

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF BLACKS IN  
LEADERSHIP ROLES IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS

Marcía Elizabeth Stokes

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations who were promoted into leadership positions. The theories which guided this study were Spence's theory on signaling and the Critical Race Theory (CRT). They provided lenses that were used to view the problem of access to advancements and promotions for Blacks in professional services organizations. The research design used for this study was qualitative, and the approach was hermeneutical phenomenological. The qualitative design provided an opportunity to gather the data by hearing the lived experiences of the participants and by capturing their thoughts via a video recording. The participants consisted of 10 Black professionals who work or have worked in a professional services organization in the United States of America. The data were collected through interviews with the participants, a focus group conversation, and journal prompts. The results of the research findings included that Black professionals have obstacles to overcoming underrepresentation in leadership roles, need the support of others for visibility, and should develop strategies for promotion and advancement. The research findings revealed several implications for policies that should be created and practices that should be followed by leaders and hiring managers in professional services organizations.

*Keywords:* advancement, promotion, diversity, equity, inclusion, discrimination, leadership

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## Dedication

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

W.E.B. Du Bois

I dedicate this dissertation to my African ancestors who I never met, the Black forerunners who completed the doctoral journey before me, and to every prayer warrior around the world who covered me as I attempted to achieve my dream.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my maternal grandmother, Annie Mae Bush, who was educated through the eighth grade and was the smartest woman I have ever known. May your eternal rest find you looking over the portals of heaven in that great cloud of witnesses, cheering your granddaughter on to the finish line. I love you, Mama!

To my parents, Deacon James Stokes (deceased) and Dr. Almeta Stokes, who instilled in me a thirst for knowledge while always gently pushing me to pursue my highest God-given call. Specifically, to my Mom, I say thank you for demonstrating by example how to earn a doctorate! Your motivation pushed me to complete the doctoral program.

To my sister, Dr. Carla Stokes, thanks for helping me develop my research question early on, and for reminding me that if you did it, I could do it too...and I did!

To the memory of my godfather, Pastor Emeritus Dr. Jake Butler (deceased), for always believing in me and constantly letting me know how proud he was of me. I made it because of you.

To my family and friends, you allowed me to put my life on hold for three years and I thank you!

To the one and only living and true God, who assured me that I could do all things through Christ, who never left me or forsook me, who brought me to this place in the journey, I love You; I honor You; I appreciate You; and I thank You for being my Almighty Jehovah God! You alone, are worthy of the praise!

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)

Business Resource Groups (BRGs)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Corporate Social Performance (CSP)

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Historically Black College and University (HBCU)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

People of Color (POC)

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The objective of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Blacks who have been promoted into leadership positions in professional services organizations and to understand how their educational background influenced the process of being promoted. The research conducted provides insight into how promotion decisions are made and if educational factors are considered during the process. The voices of the marginalized group were used as data in this phenomenological study. The signaling theory and critical race theory (CRT) lenses were used to frame the study and provide insight into the research findings. In this chapter, a background of the phenomenon is provided and includes the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study give insight into the dissertation research. The research questions provide a view into the lens used for the study. Lastly, definitions for acronyms and phrases not generally known are also provided.

### **Background**

Organizations are viewed as tools that people use so they can coordinate actions that are important to them and achieve their personal desires and goals (Jones, 2013). Specifically, professional services organizations employ people who can help the company meet its objectives in the area of interest they serve. For instance, people who are knowledgeable in various aspects of the law may work in law firms that serve the needs of clients who require legal situations to be remedied and employees who aspire to achieve their goals of service by applying their expertise to serve the needs of the clients. Various roles are needed to fill the employment needs of the law firm organization. Each role has a purpose, and all roles are working toward the same common good: to satisfy the needs of the client. In this way, the organization is viewed as a tool that the

employees use to collaborate and garner their expertise to satisfy the needs of the law firm clients.

The value of working in an organization is that, most often, people find that when they work with others toward achieving a common goal, they can get more done than if they work alone or independently to achieve the same goal (Jones, 2013). When like-minded individuals with diverse ways of achieving objectives come together to solve a problem, they have a greater chance of producing a better result than if they tried to resolve the problem on their own. Many find that it is better to work together. The design and culture of the organization are usually set based on how the organization needs to achieve its goals. Managers are responsible for handling the activities that are necessary to support the design and culture of the organization. They have the benefit of being able to see the full picture and understand what is needed to achieve the business goals. They also have the ability to hire, fire, promote, and demote employees based on the needs and actions of the organization. Managers who understand the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion are generally open to hiring and promoting diverse employees, hence the reason for this study of the underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations.

### **Historical Context**

According to Owings (2019), the American dream is “the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved” (p. 1). For many Blacks, achieving the American dream of working in a professional service organization in a leadership position is difficult to conceive or achieve. Also, achieving the dream of advancement and promotion is difficult for many to believe in. Discrimination against non-white minorities who desire to be hired or be promoted is less widespread and overt

than it was following the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but it still exists (Estlund, 2005). However, employers can mitigate this issue.

The Supreme Court opened the doors for corporations to use affirmative action to help those making decisions about preferential hiring and promotion opportunities for people of color (POC) and women. The rulings in the *Johnson v. Transportation Agency*, 480 U.S. 616 (1987) case and *United Steelworkers v. Weber*, 443 U.S. 193 (1979) case paved the way for underrepresented employees to have opportunities for advancements in corporate organizations. Yet, the issue of Blacks being underrepresented in leadership roles in professional services organizations still exists today.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), 43% of employed Whites work in management, professional, and related job opportunities. Thirty-five percent of employed Blacks work in management, professional, and related job opportunities. Additionally, 25% of Whites in the labor force have a high school diploma, but no college degree. Comparingly, 29% of Blacks in the labor force have a high school diploma, but no college degree. Alternatively, 43% of Whites in the labor force have a bachelor's degree and 34% of Blacks in the labor force have a bachelor's degree.

Is education necessary to achieve an aspiration of professional success? For some, education is a non-issue since they expect to attend a college or university prior to pursuing a career. For others, who do not have the financial means to attend a college or university, this barrier may prevent them from pursuing a professional career. However, data has revealed that inequalities in professional success have been experienced by Blacks for centuries.

Professional services organizations have various requirements for entry into their companies. In most professional organizations, professionals who serve in leadership roles are typically required to have a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited school, a minimum of five years of experience in a leadership role and an intimate knowledge of the workings of the industry in which they work. An advanced degree is, at times, preferred.

When considering educational requirements in the legal industry, for most leaders in roles who work directly with attorneys, a juris doctorate (JD) is required. Professionals who are in financial services (FinSys) leadership roles usually have to have a master's in business administration (MBA) or be certified public accountants (CPA). Administrative leadership roles often require proficient communication, people management, and time management skills. The ability to be agile in a high-paced environment is also required. What seems to be missing from most qualification lists for leaders is the ability to serve, lead with empathy, possess the proven skills to inspire others, and have excellent negotiation abilities. Leaders should also be capable of working in a shared leadership environment where multiple leaders are responsible for the actions of a single team.

The Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas in 1954, opened the door of opportunity for Blacks to legally enter, engage in, and be educated in higher education schools which were predominantly White institutions (PWI) (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Prior to May 17, 1954, segregated schools were legal. In the south, segregation was inculcated through the public school system. This caused many to believe that books, school supplies, lessons and teachers in Black schools did not need to be of the same quality as those being used in white schools. Specifically, textbooks were handed down from white schools to Black schools. Distributing textbooks to students with

missing pages, marked up manuals and overly used materials did not offer the same level of quality education to all students. As a result, *Brown v. Board of Education* challenged segregated schools (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). In 1954, the Supreme Court decided that when states supported segregation in schools, it was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment and, therefore, unconstitutional to do so. In light of this, Black teachers would promote their students' ability to achieve over their personal need to dismantle segregation tactics that were meant to present obstacles for Black students' success (Bagley, 2019).

Interrupting segregation in the school systems, however, did not guarantee equal learning opportunities for all students. Schools had to work through the problems that segregation in schools started. Children attending schools where racism was taught in the home had to learn to get along with children who were of a different race. Many factors played into successfully teaching students and offering quality and equal education to all students.

Legislation required racial integration of the schools, which caused Black students to come into contact with White students, but it did not require White students to socially engage with Black students (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Separation and social out casting were demonstrated not only in the schools of higher learning but in businesses where students eventually became employed and needed to engage with others of different races (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Social disengagement, experienced during the initial implementation of legislated integration, may still have a direct impact on the promotion practices of Blacks who work in professional services organizations. If this is the case, education may be the equalizer that Blacks can use for advancement in the workplace.

## **Social Context**

There are perceived unique barriers in place that keep Blacks from reaching higher levels of leadership in professional services organizations (Johnson & Eby, 2011). This often happens because Blacks are not invited to participate in social settings where deals are made, relationships are built, and professional advancement is determined (Weber, 2018). They often rely on their own informal networks for socializing at work. Research conducted at predominantly White colleges and universities shows that in most social situations, “Black students are compelled to interact across race/ethnicity, even if not easy, comfortable, or of their own volition” (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014, p. 394). This college learned activity may benefit Blacks who need to use social networks for social engagement to help position themselves for promotion and advancement opportunities. Those who are looking to engage in organizational change will benefit from the research provided through this study.

Leadership opportunities come from having true, authentic, and ethical relationships with others in professional organizations. It is imperative to build strong relationships for the success of the whole team and organization. When power relationships are at play, it opens the door for imbalanced and destructive relationships to form (Ryan et al., 2021). Those who are followers should not be dependent upon leaders to provide them opportunities for participating in shared leadership roles based on what the follower will do for the leader. The relationship should be built on mutual respect and be filled with authentic communication. Ryan et al. (2021) expressed that the senior leader can learn from those who are following them in leadership. At times, younger leaders (e.g., millennials) feel their views and opinions are not heard or acknowledged. Therefore, seasoned leaders should be aware of this issue and bring younger leaders into the fold by listening, acknowledging, and acting on their suggestions and concerns (Ryan et al., 2021).

When this happens, everyone involved, including Black professionals, benefits from the relationship.

### **Theoretical Context**

The underpinning theories utilized in this research provided a lens for building the research questions, collecting data, and analyzing the results. The theories used are the signaling theory (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Bohonos, 2021; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Kharouf et al., 2020; Spence, 1973; Sun et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2019) and the CRT (Bell, 1990; Carter & Davila, 2017; Chan et al., 2018; Delgado et al., 2017; Gillborn et al., 2018; Grier et al., 2020; Logan, 2019; Poole et al., 2021; Rankin-Wright et al., 2020; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Tilghman-Havens, 2018). The signaling theory purports that researchers are able to look at how organizations and people communicate their needs to each other with the hope of gaining some type of investment from the person with whom they are speaking (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Kharouf et al., 2020; Spence, 1973; Sun et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2019). Some professional services organizations use it to determine the best candidates for open positions (Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Xu et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2014) found in their research that prestigious professional services organizations use the signaling theory to attract potential job seekers to their organizations. By sending signals that indicate an organization's level of corporate social performance (CSP), they can attract employees with a three-fold signal-based mechanism.

When viewing issues through the lens of the CRT, the research conducted on this topic enables the reader to discover if education is a factor for advancement for Blacks in professional services organizations when it is not a factor for non-Blacks in the same types of professional services organizations. The basic tenets of the CRT are that race is a term that was created to

categorize and oppress POC and to legally put a social, economic, and political barrier between White and non-White people (Gillborn et al., 2018). These theories were applied to the research for studying the lack of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations. Rocco et al. (2014) applied CRT to their research on human resources in professional services organizations. They found that when organizational policies and procedures are reviewed using the critical theory lens, professional services organizations can find ways to move from managing diversity through initiatives to actually making an impact on people's behavior and attitudes. Research suggests that this has been proven to happen in the technology, hospitality, tourism, and higher education fields and industries (Johnson, 2022; Parker & Villalpando, 2007).

