking on research for my dissertation this spring. I invite you to participate in a study entitled “A Critical Examination of the Effects of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America.” The purpose of this study is to understand how racism has shaped the career development of African American professional men and the individual and organizational factors that help facilitate their career development. Specifically, in this study, I will be examining your career development experiences, the impact you believe your race and gender as a Black man in corporate America has had on your career development, individual and or systemic racism you have encountered in your career development, and the strategies that you and or your organization have employed to help you in your career development.

Participants must be African American professional men actively employed in a for-profit corporation comprised of 500 or more employees. Participants must have a minimum of 10 years professional experience, one of which must be with the participant’s present company. Participants must also be in a position of mid-management or higher as determined by his company, be between the ages of 35 and 65, and hold at least a bachelor’s degree.

Your participation will involve participating in either one to two confidential individual, in-person interviews or one focus group interview with six to eight other participants; or *both* individual, in-person interviews *and* a focus group interview. You elect your level of participation. Each interview is expected to last approximately 1-2 hours. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. Every attempt will be made to keep your identity protected by the researcher’s use of pseudonyms. The results of the

research study may be published, but no other individually-identifiable information about you or provided by you during the course of the research will be shared. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

The findings from this project will provide information on challenges African American professional men may face in the workplace and strategies they may employ to ensure more positive and successful career development. Risks associated with participating in this research are minimal. If adverse comments are attributed to the participant, the participant could experience a negative impact to relationships, promotion opportunities, and self-esteem. These risks will be held to an absolute minimum through the use of pseudonyms and the researcher's commitment to confidentiality.

If you have any questions about this research project, or would like to participate, please call me at 770-879-4697 or send an email to [tcornileus@aol.com](mailto:tcornileus@aol.com) no later than Month day, 2009. You may also contact my major professor, Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, at 706-542-4015 or send an email to [tguy@uga.edu](mailto:tguy@uga.edu).

Thank you for your consideration! I hope you will help contribute to this important study. Please feel free to photocopy this letter and pass on to other potential participants.

Sincerely,

Tonya Cornileus  
Doctoral candidate  
University of Georgia

## Appendix B

### Participant Confirmation Letter

594 Wind Rush Ct.  
Stone Mountain, GA 30087  
770.879.4697  
tcornileus@aol.com  
date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

This letter confirms our telephone conversation. Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research study that I am conducting. Please take time to review the attached Consent Form and do not hesitate to contact me with any questions. The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America. The University of Georgia Graduate School and the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy have approved this research project. It is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, Associate Professor of Adult Education. As we discussed, our interview is confirmed for:  
[Date, Time, Location]

Please reserve two hours for this interview and have a copy of your resume and the attached Demographic Questionnaire completed and available. I am also interested in reviewing company and personal career-related documents to the extent that they are available for sharing and you are comfortable sharing. Documents such as company demographics, diversity strategies, career development programs, promotion statistics, your performance evaluations, professional training records, emails, memos, work journal entries, etc. will provide a greater understanding of the context and your career development experiences. Please bring with you to the interview copies of any such documents as those listed or others you deem relevant to the study. Interviews will be tape recorded for later retrieval and analysis.

The results of your participation in the study will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without your consent, unless otherwise required by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the presentation and analysis of all findings to ensure your confidentiality.

Thank you once again for agreeing to participate in this important study. If you have any questions, please contact me at 770-879-4697 or by email at tcornileus@aol.com. I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Tonya Cornileus  
Doctoral candidate  
University of Georgia

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study titled “A *Critical Examination of the Effects of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America*” conducted by Tonya Cornileus, a doctoral candidate from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy, Adult Education program at the University of Georgia (770.879.4697) under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, Associate Professor of Adult Education, University of Georgia (706-542-4015). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to understand how African American professional men negotiate the effects of racism on their career development. In particular, this study is interested in knowing how racism has shaped the career development of African American professional men in corporate America and the individual and organizational factors that facilitate their career development. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Answer questions about my career, how my career has developed over my career span, mobility and satisfaction and the organizational contexts within which I have worked, which will take approximately one to two hours
- 2) Provide documents to the degree that I am comfortable that will corroborate and or clarify my responses to questions
- 3) Review and confirm the accuracy of my responses, which can take approximately one hour
- 4) Agree to a follow up interview, if necessary, to answer questions or clarify statements from the first interview, which may take approximately one hour
- 5) Commit to a total of no more than six hours to answer questions and confirm responses

I agree to participate in the study in the following manner:

\_\_\_\_\_ individual, in-person interview(s)

\_\_\_\_\_ focus group interviews (along with six to eight other participants)

\_\_\_\_\_ both individual, in-person interview(s) and a focus group interview (along with six to eight other participants)

I understand that all interviews will be audio recorded and the interviewer will take notes for later retrieval and analysis.