The signaling theory and CRT have been applied in all types of professional services organizations, across multiple industries, to strategically attract certain types of employees with specific profiles and to eliminate workplace policies and procedures that foster discrimination (Johnson, 2022; Jones et al., 2014; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Rocco et al., 2014). This study focused on the signals used by professional services organizations and informed organizations how they can consider focusing on the signals being sent to them by employees who feel they are being overlooked for promotional opportunities. CRT focus provides professional services organizations with a practical perspective of understanding how employees view their experiences when using the CRT lens. This focus adds significant value to the body of research currently available. It also extends knowledge in the area under study by specifically looking at how the promotional experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations are viewed through the lens of the signaling theory and the CRT.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that there is an underrepresentation of Black employees being promoted into leadership positions in professional services organizations (Fowler, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Miller, 2020; Poole et al., 2021; Scott, 2018). In addition, it is important to note that between 2050 and 2055, no single race or ethnicity will be able to claim a majority status in the United States of America (Borry et al., 2021; Krogstad et al., 2021). Between 2010 and 2020, for the first time in United States history, the number of American citizens who self-identified in the 2020 census decreased by 3% which is 5.1 million people (Krogstad et al., 2021). The data is reflected in the racial balance of professional workplaces (Borry et al., 2021). Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become major areas of focus for professional organizations over the past decade (Parshakov et al., 2018; Silverthorn, 2020). Borry et al. (2021) advised, “that women and people of color are overrepresented in lower-level positions in public organizations and segregated in agencies that traditionally employ them (e.g., housing, welfare, and education)” (p. 393).

A study needs to be done that looks into the lived experiences of those who have experienced challenges in getting to the next level of professional services organizations as Black employees.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations who have been promoted into leadership positions. The promotional experiences were generally defined as the pursuit of promotion into higher-level leadership positions, by Blacks, in professional services organizations.

### **Significance of the Study**

This is an important topic to study because *Brown v. Board of Education* opened doors of opportunities for Blacks to attend colleges and universities without being restricted to private historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; Gasman, 2004). The outcome of the decision may not benefit Blacks in professional services, who desire to attain promotions into leadership positions, in the 21st century the way it did in 1954 when the ruling was delivered. There is a need for diverse voices to speak up and share information that is pertinent to the education and workplace experiences of diverse stakeholders and professionals. Providing research on this topic benefits professional organizations which are seeking to level the diversity, equity, and inclusion ground for their diverse employees.

### **Empirical**

In order for organizations to run effectively, diversity, equity, and inclusion should be a part of the strategic plan and measurement for corporate success. Diversity often refers to various types of individuals' identities (Silverthorn, 2020). Diversity also includes different types of cultures, languages, and skills (Parshakov et al., 2018). According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2014), the Title VII Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects employees from discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. These areas are also considered to be aspects of diversity (Silverthorn, 2020). Additionally, age, ethnicity, gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, and sexual identity are aspects of inclusion and items to be considered when discussing equity (Silverthorn, 2020).

This study is similar to Bergh et al.'s (2014) study, which uses separate equilibriums when reviewing and analyzing the data through the signaling lens. One equilibrium is focused on weighing the cost and the return on the investments from the professional services organization's

perspective. The other equilibrium is focused on using signals to determine the expectation of the receiver of the signals. This means the focus is on the individual being impacted by signals the organization is sending (Jones et al., 2014). What is different about the methodological approach used in this study is the demographic group of participants used in the study. Bergh et al.'s study focused on employees in general. This research is focused on Black professionals in professional services organizations. Providing this information adds to the literature being used by researchers who are interested in understanding how the signaling theory lens can be used to view the promotional experiences of Black professionals who work in these types of organizations.

### **Theoretical**

The lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace can be associated with the signaling theory (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Kharouf et al., 2020; Spence, 1973; Sun et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2019) and CRT (Bell, 1990; Carter & Davila, 2017; Chan et al., 2018; Delgado et al., 2017; Gillborn et al., 2018; Grier & Poole, 2020; Logan, 2019; Poole et al., 2021; Rankin-Wright et al., 2020; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Tilghman-Havens, 2018). This study used the signaling theory and CRT as a lens to view how Blacks are hired for and promoted into leadership roles in professional services organizations. In doing so, I was able to use research and literature to determine if hiring practices are influenced by signals given in job ads and hiring requirements. Signals may be used to dissuade potential Blacks employees from submitting applications for hire and for those who would like to be promoted from feeling qualified to do so.

### **Practical**

Practical suggestions for change are shared in this study. Professional services organizations can design and deploy workplace policies that are not one size fits all but that

equitably fit the needs of the people in the organization. Applying practices that allow for all employees to be considered for promotions or advancements using the same criteria is a practical way to change the perceptions of workplace discrimination and workplace privilege (Tilghman-Havens, 2018). This study benefits professional services organizations that are looking for practical ways to make changes to policies and procedures that benefit all employees. When policies and procedures are put in place that assist leaders with making equitable promotional decisions, Black employees may benefit the most.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this study was on the interpretation of the promotional experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations. A hermeneutical phenomenological approach was used to discover the data. An overarching research question guided the study, and three sub-questions shed additional light on other aspects of the study.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations?

#### **Research Question 1**

What signals have Black professionals experienced in professional services organizations?

#### **Research Question 2**

How have altered signals influenced the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who were promoted into areas of senior leadership in organizations?

### Research Question 3

What do Black professionals perceive to be the social norms, expectations, and protocols of those who aspire to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations?

#### Definitions

For the purpose of the research conducted for this study, the terms Black and African American were used interchangeably to refer to people of African descent. The terms White and Caucasian were used interchangeably to refer to people who are non-Black, non-African American, and non-Hispanic. Additionally, diverse people were referenced as such when discussing POC or non-White people.

1. *CRT (CRT)* – “an interdisciplinary approach emerging from social activism...whilst acknowledging that oppressions cannot be neatly separated or categorized, CRT premises the significance of ‘race’ as an organizing structure and the endemic, insidious, and enduring everyday practice of racism in society” (Rankin-Wright et al., 2020, p. 1129).
2. *Diversity* – different types of cultures, languages, and skills (Parshakov et al., 2018).
3. *Equity* – providing resources and access, as needed, to everyone (Silverthorn, 2020).
4. *Inclusion* – The assurance that everyone receives representation in the organization and open doors of opportunities for employees to feel welcomed, valued, appreciated, respected, and supported in the organizations for whom they work (Silverthorn, 2020)
5. *Language coding* – words that prioritize a person’s liberty over another’s racial justice (Woodson, 2019).

#### Summary

Factors for advancement and promotion into leadership roles for Black employees in professional services organizations need to be identified and shared so the affected demographic

group can uncover ways to overcome obstacles that may be holding them back from professional advancement. This hermeneutical phenomenological study described the lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations and who have experienced challenges being promoted and advanced in their organizations. The issue of barriers that appear to be in place which keep Blacks from reaching higher levels of leadership in professional services organizations was identified in the research. One such barrier is experienced when Blacks are not professionally and socially connected to internal networks. This may lead to experiences perceived as being discriminatory (Bates et al., 2018; Griffen, 2019; Tran, 2019).

When the signaling theory lens is applied, it appears that some professional service organizations use discriminatory practices in determining who will get advancement opportunities. Education may help to break the barrier of access to advancement for Blacks in professional services organizations. Obtaining higher-level degrees may be the tipping point that can be used to convince leaders of a person's effectiveness and ability to impact the business from a higher level of the organization. If the study revealed this to be true, organizations would need to consider other ways to level the playing field and give everyone equal access and opportunity to thrive in their organization. Representation, at every level, matters.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical framework used for the research and the literature that is related to the topic. The theoretical frameworks, signaling theory and CRT are presented in the first section. Following is an in-depth review of current and relevant literature focused on organizational diversity, equity and inclusion practices, organizational structures, Blacks' experiences working in professional services organizations, and perceptions of a lack of advancement and promotion opportunities. The closing of this chapter summarizes the empirical literature about Blacks' success in professional services organizations and discloses the gap that has been identified, which still needs to be researched to show what is not known about this topic. The final portion of this chapter contends that a gap exists in the literature and does not clearly indicate reasons for the underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theoretical frameworks were used as lenses for the study. They also guided the perspective of the literature reviewed in this chapter and allowed what is found in the literature to be considered using the theoretical frameworks.

### **Signaling Theory**

The signaling theory was developed by theorist Michael Spence in 1973 (Spence, 1973). He asserted that everyone gives off signals, and the signals can be used for hiring practices, determining promotional opportunities, and developing organizational effectiveness (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Kharouf et al., 2020; Spence, 1973; Sun et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2019). As organizations are positioning themselves in

the marketplace, they want to be viewed as businesses that operate with high integrity and outstanding quality (Drover et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2020). This desire causes many of them to seek out candidates for employment who have credentials that warrant them being seen as high-quality candidates versus others with lower qualifications who are considered lower-quality candidates (Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Spence, 1973; Xu et al., 2019).

One of the key indices used as a signal to determine high-quality candidates and lower-quality candidates is education (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012). The signal sent to receivers (e.g., hiring managers) that the person has a college degree is both observable and verifiable information (Certo, 2003). The receiver may feel that since the candidate has a degree, they have the wherewithal to identify and secure funding to secure their education (Kharouf et al., 2020). Candidates without a college degree may be deemed as being inferior in quality and lacking in problem-solving and critical thinking skills that are needed to obtain a college degree (Certo, 2003).

The signals may also be used to limit promotional opportunities. If a supervisor has an employee on their team who is proactive in taking on work assignments and who is demonstrating characteristics of an employee who is ready to be promoted, it may expose the incompetence of the supervisor who is not operating at the same level (Xu et al., 2019). This could potentially be viewed as a signal by the supervisor to refrain from sharing the credibility and readiness of the employee with the powers that be (e.g., decision makers) in the organization (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Kharouf et al., 2020). The employee is demonstrating what self-sacrifices look like, and that would typically indicate they are ready to be promoted to a level that is of higher prestige (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). Using signals in this way could be perceived as setting up a discriminatory practice that holds the employee back from being

promoted (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). The signaling theory has been proven, over time, to be a theoretical lens that allows researchers to understand how organizations use communication through signals to establish organizational practices for hiring, promoting, and enhancing organizational effectiveness (Spence, 1973).

The signaling theory has been studied in professional services organizations. It suggests that some professional services organizations apply the signaling theory by using separate equilibriums to define the focus of how signals are being sent (Bergh et al., 2014). They are either weighing the cost and the return on the investments provided by signals, or they are using signals to determine the expectation of the receiver of the signals. Other professional services organizations are much more concerned with how their signals are sent from the organization to attract workers rather than being concerned with the signals their workers are sending to them about the organization. Still, other professional services organizations use signals during certain timeframes that are intended to increase an area of the business as opposed to other times when that is not necessary (Etzion & Pe'er, 2014). When a professional services organization's strategy changes, it may change the signals they send to perspective employees and customers. Over time, as the strategies adjust, the signals adjust as well.

## **CRT**

CRT was birthed out of the same issues that energized the civil rights movement (Delgado et al., 2017). The focus of the civil rights movement was on progress being made toward advancement for POC. During the 1960s, as the civil rights movement began to slow down, CRT began to pick up momentum. The roots of the theory are grounded in law (Grier & Poole, 2020). The CRT movement began in the 1970s (Bell, 1990) and "questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment

rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). The basic tenet of CRT is that race is a term that was created to categorize and oppress POC and to legally put a social, economic, and political barrier between White and non-White people (Gillborn et al., 2018).

The early theorists included Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (Delgado et al., 2017). In 1989, they met with a group of people who were also interested in this field of research. The group also considered thoughts about critical race from European theorists Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. The works of “Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Power” added to their knowledge about the subject from an American perspective (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 5). They built the theory from insights gained from critical legal studies and the radical feminist movement (Delgado et al., 2017). The theorists generally believed that racism exists because of inequalities that are embedded in society, which overlook the laws that focus on neutrality for all (Grier & Poole, 2020).

CRT “is an interdisciplinary approach emerging from social activism...whilst acknowledging that oppressions cannot be neatly separated or categorized, CRT premises the significance of ‘race’ as an organizing structure and the endemic, insidious, and enduring everyday practice of racism in society” (Rankin-Wright et al., 2020, p. 1129). Another consideration of CRT is that it is racism in the form of systematic oppression, and it is a way to structure society in a prolific way (Poole et al., 2021). CRT is further defined as “a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race and racism” (Grier & Poole, 2020, p. 1191). It can be applied to areas of education, business,

religion, and law (Carter & Davila, 2017; Chan et al., 2018; Logan, 2019; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Tilghman-Havens, 2018).

The three tenets of the CRT include that it is ordinary, it has an interest in convergence and social construction (Bohonos, 2021; Delgado et al., 2017). Racism is difficult to address and is considered a normal part of everyday society. For Black people, in particular, it is a normal part of the business world and environment. Delgado et al. (2017) advised that to eliminate or decrease blatant forms of discrimination in the workplace, companies should consider implementing formal policies that provide direction for treatment being applied in situations to be the same across the board for everyone, without taking race, creed, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other factors into consideration.

When viewing professional organizations through the lens of CRT, we see that race can be a factor for consideration for Black employees who are looking to advance and be promoted in their fields while employed in professional services organizations. When they are not a part of networking groups and the “old boys’ network,” it is considerably more difficult for them to advance in their chosen careers in these organizations (Carter & Davila, 2017). Diversity, equity, and inclusion help break the back of racism in organizations. Using CRT to identify discriminatory practices provided a framework for the context of this discussion, which extends CRT to be applied to the lived experiences of Blacks being promoted in professional services organizations.

### **Related Literature**

The information contained within this section provides a synthesis of research literature pertaining to the lived experiences of Blacks who are interested in being promoted or advanced in professional services organizations. To understand the topic, the literature provides a historical

examination of how racism, discrimination, and biases were formed and developed that have made it difficult for Blacks to advance in their respective professional fields. Gaps in the literature were indicated, as well as how the study fills the gap found in the literature about this topic.

### **Professional Services Organizations**

An organization is a tool and a resource people use to accomplish their goals and from which they can attain something they desire (Jones, 2013). Organizations are not buildings or structures. They are non-tangible entities that contain representatives who are focused on a particular mission, purpose, and product (Jones, 2013). Organizations use people to facilitate and accomplish their purpose of receiving input, producing a service or product, and distributing an output. Simply put, an organization is a system that is run by people who are focused on activities and forces that are coordinated by those who run the organization. Professional services organizations offer consumers products and services focused on a variety of areas, including information technology, legal services, healthcare, engineering, higher education, entertainment, sports, and other services (Burlew & Johnson, 1992). In the following sections, there is a discussion concerning how organizations are structured, labor is divided among the workers, leadership values are implemented, and dynamics within the organization are exhibited.

### ***Organization Structures***

Organizations are comprised of five basic parts. They are the operating core, administrative component, middle line, technostructure, and supporting staff. The operating core of the organization is where the input, processing, and output takes place for the goods or services the organization provides. This core area is also where specific and direct support takes place that keeps the engine of the organization running. The administrative component is where

the decision makers, leadership, and top of the organization management reside. This is the strategic apex group. The middle managers, who are responsible for the coordination of the work and division of labor, are the third component of the organization. The technostructure component comprises the technology systems, policies, and resources needed to run the organization. The last component is the support staff. Without this group, the organization cannot function efficiently or effectively. This is usually the largest part, in employee numbers, of most organizations. While some organizations may be birthed with a small number of people, all five of the organization's basic parts will be filled even if that means a person is filling multiple roles (Jones, 2013).

The structure of the organization is defined by its principles, founders, and stakeholders (Jones, 2013). These groups are focused on ensuring that ethics, knowledge management, organizational transformation, and informational technology are being used appropriately and adequately. They are also interested in managing power and politics throughout the organization. The culture of the organization is then defined by the values and norms that are produced by the organization's structure and design (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013).

### ***Division of Labor***

One of the structures in the organization is the division of labor. In 1776, Adam Smith published his formal thoughts on a theory of organization (Hatch, 2018). In his writings, he explained the division of labor that takes place in organizations. He believed that when done correctly, an organization could benefit from economic efficiency. He described two types of labor: task differentiation and specialization. When assigning work, it is more efficient to have one person focused on a single task or a few related tasks (Hatch, 2018). This way, the work can be completed consistently with single resources. However, when working on tasks that require

special training, it has been noted that when people work together in the same place while working on the same task, they complete it in a more productive and efficient manner (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013). When the expertise of individuals can be partnered with others of the same skillset, collaboration brings about a better product. The individuals are not competing against each other but are complementing each other in getting the work done.

### ***Leadership Values***

Another structure in the organization is the leadership values held by the founders and stakeholders. In the early evolution of leadership being defined, it was referred to as a way of impressing the will of the leader onto a group of people while demanding their respect, loyalty, and cooperation in completing assignments. Over time, the definition has moved away from control and power and has become a term that is associated with authenticity, servants, being adaptive, collaborative, and spiritual. The values placed on leaders are generally ascribed to their personal values and the values of the organizations in which they serve.

### ***Organization Dynamics***

In the case that was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court, a White employee challenged the affirmative action plan under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (*United Steelworkers v. Weber*, 1979). The organization set aside 50% of the openings for a training program for Black employees. The consideration was made so the number of craftworkers would be equivalent to the number of Blacks who were in the labor workforce. The case was won by Weber in the district court and the court of appeals. The United States Supreme Court, however, overturned the rulings. They held that the affirmative action plan did not violate Title VII's intention to prohibit discrimination in the workplace. While affirmative action plans offer Black employees opportunities to succeed in the workplace, it does not guarantee or offer them

opportunities to gain higher level positions in professional services organizations, by law (Sales et al., 2020). Corporations can make their own decision about advancement of Black employees without considering the use of an affirmative action plan to increase the representation of Blacks in leadership roles.

Due to the nature of their concerns, many Blacks refuse to voice their concerns over representation matters that appear to be political and social in nature. Even after Black employees gain leadership roles in organizations, they are still fighting their internal inclination to avoid any appearance of being biased toward their race when dealing with others of different races (Sales et al., 2020). Considering the long history of White men in leadership at top levels of organizations, Blacks who aspire to gain leadership positions often wonder if a glass ceiling or sticky floor, created by White men, is preventing them from rising and joining the leadership ranks (Sales et al., 2020).

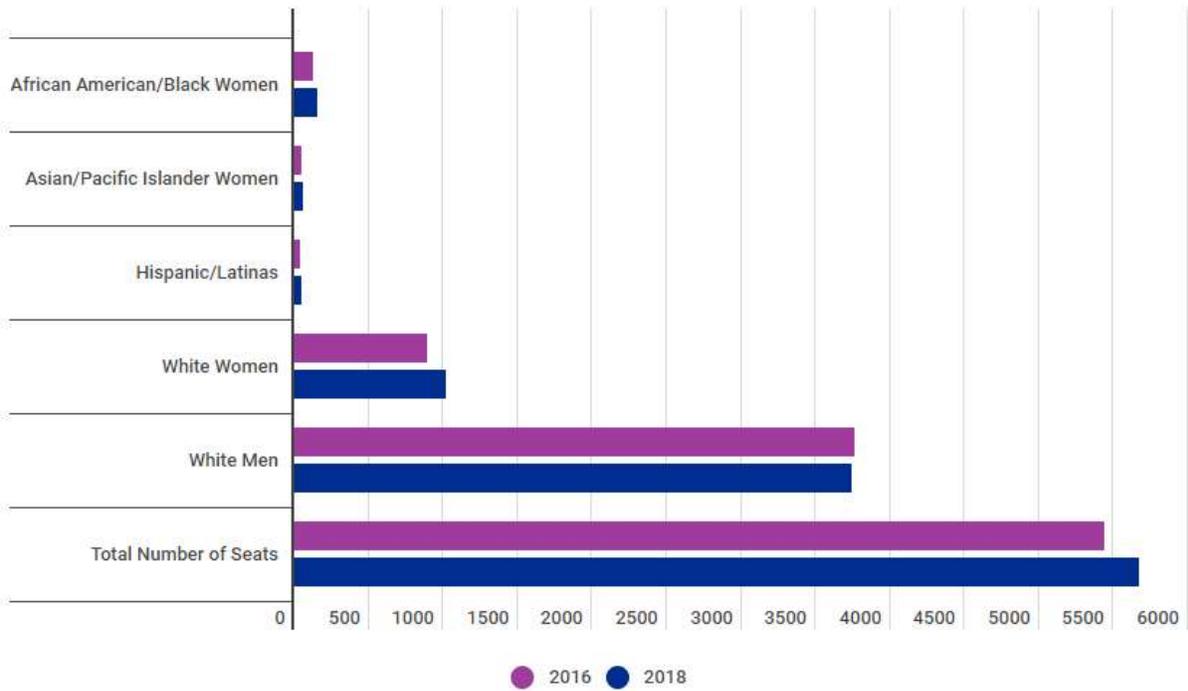
### **Blacks in Leadership**

Blacks who are fortunate enough to gain leadership positions in professional service organizations find that the percentage of Blacks who fill leadership roles is dismal and small (Missing Pieces Report, 2021; Catalyst Report, 2020; Catalyst Report, 2021). The presence of Black women in the corporate workforce has increased, yet the increase has not been seen in leadership positions. The lack of Black leadership is evidenced in higher education, law firms, financial corporations, and Fortune 500 companies (Missing Pieces Report, 2021; Catalyst Report, 2009; Catalyst Report, 2020; Catalyst Report, 2021; Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Zockoll, 2019).

### ***Representation of Blacks in Professional Services Organizations***

When looking at the population of the United States of America, the 2020 census shows that there were 331,449,281 residents at the time the census was taken (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The U.S. Census also showed that 13.4% of Americans at that time were Black or African American (United States Census Bureau, 2021). According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), 8.6% of employees filling management roles who are 16 years and older are Black. Of that group, 5.9% hold chief executive positions. Within the management group, 14% of the Black managers are working in education and are childcare administrators (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In comparison, 82.2% of employees filling management roles who are 16 years and older are White. Of that group, 85.7% hold chief executive positions. Within the management group, 79.8% of the White managers are working in education and are childcare administrators (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). There is a drastic difference in the number of Black employees holding leadership positions in the workforce.

Research has also shown that when Black women enter corporate positions, they represent 17% of those who are filling entry-level positions (Catalyst Report, 2021). When looking at the advanced leadership positions, they hold 12% of the manager positions, 9% of the senior manager/director positions, 7% of the vice president positions, 5% of the senior vice president positions, and only 4% of the c-suite positions (Catalyst Report, 2021). Research also shows that in 2021, White women held 32.6% of all management positions, while Black women held 4.4% of all management positions in the United States of America. When reviewing the boards of Fortune 500 companies, White men hold two-thirds of the seats on Fortune 500 boards, and Black women hold 4.6% of the Fortune 500 board seats (Figure 1). They are the most underrepresented group on Fortune 500 boards (Figure 2) across the United States of America (Catalyst Report, 2020).