The benefits for me are that I may surface those factors that serve as facilitators and/or challenges to my career development, mobility, and career satisfaction, and that through my heightened awareness, I may affirm or develop strategies that enable me to achieve the success I desire in my career development. The researcher also hopes to learn more about the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men given their unique social position as Black males in this society, what that may mean for other subgroups and the implications this study holds for organizational strategies and human resource development practices (i.e., diversity, career development).

No risk is expected but I may experience some negative consequences if my comments become known to affected parties. Possible results could be a negative impact to relationships, promotion opportunities, and self-esteem, among other effects. These risks will be held to an absolute minimum by the researcher's use of pseudonyms in an attempt to protect my identity and the identity of my company. The researcher promises to maintain confidentiality and in the condition of the focus group interviews, all focus group participants will be asked to sign confidentiality statements. I understand pseudonyms for participants and

the organizations will be used to enhance the confidentiality of the participants and the organizations/companies. Documents will be copied or scanned and the original returned to me. I understand individually identifiable and organizationally identifiable information from collected documents will be removed, replaced with pseudonyms, or blacked out to enhance the confidentiality of the participants and the organizations/companies. No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, except if it is necessary to protect my welfare or if required by law. Individual, in-person interviews will be conducted in a setting of my choosing. Focus group interviews will be conducted in a location determined by the researcher that is mutually convenient to the majority of participants. I will be notified in advance of the location where the focus group interview will be conducted.

All transcripts, notes, audio recordings and other data pertaining to my participation in this study will be kept securely under lock and key. The researcher may allow me to review a summary of my interview for clarity and accuracy. All recordings will be destroyed within 30 days after final approval of dissertation.

This study will be shared with the researcher's major professor, Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, so as to get his guidance on conducting a successful research project.

I understand I will not be paid for any of the activities asked of me as a participant in this study.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be contacted at 770.879.4697 (home) or 404.664.1418 (cell). I may also contact the researcher's major professor, Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, at 706.542.4015.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Tonya Cornileus

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher  
594 Wind Rush Ct.  
Stone Mountain, GA 30087  
Telephone: 770-879-4697  
Email: Tcornileus@aol.com

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Make two copies. Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

## Appendix D

### Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Name:		
Preferred pseudonym:		
Age:		
Race/ethnic background:		
Education: (list all degrees earned)	Degree:	Major (area of concentration):
# of years of professional experience		
# of years at present company		
Current position: (title)		
# of years in current position		
Industry:		
# of employees in the company:		
# of years reporting to your current supervisor:		
Currently supervising others?	(Yes/No)	How many direct reports?
# of years of supervisory experience: (If applicable)		



1. How do African American professional men describe their career development?
  - a. How did you come to choose (professional area) as your career? (interests, skills, personality, environment, etc)
  - b. Please describe how your career has evolved over your career span? (promotions, types of roles)
  - c. What factors have influenced your career development? (self, key people, organization)
  - d. How would you describe your sense of career satisfaction over your career span?
  - e. What challenges have you encountered in your career development?
  - f. What do you enjoy about your current position? About your career overall?

- g. I should be \_\_\_\_\_ (position, level, etc.) at this point in my career, however, ... (How do you feel about where you are right now in your career)

### **Research Question #2**

2. How has racism shaped the career development of African American professional men?
  - a. How has your position as a Black man in corporate America impacted your career? (Examples; how do you know it was because you were Black and male? which has more salience – being Black or being male?)
  - b. Are there specific times at work that caused you to remember that you are a Black man in corporate America? (what were they; specific incidents)
  - c. How has your career development compared with your White peers? (what is similar? What is different?)
  - d. In what way are your experiences shared by (or are common to) other African American professional men that you know?
  - e. How open or supportive is your organization in promoting the career development of African American men? (Examples; how do you know?)
  - f. Suppose I had access to your company's career development and mobility statistics, what would I notice? (different racial/ethnic groups, gender; written versus unwritten)

### **Research Question #3**

3. What strategies do African American professional men employ to overcome racism in their career development?
  - a. How have you been able to manage the challenges you've faced in your career?
  - b. How have you negotiated (lessened) the impact of racism and discrimination (what systems are you fighting? What is the role of personal agency?)
  - c. If you had to do some things over, what might those be?
  - d. What advice would you give to other African American professional men to help them achieve success in their career development and outcomes?