**Figure 1***Fortune 500 Board Seat Changes***Change in Number of Fortune 500 Board Seats**

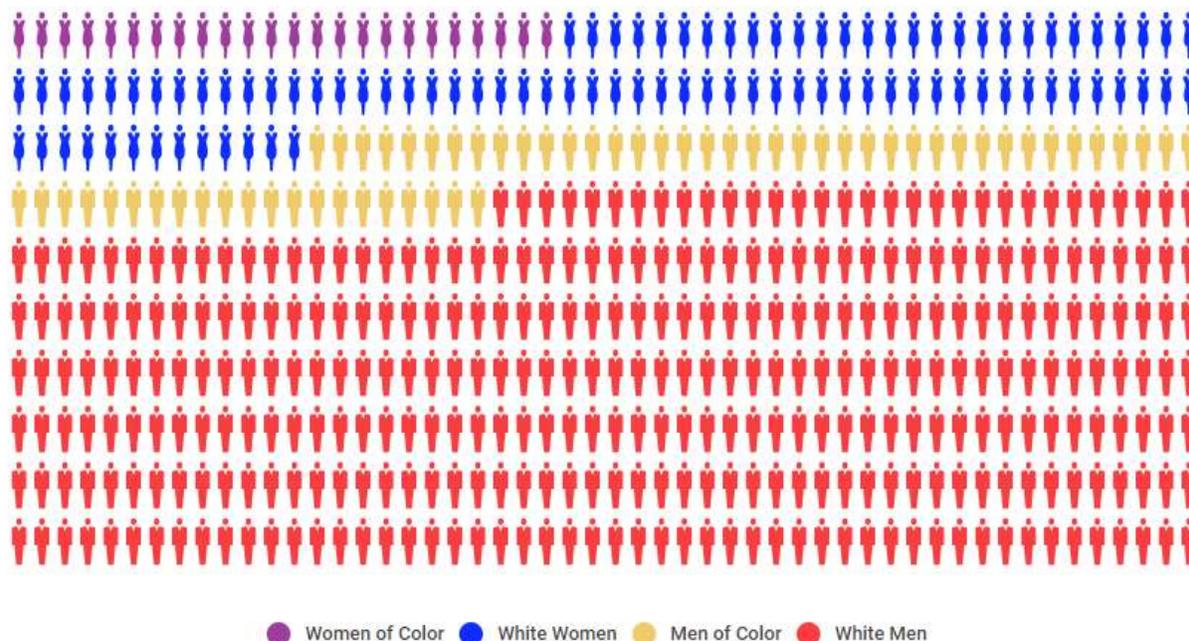
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*Note.* “Change in Number of Fortune 500 Board Seats,” from *Too few women of color on boards: Statistics and solutions* (Catalyst Report, 2020).

## Figure 2

### *Representation on Fortune 500 Board Seats*

#### 2018 Fortune 500 Board Seats By Race and Gender



*Note.* “2018 Fortune 500 Board Seats By Race and Gender” from *Too few women of color on boards: Statistics and solutions* (Catalyst Report, 2020).

Black and minority ethnic (BME) employees and White employees note four areas of necessity for advancement to leadership roles. These areas include visibility, networks, development, and management support (Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). The BME’s experiences differ from their White colleagues as they are often unable to secure opportunities to be seen as managers, networking with those in authority, receiving access to development opportunities, and support from upper management (Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). According to Rosette and Livingston (2012), employees with more than one subordinate identity (i.e., Black woman) experience greater barriers to leadership roles

than employees with single-subordinate identities. Those with single-subordinate identities are often viewed as being intelligent, having moral worth, the ability to lead teams, and excellent experience. This adds to the perception that there is a lack of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations.

### ***Emotional and Diversity Taxes***

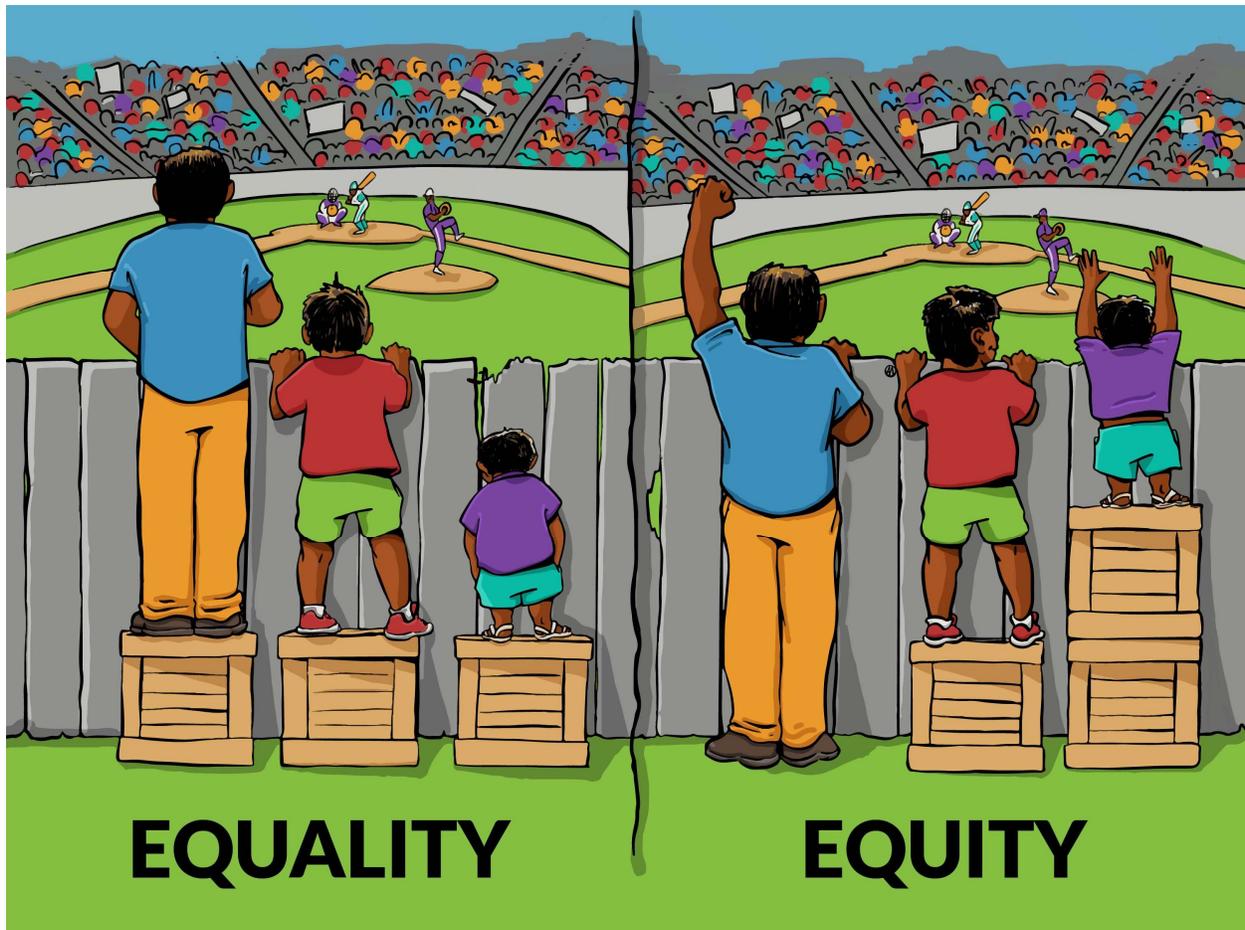
Blacks who are in leadership roles often pay an emotional tax and a diversity tax for the journey they took to gain entry to that level of leadership (Travis & Thorpe-Moscone, 2018). Emotional tax and the diversity tax are states of being for Blacks who are constantly concerned with dealing with implicit institutional biases, exclusions, microaggressions, emotional reactivity, and discrimination in the workplace. The tax may be a factor that causes burnout and is evidenced by one-third of Black women who were planning to leave their employer in 2021 (Catalyst Report, 2009; Catalyst Report, 2021; Travis & Thorpe-Moscone, 2018). This affects the organization's retention rate as well as the employee's well-being. Overall, the literature reveals that there is a need for research to be conducted to determine why the percentage of Blacks in leadership is consistently low from year to year. Further discussion into the emotional and diversity tax is shared in chapter five.

### **Organizational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

In order for organizations to run effectively, diversity, equity, and inclusion should be a part of the strategic plan and measurement for corporate success. Diversity often refers to various types of individuals' identities (Silverthorn, 2020). Diversity also includes different types of cultures, languages, and skills (Parshakov et al., 2018). According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2014), the Title VII Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects employees from discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. The original intention of

Title VII was to integrate workplaces and eliminate conscious and unconscious biases that impacted the employment of minority employees in arbitrary ways (Williams, 2018). While some advances have been made in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion for Blacks in the workplace after the passage of the Title VII Civil Rights Act of 1964, much work still needs to be done. Other subtle, informal, and negative ways of impacting Blacks in the workplace have surfaced in modern day society and caused workplace biases to appear in private and public sectors as well as large and small organizations (Williams, 2018).

An excellent way to understand equity is to consider the pictures of three Black boys who are standing on crates to watch a baseball game over a fence (Silverthorn, 2020). The two taller boys are standing on the same size crate and can see over the fence to watch the baseball game. The smaller boy, who is standing on the same size crate, is unable to see the game because he is not tall enough to see over the fence, even while standing on the crate. The picture represents equality. The second picture shows the same three boys with different outcomes. The tallest boy gave his crate to the shortest boy so he could stand on two crates and see over the fence. The middle boy is able to stand on one crate and see over the fence. This picture represents equity. Everyone has access to see the same thing. Some just need a higher lift than others. Organizations need to recognize that equity is needed for corporate success and gets organizations to the finish line (Silverthorn, 2020).

**Figure 3***The Difference between Equality and Equity*

*Note.* “To promote greater equity and inclusion, institutional interventions must be sensitive to the specific circumstances of the diverse communities they serve. Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire.” (Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2016).

Inclusion ensures everyone receives representation in the organization and opens doors of opportunities for employees to feel welcomed, valued, appreciated, respected, and supported in the organizations for whom they work (Silverthorn, 2020). It has often been said in professional environments that while diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance (Silverthorn, 2020). Inclusion generates a sense of belonging.

### ***Cultural Diversity***

Cultural diversity has become a norm in most professional services organizations. To best understand cultural diversity, consider that it “means the representation, in one social system, of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance” (Cox, 1994, p. 3).

Cultural norms are shaped by the values, experiences, and beliefs of members of different associated groups (Andrevski et al., 2014). In the 1990’s, 45% of employees in the United States of America workplaces were diverse (Cox, 1994). When a group of people who share the same cultural diversity beliefs, values, and experiences feels threatened or intimidated in the workplace, it produces cultural tension (Andrevski et al., 2014; Cox, 1994). The tension may manifest as discrimination in the workplace. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provide guidelines for organizations to use as a determination of what is outlawed by the United States government and deemed to be discriminatory acts or practices (Cox, 1994; Williams, 2018). Organizations which embrace cultural diversity, at all levels of the organization, tend to do well and have a competitive advantage over other organizations (Andrevski et al., 2014). There may even be some correlation to organizations that have diversity in their management structure and the high performance of the organizations in their growth and competitive edge (Andrevski et al., 2014).

### ***Inclusion***

Over the past few years, professional services organizations have increased their desire to incorporate diversity and inclusion in the culture of their organizations. Some organizations use the diversity and inclusion terminology interchangeably and inseparably (Murphy, 2018). They are, in fact, different. Inclusion in the workplace is defined “as the individual’s perception of a specific group (e.g., the organization) providing him or her with the satisfaction of the

fundamental human needs for belonging and authenticity” (Rengers et al., 2019, p. 2).

Individuals in the organization must decide if they want to participate in inclusive conversations and activities since doing so may disclose to others their uniqueness which may be stigmatized by some in the organization (Murphy, 2018; Rengers et al., 2019). Those who are perceived as being different, may not be considered for advancement opportunities because of their association and affiliation with non-traditional groups in the organization. In other words, they may be socially excluded from events that promote opportunities for networking and advancement consideration (Rengers et al., 2019). While diversity is directly tied to discrimination and laws, inclusion is not (Murphy, 2018). Inclusion represents a sense of belonging and when individuals do not sense representation or belonging in an organization, it can cause feelings of perceived discrimination to exist.

### **The Intersection of Race, Society and Law in Leadership Advancement Opportunities**

Research has shown that Blacks are underrepresented in top levels of leadership in corporations. For some employees, who have leadership potential, it takes great effort to make it to the top. Glass ceilings, old boys’ networks, sticky floors, and experiences with microaggressions have made the climb to the top of the corporate ladder painful and challenging (Carter & Davila, 2017). Some corporations view Black employees using a colorblind lens, which can be damaging to POC who are not recognized for doing the work within a minority group of underrepresented employees (Griffen, 2019). Using the colorblind lens allows white privilege to emerge because denials are in place of others, who do not have the same levels of access to leadership roles, as those who are White (Tran, 2019). According to Woodson (2019), “choice, preference, rights, and colorblindness serve as racial code words by prioritizing individual liberty over racial justice” (p. 28). When used effectively, these code words can be

used as “formal language of equality, but subordinate equality by vesting the expectations of whites that what is unequal in fact will be regarded as equal in law” (Woodson, 2019, p. 28). Applying CRT to colorblindness and coding, shows how predominantly White professional services organizations can implement policies that prevent Blacks from advancing into leadership roles with the same level of ease as their White counterparts (Patton et al., 2019; Woodson, 2019).

Professional services organizations, such as health care providers and academic institutions have been noted as organizations that set policies in place that may be barriers for advancement for Black employees (Fowler, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Miller, 2020). When policies are in place that exempt certain types of employees from advancing into leadership roles, this causes a flatlining of career advancement for impacted employees (Miller, 2020). These institutional practices often have an underlining theme of discrimination and racism associated with the implantation of the policies (Fowler, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Miller, 2020). Some workplace policies have been written and linked to laws that support what non-minorities see as class statuses. The policies, which are often cloaked in discrimination and implicit bias, cause career advancement for minorities to be like climbing uphill but never reaching the top (Fowler, 2020). Iheduru-Anderson (2020) stated that their “study also found racial discrimination hindered access to promotion and training with some policies lacking transparency or equitable implementation, allowing for intentional discriminatory behaviors towards ethnic minority migrant nurses” in healthcare professional services organizations (p. 666).

According to Ruzycki et al. (2021), to combat underrepresentation of diverse talent in the medical field, quotas are used to ensure the leadership roles are filled by targeted groups of

individuals. The thought is that critical mass is reached when an organization's diverse or underrepresented talent in leadership roles reaches 30% (Ruzycki et al., 2021). One of the barriers that keep individuals in the medical field from advancing into leadership is years of experience. This barrier is often the reason why historically advantaged groups advance into leadership roles earlier than others. One way to overcome this barrier is to put intentional inclusion practices in to play. From a global perspective, quota policies have been shown to help increase diversity numbers in government and corporate entities (Ruzycki et al., 2021). One must consider the legality of using quotas since some countries ban this practice because it is deemed unconstitutional.

Those who oppose the use of quotas to increase diversity in corporations often point to the merit system being used with quotas as the issue (Barceló et al., 2021; Ruzycki et al., 2021). Merits are, at times, subjective and aligned with whether a person is liked by leaders in the organization, sponsored by a champion in the organization, or mentored by a senior or tenured leader in the organization. Some corporations are moving away from using quotas to increase their diversity numbers and are realigning their selections for hire with the core values of the organization (Barceló et al., 2021). Underrepresented potential leaders who are diverse often do not have access to these factors that are associated with merits. Additionally, merits can include implicit biases that exclude diverse employees from being considered for promotion into leadership roles and for this reason, should be critically examined (Barceló et al., 2021; Ruzycki et al., 2021).

In some corporate organizations, like higher education institutions, diversity and inclusion, organizational change, and transformation have not improved by a substantially great measure (Patton et al., 2019). This makes progress for Blacks difficult and their experiences for

promotion different from their colleagues. For diversity issues, colleges and universities tend to focus on letting their culture centers and minority affairs offices handle those types of issues that arise in the institution. Ownership of diversity issues, by leadership, is not the cultural norm (Tran, 2019).

Another factor that makes life difficult for Blacks in professional services organizations is the interpretation of racially neutral policies (Griffen, 2019; Tran, 2019). When confronted with requests for organizational changes, organizational development, and improved diversity-based policies, some White employers do not grasp and understand the full scope of how these requests may benefit their Black employees and help them feel more accepted in their professional services organizations (Killough et al., 2017). Those types of changes can help build a sense of belonging within the organization and assist Blacks with having a sense of being needed and feeling included in the organization.

### ***Recruitment***

According to Chapman et al. (2005), recruitment is defined as “encompassing all organizational practices and decisions that affect either the number, or types, of individuals that are willing to apply for, or to accept, a given vacancy” (p. 928). It generally assumes that applicants are looking for a role in organizations where their character and interests can be displayed, utilized, and exhibited throughout the organization (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993; Walker et al., 2012; Wyckoff, 2020). Applicants will generally research organizations to determine if there is a cultural and professional fit for them within the organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Turban & Keon, 1993).

As women and racial minorities enter the workforce, they are looking for representation inside of organizations. Research has shown that having a diverse workforce can add substantial value and benefits to organizations (Assari & Moghani Lankarani, 2018; Avery & McKay, 2006; Walker et al., 2012). For this reason, organizations have increased their resources so they can pursue and target diverse employees (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993; Walker et al., 2012; Wyckoff, 2020).

Applicants may feel the need to ensure organizations have robust diversity and inclusion policies (Chapman et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2012). As minority groups are often targets of discrimination in the workplace and have lived experiences on which to base their concerns, it is common for diverse applicants to ask recruiters specific questions about the organizations' diversity efforts, hiring practices, and policies (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993; Walker et al., 2012; Wyckoff, 2020). For this reason, some organizations use diversity cues (e.g., signaling) when posting job ads and when recruiting diverse employees into their organization (Chapman et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2012). According to Walker et al. (2012), when Black job seekers are reviewing organizational websites, “inclusion of diversity cues will result in more thorough information processing among Black job seekers (vs. Whites) as indicated by increased website viewing time and more accurate recall of presented information” (p. 215). It is the responsibility of the recruitment department to ensure the organization’s diversity and inclusion efforts, policies and nuances are included in the recruitment materials if the organization does in fact want to increase its diverse employee groups.

Recruiters also have the ability to use technical instruments and techniques to exclude candidates from the application process (Harris & Finks, 1987). While this may be appropriate for those who lack certain skills and experience, it may also be used in a negative manner (Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2019). When a candidate's application and resume include diversity cues, like an ethnic name, they may not be considered a good fit for the organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Walker et al., 2012). When an application is perceived as not being a good organization fit, this may be viewed as coding language used by non-minorities in professional organizations and may exclude certain races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and disabled candidates (e.g., differently abled candidates) from being hired in the organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Walker et al., 2012; Woodson, 2019). Organizations with these types of practices may also find ways to restrict Blacks from advancing to leadership roles within the organization (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Xu et al., 2019).

### ***The Rooney Rule***

One professional services organization that has attempted to self-correct its problem of a lack of diverse head coaches in leadership roles is the National Football League (NFL) (CNN, 2022; Forbes.com, 2020; Harrison et al., 2022; NFL, 2022; Pitts et al., 2022; Salaga & Juravich, 2020). Tony Dungy, who was the head coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Dennis Green, who was the head coach for the Minnesota Vikings were both released of their coaching duties in 2001 (Pitts et al., 2022). At that time, in 2001, they were the only Black head coaches in the NFL. The firing of both caused questions that needed answers around the lack of diversity in head coaches in the NFL. Johnnie Cochran and Cyrus Merhri commissioned a study to be performed that analyzed how the NFL assigned and promoted Black head coaches and White

head coaches (Pitts et al., 2022). The results of the study revealed that while Black coaches in many cases outperformed their White counterpart coaches, they were still not given many opportunities to advance to head coaching positions (Pitts et al., 2022). This information prompted Dan Rooney, the owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers, to create the Rooney Rule in 2003 which required NFL teams to interview at least one minority candidate for open head coach positions associated with their teams before making a hiring decision (NFL, 2022; Forbes.com, 2020; Pitts et al., 2022). Mr. Rooney was the chairman of the Workplace Diversity Committee for the NFL (NFL, 2022). The committee focused on the historical problem of not having similar representation in the front office as was seen on the field by minority personnel.

At the time the Rooney Rule was instituted in the NFL in 2003, there had only been a handful of Black head coaches employed with the 32 NFL teams. They were Art Shell, who was the head coach of the Los Angeles Raiders from 1989 to 1994, Dennis Green, who was the head coach for the Vikings from 1992 to 2001, Ray Rhodes, who was the head coach with the Philadelphia Eagles from 1995 to 1998 and the Indianapolis Colts in 1999, Tony Dungy who was the Buccaneers' head coach from 1996 to 2001 and was with the Colts in 2002, and Herm Edwards who was the head coach for the New Jersey Jets from 2001 to 2002 (Pitts et al., 2022). Following the establishment of the Rooney Rule, from the 2003 to the 2021 NFL seasons, there were 22 other Black head coaches employed by the NFL. This seems to indicate that the Rooney Rule worked for increasing the number of Black head coaches in the NFL and advanced the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the league (NFL, 2022; Pitts et al., 2022).

When teams did not comply with the Rooney Rule, consequences for lack of action occurred. The rule required NFL teams to not only consider, but interview minority candidates for head coach roles or else they would face a fine. In 2003, the Detroit Lions were fined

\$200,000 because they did not interview a single minority candidate for their open head coach position (Williams, 2018). The NFL stood its ground on enforcing the rule and penalty for non-compliance.

By 2009, the Rooney Rule was adjusted to include additional management and leadership roles. General manager jobs and other front office personnel positions were required to follow a similar protocol for interviews. Each opening required a minimum of two minority candidates to be interviewed and considered before the hiring decision was made (NFL, 2022).

By 2013, Harrison et al. (2022) shared that the NFL led all sports organizations in hiring a diverse and inclusive workforce while increasing opportunities in the organization for minority coaches. In 2018, 70% of the NFL players were Black, 9% of the managers working in the NFL were Black, and 21% of the NFL head coaches were Black (Salaga & Juravich, 2020). During the same time period, none of the franchise owners or presidents were Black (Forbes, 2020; Salaga & Juravich, 2020). While a lot of work has been done to increase the presence of Black head coaches in the organization, much still needs to be done to ensure that ownership and front office leadership is also represented by Blacks in the NFL organization (Harrison et al., 2022).

As the NFL considered how to incentivize team owners who worked the Rooney Rule in a favorable way, they came up with a new plan. They decided to approve a proposal in November 2020 to reward team owners who took the time to develop their internal Black employees who would go on to become General Managers or head coaches with a team in the league (NFL, 2022). Teams are rewarded with a third-round compensatory pick for two years when one of their minority executives or head coaches joins another league's team. If a team loses its head coach and another personnel member, they are rewarded with a third-round compensatory pick for a total of three years (NFL, 2022). This incentive helps league teams

understand the value of developing qualified leadership role-ready individuals who are minority personnel.

In 2021, the Rooney Rule was changed to ensure that at least two minority candidates were interviewed and considered for head coaching positions. Additionally, the rule changes ensured that at least one minority or female candidate would be considered for senior level positions in the NFL (NFL, 2022). Senior level positions include club president and senior executives. In 2022, the 32 NFL clubs further committed to increasing the presence of diversity in their ownership ranks (CNN, 2022).