### **Research Question #4**

4. What organizational factors facilitate the career development of African American professional men?
  - a. Describe your current organization's career development programs and practices? (how effective are they? What has been your involvement?)
  - b. Of all the companies you've worked in, what stands out as most helpful to you in your career development?
  - c. If you could, how would you construct a career development program that would be relevant to you? (Is this different from other racial/ethnic or gender groups? How? And why?)
  - d. Mentoring? Networking?
  - e. Any external organizations that contribute to your career development? (fraternities, church, community organizations, etc.)

**Closing:**

5. What else would you like to add to help me understand better your career development?
6. What question should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

## Appendix F

### Focus Group Interview Guide

*A Critical Examination of the Effects of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America”*

Names of Participants: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Interview: Start: \_\_\_\_\_ End: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

### Review and collect:

Signed consent form (1 copy for participant; one copy for researcher)

## Confidentiality Statement

Completed Demographic Questionnaire

## Participant Resume

Company or personal career-related documents

**Discuss the following with each participant:**

## Purpose of the research

Use of pseudonyms to mask participant's identity and maintain confidentiality

Refer to company by fictitious name to mask company's identity and maintain confidentiality

Logistics (length of interview, tape recording, transcribing, member checks, etc.)

Monetary incentive is not provided for this study

## Final decision-making about this research project

Interview questions to be used as a guide and for probing participants for greater clarification. Not all questions may be asked of each participant.

### Opening Question:

1. Tell us your name, current position, how long you have been working in corporate America, what you hope to contribute, and what you hope to get out of this session. (The intent of this question is to establish a sense of community in the group)

### Introductory Questions:

1. How did you come to choose your professional area as your career?
2. When you think about your experience in corporate America, what comes to mind?  
(The intent of this question is to begin to focus on the topic and allow participants to tell about how they see or understand the phenomenon under study)

**Transition Questions:**

1. What has been the greatest influence on your career development? (self, key people, organizations, etc.)
2. Describe one of your most memorable points in your career (high or low point in your career?  
(The intent of this question is to have participants begin to provide more depth about their experiences – making the connection between the participant and the topic of study).

**Key Questions (Questions in Bold are “required”):**

1. What factors have facilitated (helped to advance) your career development?  
(individual/personal or internal/external organizational factors)
2. What specific challenges (inhibitors) have you faced in your career development?
3. **What are the unique challenges African American professional men face in corporate America?**
4. What is the biggest obstacle African American professional men face in corporate America?
5. How much of what African American men face in corporate America is reflective of the history of African American masculinity/manhood in this society?
6. What is racism to you and is racism still a relevant topic today?
7. Is racism relevant in light of a diverse workforce and global economy?
8. **In a performance based corporate culture, is racism still a factor in your career development? Or, is it all about profit and what you do to contribute to the bottom line?**
9. **How has racism impacted your career development?**
10. **Any specific examples of experiences with racism in your career?**
11. Where does racism rank as a challenge to your career development? What ranks higher/lower?
12. How does your career development compare to your White peers?
13. **What actions (strategies) have you taken to overcome the challenges you have faced or to lessen the impact of racism on your career development?**
14. How much of your career development is attributable to your personal actions (taking personal charge and accountability for your development)? How much is attributable to the programs your company has in place to support your career development?
15. How many of you have mentors? Corporate sponsors or a board of directors? What purpose do they serve for you?
16. On the theme of making white leaders “comfortable” with you, what do you have to do to make them feel comfortable and why is that important for your career development?
17. Can you talk about conformance to mainstream values you see in corporate America and the cultural values you hold ? How are they congruent? In what ways are they different? How do you reconcile the differences?
18. Knowing what you know now, what are some things you would do differently if you were starting your career over today?

**Ending Questions:**

1. What advice would you give to other African American professional men to help them achieve success in their career development?
2. Of all that we have discussed today, what stands out as the most important to understanding the impact of racism on the career development of African American professional men in corporate America?

(The intent of this question is to bring to closure the discussion, enable participants to reflect on previous comments, and is critical to analysis)

## Appendix G

### Focus Group Participant Confidentiality Statement

*A Critical Examination of the Effects of Racism on the Career Development of African American Professional Men in Corporate America”*

As a participant in the focus group interview with other participants, I agree to maintain confidentiality of the information shared in the interview. I will not disclose to any person the names or personal information about the individuals participating in the interview. Neither will I disclose the identification and information regarding the companies represented. I will refer to my employer by a fictitious name to enhance my confidentiality and to protect the identification of the company. I also understand that no individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, except if it is necessary to protect my welfare or if required by law.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this confidentiality statement for my records.

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Name of Participant

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Signature

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Date