The NFL opened its doors to consider minority and/or female candidates for open quarterback coaching positions in 2022 (NFL, 2022). The decision was made at a Spring League Meeting, and it included the fact that teams would be required to interview candidates from outside of the organization for those roles. The rationale behind this move was the fact that many of the leagues' head coaches started their careers as quarterback coaches. Having a pipeline of talent come through that role should help to increase the number of minority and female head coaches in the NFL (CNN, 2022; Forbes, 2020; Harrison et al., 2022; NFL, 2022).

As the league continues to find ways to place minorities in the pipeline for leadership positions, it also established a coaching fellowship program (Forbes, 2020). The intention of the program is to give NFL legends, minority, and female talent an opportunity to learn how to be a head coach using firsthand experience. As a part of the fellowship program, the participants engage in hands-on experience working full-time, filling various roles on teams for one to two years. Access to learning and development opportunities is essential to the success of moving talent from one level to another, especially as it relates to moving personnel into leadership positions (Forbes, 2020; Harrison & Bukstein, 2022).

### *The Mansfield Rule*

The legal field also instituted and adopted a form of the Rooney Rule. It is called the Mansfield Rule (Armstrong, 2021; Taoultides, 2021; Williams, 2018). In 2017, the Diversity Lab launched the first iteration of the Mansfield Rule (Armstrong, 2021). Law firms were able to become certified under the rule when they showed proof that when hiring, they consider underrepresented lawyers for leadership positions (Taoultides, 2021). The voluntary certification program encouraged law firms to consider and promote women, POC, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and differently abled (e.g., disabled) candidates for partnerships and leadership roles within their organizations including roles with critical pipeline work on RFP teams, senior level lateral hiring opportunities, and other high visibility and advance work assignments (DiversityLab, 2022).

The Mansfield Rule was named as such to honor the first woman attorney in the United States of America, Arabella Mansfield (Armstrong, 2021). She was barred in 1869 in Iowa. At the time that she sat for the bar, only men who were over 21 were allowed to do so. Not only did she pass the bar, but she passed with high scores. For this reason, the Mansfield Rule was named after her because the rule represents those who are not normally given opportunities for advancement but should be considered for advancement into leadership roles.

When advancement and hiring decisions are being made, law firms should consider who is on the selection committee. Research suggests that when the hiring and promotion selection committee does not include diverse members, the chances of diverse candidates being selected for leadership roles are reduced by as much as 13% (Williams, 2018). This can essentially eliminate chances for some minority candidates to be considered for hiring in or promotion to

leadership roles in professional services organizations. The Mansfield Rule seeks to eliminate this practice from happening.

### ***Professional and Social Identity***

Generally speaking, in professional services organizations, the road to promotion and advancement comes by way of employees having a professional and social identity that is seen and appreciated by organizational leaders (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019; Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Lin et al., 2017). When minority employees are not included in professional and social events, where networking with leadership and decision makers is key, their ability to gain promotions and advancements is hindered because of their exclusion in those types of activities and events (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019; Heilman & Alcott, 2001). In those settings, Blacks have found that when they become advocates for themselves, advancement into leadership through entrepreneurial efforts is much easier to gain (Bell, 1990). For Black women in particular, this phenomenon appears to be more prevalent (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019). Inherent in organizational leadership are kinship and camaraderie.

### ***Discrimination***

There is an assumption, when Blacks enter predominantly White workplaces, they will have to contend with racism and discrimination (Assari & Moghani Lankarani, 2018; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Killough et al., 2017). Research suggests, that in recent years, while the number of Black women in the workforce has increased, the number of women of color who have ascended into leadership roles in organizations has declined (Sales et al., 2020). The issue of not being able to rise above mid-level management is often described as hitting a glass or concrete

ceiling (Sales et al., 2020). At the root of the issue, we find discrimination, which shows up as sexism, racism, denial of advancement into leadership roles, gender diversity and lack of opportunity to participate in mentoring programs. This also appears in lower wages being paid to Black women and points to discrimination based on race and gender (Weber, 2018). Discrimination is a factor in the lack of advancement for Blacks into leadership roles in professional services organizations.

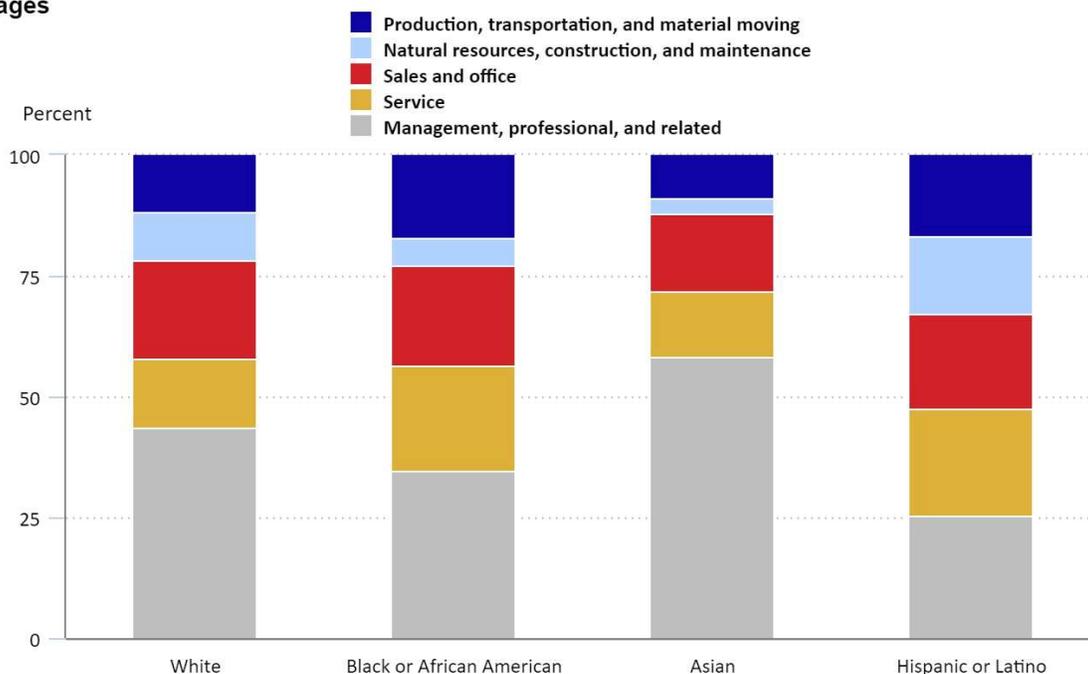
### Perceptions of Education Impact and Advancement Opportunities

According to Griffen (2019), education is supposed to be seen as the great equalizer for Blacks in the United States of America, but this has not proven itself to be true. Blacks dominate the lower-level job employees in most corporations (see Figure 4).

#### Figure 4

*Employed People by Occupation, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, 2020 Annual Averages*

**Chart 3. Employed people by occupation, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2020 annual averages**



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.

Note: People whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race. Data may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS).



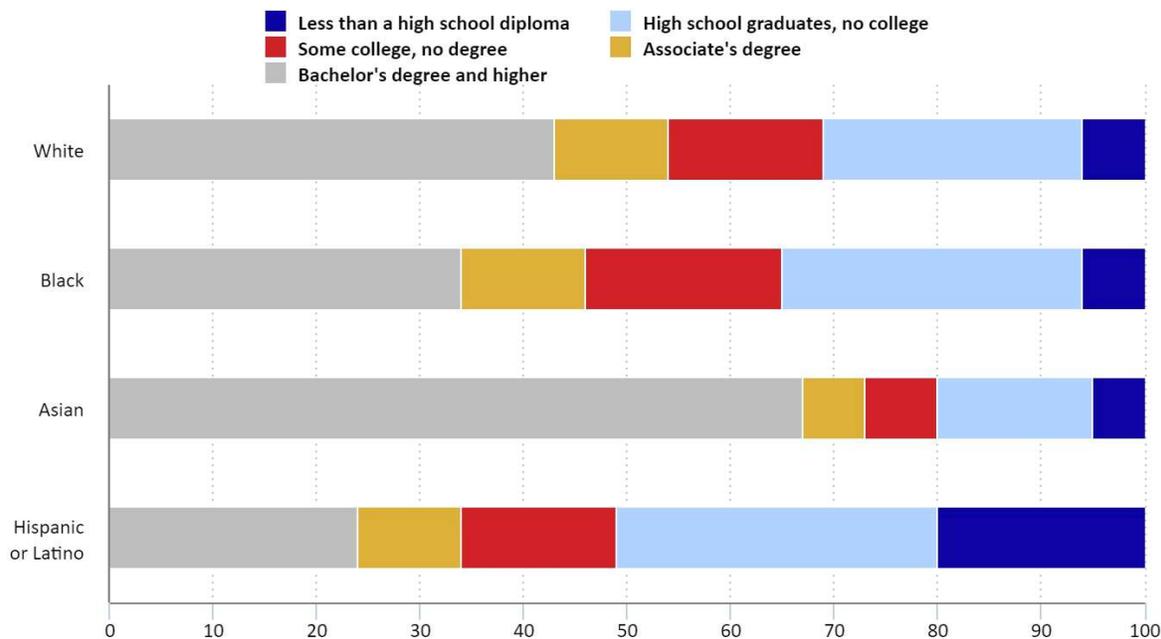
*Note.* From U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020)

This is an interesting phenomenon because Blacks tend to have a net black advantage in that they have higher levels of education than Whites (Mangino, 2019). Blacks tend to over-invest in their education, in relation to their white counterparts. This is happening because the labor market is not favorable to Blacks, so they increase their level of education to increase their advantage in receiving appropriate pay and equitable opportunities (see Figure 5). Generally, their White counterparts do not need to do this because they receive superior remuneration in spite of their educational level (Mangino, 2019).

### Figure 5

*Education Attainment of the Labor Force age 25 and Older by Race and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, 2020 Annual Averages*

**Chart 2. Educational attainment of the labor force age 25 and older by race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2020 annual averages**



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS).



*Note.* From U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020)

### ***Income Equity***

While the education levels for Blacks may be higher, it is not reflected in their income when compared with their White counterparts (Mangino, 2019). The level of racial parity is achieved for Blacks once they receive education at a higher level (e.g., graduate school) and graduate (Mangino, 2019). The data in a study conducted by Mangino (2019) shows that only 10% of the Blacks in the study had levels of education high enough to reciprocate an income that afforded them wage equality with their White counterparts. The challenge that must be addressed is the difficulty Black men have in securing academic achievement because they are an underachieving and underserved group in secondary educational institutions (Peart, 2018).

### ***Career Advancement***

An ethnographic study of 29 Black men and boys revealed that they experience racism while attending school from their cohort student groups and institutional staff (Peart, 2018). This makes it more challenging for Black men to advance in professional services organizations because of the challenges they experience in gaining high educational degrees. Johnson and Eby (2011), however, have another take on this phenomenon.

While African American men may experience unique barriers and institutional discrimination/racism, it seems that those who have more human capital fare better in terms of objective indicators of career success such as salary and promotions. This is important given the African American general perception that decisions are sometimes based on subjective criteria rather than actual knowledge, skills, and abilities. This may provide some evidence to the skeptical African American male that pursuing career success can yield positive results (p. 707).

The need for Blacks to have advance degrees of education in order to obtain equality in their wages when compared with their White colleagues seems to be more of the cultural norm than the antithesis (Mangino, 2019).

### ***Perceived Opportunities for Advancement***

How employees perceive opportunities for success in professional services organizations are tied to their experiences and to the lived experiences they have heard from others. As more minorities enter the workplace, more lived experiences are being shared (Logan, 2019; Olsen et al., 2016). Some organizations sponsor gender diversity management programs and use them as a pipeline to advance women and diverse employees into management roles (Olsen et al., 2016). These programs can produce a positive result. The positive result can create a community of inclusiveness felt by those who participate in the cohort experience. They develop effective communication skills, conflict management skills, increased creativity skills, high performance, and an understanding of the market in which they serve (Cable & Judge, 1996; Olsen et al., 2016; Thomas & Wise, 1999). These factors lead to perceived opportunities for advancement in the workplace. Other aspects also need to be considered. The employees must develop relationships with leaders and decision makers to help ensure advancement takes place. Networking is key to organizational and professional advancement (Ng et al., 2005).

### ***Success Factors***

In determining the characteristics of success, one must look at the literature. Judge et al. (1995) conducted research to determine the extent to which “demographic, human capital, motivational, organizational, and industry/region variables predicted career success” (p. 485). They determined that career success is “the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one has accumulated as a result of one’s work experiences” (Judge et al., 1995,

p. 486). These factors may change based on the perceived success elements and factors of diverse employees as it relates to what they have seen and experienced in professional services organizations. In the study conducted by Judge et al. (1995), they only considered success as it related to their study participants' current jobs and did not consider elements of previous jobs where success may not have been experienced. Their research found that white managers received better evaluations, pay, performance ratings and promotions than their Black colleagues (Judge et al., 1995). This may indicate that Black employees may experience less success in professional organizations than their White colleagues.

The research further indicates that “although research revealed a great deal of information concerning the relationship between quantity of education and career success, less is known about the effects of educational quality on career outcomes” (Judge et al., 1995, p. 490). Additionally, successful executives tend to graduate from universities that are regarded well in professional industries (Judge et al., 1995). This may be a barrier for Blacks who are unable to attend colleges and universities of the caliber referenced in the research and may, therefore not be considered for advancement into leadership roles in professional organizations.

### ***Career Success and Mobility***

It is also worth noting that Blacks who are working successfully in leadership roles, in professional services organizations, have similar lived experiences for how they were able to achieve their goal. Some took an aggressive stance and intrusive measures to ensure they would be a part of leadership development opportunities designed to prepare them for leadership (Jackson, 2018). Others used their passion and commitment to serve as a leader as motivation to secure a leadership role in their organization (Beatty, 2022). Some found that having emotional intelligence, authenticity, the support of family and friends, and the ability to pivot, helped them

craft their leadership identity and prepared them for the role they aspired to achieve (Roberts et al., 2018). Resoundingly, mentorship was the greatest element used to achieve leadership roles in professional services organizations (Catalyst Report, 2009; Roberts et al., 2018; Wingfield, 2020).

### Summary

Diversity, equity, and inclusion in professional services organizations have become a significant concern in recent years. The impact is seen in recruiting (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993; Walker et al., 2012; Wyckoff, 2020), career success (Boudreau et al., 2001; Judge et al., 1999; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001), and perceived imbalances in educational needs for Blacks career advancement opportunities (Mangino, 2012; Peart, 2018). *Brown v. Board of Education* set in motion opportunities for Blacks to receive quality education (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). The impact of the decision is still being felt today. Professional services organization structures vary based on industries, leadership values and politics (Forbes, 1987; Judge et al., 1994; Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

For Blacks who are not professionally and socially connected to internal networks, this may lead to experiences perceived as discriminatory (Bates et al., 2018; Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019; Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Lin et al., 2017; Tran, 2019). Hiring practices and coding in recruitment ads also add to the struggles some Blacks experience in trying to advance in their careers (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993;

Walker et al., 2012; Woodson, 2019; Wyckoff, 2020). When job opportunities include code language that is intended to convince minority applicants that an organization is diverse, it can cause diverse applicants to ask specific questions about diversity efforts, practices, and policies (Avery & McKay, 2006; Bretz et al., 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chapman et al., 2005; Erhart & Ziegert, 2005; Harris & Finks, 1987; Thomas & Wise, 1999; Turban & Keon, 1993; Walker et al., 2012; Woodson, 2019; Wyckoff, 2020). Some minority employees opt to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities so they can hold a leadership position within their own organization (Bates et al., 2018).

The literature provides information on this topic using the theoretical framework of CRT (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Delgado et al., 2017). The use of the CRT lens was used in this study to hear the lived experiences of Black people who have been discriminated against and may have missed opportunities for advancement because of this issue. The themes of organizational diversity, equity & inclusion, professional services organizational structure, Blacks' struggles working in professional services, perceptions of education impact and advancement opportunities, and success factors have all been thoroughly reviewed in the literature.

This study addresses the theoretical and practical value of the importance of listening to the lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations and who have experienced challenges being promoted. The signaling theory and CRT can be used as the lenses from which the problem can be viewed. The literature shows how systemic racism, classism, and discrimination have historically been used as an obstacle for Blacks to be advanced in their fields of expertise and interest. However, the existing literature does not adequately address how to help professional organizations become aware of and intentionally shift from using unconsciously bias-based policies to inclusion-based policies that benefit all employees,

including Blacks. Therefore, the study will fill the gap in the literature by discovering how these obstacles, uncovered when listening to the lived experiences of this group, can be overcome and destroyed.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations who have been promoted into leadership positions. There appear to be barriers in place that keep Blacks from reaching higher levels of leadership in professional services organizations. The research question guiding this study asks about the lived experiences of educated Blacks who work in professional services organizations and have experienced challenges being promoted and advanced in their organizations. This chapter presents the research design, research questions, setting, participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection plan, and trustworthiness. This chapter also provides details about the demographic group selected for this study.

### **Research Design**

The research design used for this study was qualitative. The definition for qualitative research is “Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 42). This approach provides the best way to understand the nuances of the central phenomenon of the study. Additionally, it provides a “final written report or presentation [which] includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 43). The qualitative approach also provides an effective way to capture the non-verbal thoughts of those who are interviewed for the study and allows the researcher to consider the overall perspectives of the individuals who participate in the study. As participants shared their lived

experiences, the researcher made notes of their observation of non-verbal cues being given as the lived experiences were being told. These cues added credence to how participants were affected by the experiences they were sharing.

Specifically, the phenomenological approach allowed for the use of interviews and focus groups to be used to hear the lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The “phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). This approach was created by Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician, and is popular for those who are investigating social and health sciences phenomena.

The type of phenomenological study conducted was hermeneutical. According to van Manen (2014), this approach provides methods for research, which “are the description of personal experiences, conversational interview, and close observation” (Guillen, 2019). The abstemious method used in the study was intended to approach the phenomenon being shared using a specific process of reflecting on lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). The method uncovered the factual reflection of the experiences. It did not use controversial, theoretical, uncertain beliefs, or overly critical thoughts of the participants to explain and share the phenomenon being discussed. Instead, the research was based on the writing and reflections of the experiences being shared in a non-organized and organic way. This made the analysis and understanding of the phenomenon easier to understand and describe to others. Lived experiences are the reflective thoughts of humans who have lived through the phenomenon being researched.

Moustakas (1994) ascribed to the idea that the phenomenological approach allowed those involved in the research to have a feeling that they were being understood. As the researcher asks

questions, listens, and records the lived experiences of those in the study, themes emerge. This provides the data needed to understand the phenomenon. van Manen (2014) suggested the researcher go beyond the surface in asking questions when conducting a hermeneutical phenomenological study. The researcher should attempt to have the person being interviewed return to the time and scene of the event. They should try to feel what they felt as they were experiencing the phenomenon. The researcher should record what they hear, see, and feel from the interviewees' lived experiences. Simply put, this approach allows the researcher to ask the question, "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (van Manen, 2016, p. 9).

In this phenomenological study, the lived experiences were recorded and transcribed. A Microsoft Word document was produced so the research could be analyzed from the statements given by the participants. The design also allowed for themes to be identified and coded as a part of the data analysis process.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this study was on the interpretation of the promotional experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations. A hermeneutical phenomenological approach was used to discover the data. An overarching research question guided the study, and three sub-questions shed additional light on other aspects of the study.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations?

#### **Research Question 1**

What signals have Black professionals experienced in professional services organizations?

**Research Question 2**

How have altered signals influenced the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who were promoted into areas of senior leadership in organizations?

**Research Question 3**

What do Black professionals perceive to be the social norms, expectations, and protocols of those who aspire to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations?

**Setting and Participants**

The focus of this research was to examine the inner workings of professional services organizations and the practices used to determine promotion and advancement opportunities, specifically for Blacks. The setting for the study did not occur in any specifically named professional services organization or site. The participants who are employed, retired, or formerly employed by a professional services organization were invited to participate in the study. Details about the demographic group are provided below.

**Site (or Setting)**

Due to the nature of the study, the setting was a group of various professional services organizations, one of which was in the legal industry. These organizations typically had leadership roles that included the C-suite, managing directors, directors, senior managers, managers, supervisors, lawyers (e.g., shareholders, partners, associates, counsel), paralegals, legal business professionals, and administrative staff. While professional services organizations in the legal industry are held to a standard of excellence and business ethics, they are also known as a workplace that is often filled with biases and discrimination (Nelson et al., 2019). Lawyers experience a high level of discrimination in the workplace (Nelson et al., 2019). Nelson et al. (2019) discussed the following:

...over one-half of African American women reported being the target of discrimination in their workplace in the last two years, as did 43 percent of African American men, between 29 percent and 45 percent of women in other racial and ethnic groups, and 30 percent of LGBTQ attorneys. (p. 1076)

The legal industry is a prime setting to examine the phenomenon of the lived experiences of Blacks being denied promotions and advancements in professional services organizations.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were employed, retired, or formerly employed leaders who work or have worked in professional services organizations. They had experience working in a supervisory, middle management, or senior management role for at least three years. The participants' ages varied between 20 and 70 years old. Participants identified as Black males and Black females who worked for professional service organizations. Professional services organizations included companies that offer legal services, healthcare services, higher education, engineering services, entertainment services, and other services (Burlew & Johnson, 1992). At a minimum, each participant possessed a high school diploma. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that studies should include 20 – 60 interviews; this study included interviews with 10 participants.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher and a Black professional, I was motivated to conduct this research because of experiences I, and others I know, have lived through during our careers. The intention of the research is to inform and enlighten those who are in leadership in professional services organizations that procedures used for decision-making opportunities for advancement and promotions should be reviewed and aligned with appropriate equitable considerations. The

theory of social constructivism was used to help shape this phenomenological study (Geels, 2020). The philosophical assumptions used to guide the study are ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework used for this study is CRT. Through this lens, focused “attention on studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power” was provided (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 30). CRT offers three primary objectives, which include: (1) hearing about lived experiences of discrimination from POC, (2) seeing race as a social construct while acknowledging that racial subjugation must be eradicated, and (3) acknowledging that there are other areas of differences where inequities exist (e.g., gender, sexual identity, class). This study used the first goal of CRT and analyzed the lived experiences of discrimination in professional services organizations as told by POC.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

The three philosophical assumptions addressed in the study are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. My values and beliefs drive my view of the world and how I approach research. Details about the philosophies I prescribe to are provided below.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), an ontological assumption is related “to the nature of reality and its characteristics” (p. 20). It provides that there are many different ways to see the same reality or experience. In order to determine the nature of reality as the ontological assumption used for this study, Creswell and Poth (2018) proposed that the researcher consider using “multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives” (p. 20). The hermeneutical phenomenological study produced

various viewpoints from the participants being interviewed. This, in turn, produced various reality-driven experiences in the data collected. In turn, the researcher saw reality as multiple when viewed through the lens of lived experiences told by multiple people. Therefore, the ontological assumption is that multiple realities exist based on whose view is being considered.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption provides a way for researchers to “get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). In doing so, the researcher is able to subjectively experience what the participant has endured in their experiences of working in professional services organizations where promotions and advancements are challenging to obtain for Blacks. The assumption presupposes that those who are sharing their lived experiences are not experts in the field of research but have gained knowledge on how to navigate and assess the situational environment through their lived experiences. The researcher’s epistemological assumption is that knowledge is gained by experience and is justified by testimonial evidence.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The researcher values the work, experiences, and opportunities provided to Blacks who work in professional services organizations. As an employee of professional services organizations and as a Black person, I have personally seen and experienced barriers to promotion and advancement into leadership roles. I have witnessed discrimination in the workplace and endured experiences of racism. My biases were bracketed in the data collected so the outcome of the final analysis and findings would not be affected.

## **Researcher's Role**

Raised in Washington, D.C., my upbringing was filled with diverse culture experiences, educational focus, and sociological insights. I attended public and parochial schools. Over the years, I obtained a bachelor's degree and a master's degree and have pursued a Doctor of Philosophy degree in organizational leadership. Coming from a well-educated family, I have been taught the value of education, hard work, and good character. During my career, I have been a business owner (i.e., entrepreneur), a learning and development consultant, and an employee of several professional services organizations. Learning and development (i.e., training) is my life's passion and mission work. I have taught classes domestically, globally, and virtually in rural areas and prominent establishments for almost 40 years.

Publishing this work lets the world know that no matter what, God is still in control. He is always present, no matter what lived experiences a person is going through, enduring, or processing. This research delves into some uncomfortable places for certain individuals, participants, and readers. God wants everyone to remember that He has not forgotten them, and they are on His mind.

As the Director of Talent Development in the legal industry, I have mentored, coached, and sponsored various professional employees. Additionally, I serve as a member of the Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee at a firm in the legal industry. While I know the participants personally, I am not their direct supervisor, and none of the participants work for me or under my leadership. I have no professional authority over them or the roles that they hold.

My role in this study was as a human instrument of research. The voices being heard through the lived experiences shared in the study reflect my voice and lived experiences as well (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Having lived through the challenges of being considered for promotion

yet denied for questionable reasons, I have pondered, like others, whether increasing my educational experience might have an impact on decisions being made for advancement and promotion in professional services organizations (Araújo-Pinzón et al., 2017; Assari & Moghani Lankarani, 2018; Carter & Davila, 2017; Fowler, 2020). As such, I am a part of the research and an instrument being used in the study.

### **Procedures**

For the study to be replicated by others, details of the process used are provided in this section. The information below describes how site permissions were obtained, explains that Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was given (see Appendix A), describes the recruitment plan, the data collection and analysis process, and how triangulation for the study was achieved.

### **Permissions**

This study was not conducted at a professional services organization or in any specific workplace. All participants were interviewed using Microsoft Teams, a virtual platform. There was no need to gain permission from any site for the study. Liberty University's IRB granted approval for this research (see Appendix A).

### **Recruitment Plan**

The recruitment size in the United States of America of Blacks working in professional services organizations is “8 percent of employees in professional roles” (Roepe, 2021, p. 1). Additionally, “Black professionals hold only 3.2 percent of all executive or senior leadership roles and less than 1 percent of all Fortune 500 CEO positions” (Roepe, 2021, p. 1). While Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that in some research plans, conducting 20 – 60 interviews is appropriate, for this sample pool of Blacks working in professional services organizations, I

interviewed 10 participants for this study. I knew that I had completed the right number of interviews when I reached the point of saturation. This occurred when the incidents, events, and activities being shared during the interviews no longer presented new information to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additional instruments used included a focus group and journal prompts.

To recruit the participants, I started by asking individuals I know, who are Black leaders in professional services organizations, to participate in the study (see Appendix G). The snowballing sampling process was not used to identify participants. From the individually interviewed participants, I asked a sub-set to join me in a focus group conversation. The group size consisted of five participants. Participants were required to complete a consent form to participate in the research project (see Appendix B).

### **Data Collection Plan**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the four basic types of information that can be collected during the research process are interviews, observation, documents, and audiovisual materials. The data collection plan used for this study included individual interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts. Each data collection type and the consequent analysis plan are discussed below.

#### **Individual Interviews**

For the purpose of this research, the primary method for collecting data was individual interviews. The platform the researcher used for the interviews was Microsoft Teams. Privacy for all participants is imperative. Using a virtual meeting platform preserved the integrity of the conversation and allowed it to be recorded and transcribed. Pseudo-names were used for each participant. Since the participants worked for various professional services organizations, and

would not be identified, meeting at a professional services organization to conduct the interviews would not have been prudent. The setting's name was "MS Teams Study Meeting Space."

Each participant was asked the same set of questions (see Appendix D). Any follow-up questions that were asked during the interview were documented. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Following the interview, the video file was sent to rev.com, and a transcription was produced from each interview. Once the transcript was returned, it was placed on a secure thumb drive for storage, which is being maintained at the researcher's residence in a locked box. The researcher is the only person who has the locked storage box key and access to the thumb drive.

Hollingshead and Poole (2012) suggested that each interview starts with a grand tour question. The intention of the question is to help the participant become comfortable with the researcher. Asking participants to describe their professional journey allows them to open up and comfortably discuss their career and employment history. The grand tour question also sets the interview up for the research question to be discussed. As the participants were discussing their career journey, they shared what helped them move up in the professional organizations for which they worked.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please describe your professional journey. CRQ
2. Explain what has worked for you to achieve success in a professional services organization. SQ1
3. Describe the challenges you have faced when attempting to be successful in a professional services organization. SQ2

4. What professional development, training, mentoring, or sponsorships have you received that have helped prepare you to serve in senior leadership roles? SQ2
5. When (if ever) have you felt your race influenced your ability to be promoted into areas of senior leadership? SQ1
6. When (if ever) have you felt your education level influenced your ability to be promoted into areas of senior leadership? SQ2
7. What are the social norms employees typically engage in when they want to advance into leadership roles? SQ3
8. Describe the expectations employees have when they want to advance into leadership roles. SQ3
9. What are the protocols that are generally followed by employees when they want to advance into leadership roles? SQ3
10. What suggestions, policies, or advice do you have for leaders in organizations who are open to change? SQ2
11. What advice do you have for Blacks who work in professional organizations who would like to be promoted or hired into senior leadership positions? SQ3
12. How can work colleagues demonstrate allyship in professional organizations where Blacks are not being promoted or hired into leadership roles at the same level of consistency as their White colleagues? SQ3
13. At what point do you feel it is appropriate for Black professionals to leave professional services organizations where they do not see themselves and other Black colleagues being promoted or hired into leadership roles? SQ2

14. What motivated you to continue pursuing leadership roles within professional services organizations? SQ3

15. What else would you like to add to our discussion about your experience with advancements and promotions as it relates to Blacks working in professional services organizations? CRQ

Question one focused on the central research question. The question was asked to establish who the participant was and how they have developed professionally during their career. It also provided an opportunity for the participant to share a bit of their personal background (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions two and five were focused on research question 1. The questions invited participants to share details about how they achieved success. The questions uncovered signals participants received that motivated them to move forward in achieving promotional endeavors and making career choices (Drover et al., 2018). Questions three, four, six, 10, and 13 were focused on research question 2. The questions provided participants an opportunity to share their thoughts on what may have held them back and deterred them from achieving success in gaining promotion in a professional services organization. They shared their reflections on how they tried to prepare themselves for their next level assignment in a leadership role and suggestions for companies to consider to make the process more transparent for understanding what is needed for promotion. Some participants left organizations where they were not given promotions. These questions address that concern as well. Questions seven, eight, nine, 11, 12, and 14 were associated with research question 3. These questions drilled down into the nuances of expectations surrounding promotional protocols and expectations. They also provided participants a chance to share on the topic of allyship in their organization. If they are leveraging relationships with non-Black employees to

help prepare for advancement, it becomes evident as they discuss the answers to these questions. Question 15 was the closing question. It is focused on the central research question and provides an opportunity for participants to share additional information about their experiences that were not addressed in the previous 14 questions.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a qualitative research methodologist reviewed the questions. Under their direction, changes were made to ensure the questions were in alignment with the central research question and ensure the respondents provided the data that was necessary for analysis.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

According to van Manen (2014), the researcher should capture research data from the personal lived experiences and observations shared during the individual interviews. Leavy (2020) said that “to analyze in QDA [Qualitative Data Analysis] is to observe and discern patterns within data and to construct meanings that seem to capture their essences and essentials” (p. 6). The researcher analyzed the responses given to the interview questions. Themes, words, and phrases that were used consistently amongst the participants were categorized and analyzed. The researcher kept a journal of notes during the entire data collection process. Summaries were developed from the data. Direct quotes were extracted and analyzed.

Open coding was used to analyze the data. According to Saldaña (2021), a code is “often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 5). The process of coding involves taking the data and placing it into major categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the process, axial coding came forward, and a theoretical model was developed. The codes were then reduced to approximately 30 themes. One category became the major point of focus for the

research. Other categories were created around the phenomenon being researched. This process allowed the researcher to drown in the data and separate the data into meaningful masses of information.

The constant comparative process was also used. The process allowed the researcher to categorize and compare qualitative data for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the data were collected, the researcher went through it and compared incidents, events, and situations to an emerging category that was identified during the data collection process. The intention was to saturate the category with the data. This process allowed the researcher to develop a category with rich and deep data.

Data were also collected during the focus group session and when documents were reviewed. The triangulation technique was utilized during the data analysis process. It provided a way for multiple methods to be used to collect the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Content from the interviews was reviewed by the interviewees for accuracy using the member-checking technique.

### **Focus Group**

The focus group consisted of five participants who were individually interviewed (see Appendix G). The focus group met virtually, using Microsoft Teams, and discussed their experiences as Blacks working in professional services organizations with a desire to be promoted or advanced into leadership roles (see Appendix E). The members of the focus group were selected based on their indications of hindrances to achieving leadership roles, their gender, and the amount of time they served in a leadership capacity. The focus group confirmed and expanded the information shared during the individual interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Focus Group Questions*

1. Please describe your role in the professional services organization for whom you work (or have previously worked). CRQ
2. How are employees advised of advancement opportunities within the professional services organization? CRQ
3. What is the professional services organization's process for determining how promotions are determined and applied? SQ1
4. From your experience, how is race factored into the decision-making process when determining whether to promote individuals within the organization? SQ2
5. From your experience, how are educational levels factored into the decision-making process when determining whether to promote individuals within the organization? SQ2
6. Which business resource groups (BRGs) are available in your professional services organization? SQ3
7. What types of employees are allowed to participate in BRGs? SQ3
8. How does the professional services organization encourage employees to participate in BRGs? SQ3
9. To whom do mentors, sponsors, and advocates, who are members of BRGs, share information with about potential leaders within the group? SQ3
10. What else would you like to add to our discussion? CRQ

The questions asked of the focus group were intended to identify themes within professional services organizations around promotion and advancement practices which may be common to certain industries or professional groups. BRGs were considered as a resource pool

of possible leaders for promotion or advancement. Hearing from participants who understand what BRGs are and how they function added deep and thick data to the study.

Prior to conducting the focus group discussion, a qualitative research methodologist reviewed the questions. Under their direction, changes were made to ensure the questions were in alignment with the central research question and ensured the respondents provided the data that was necessary for analysis.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

The transcript of the focus group discussion was analyzed using the coding and categorizing process. Themes were identified from the coding process of the transcripts. The themes were discussed with the dissertation committee members, and a correlation between the themes and the central research question helped determine the usefulness and appropriateness of the content based on the research being conducted.

### **Journal Prompts**

For this study, participants were asked to journal their thoughts about their lived promotional experiences. These experiences were based on the process they lived through of being considered for promotion or advancement in a professional services organization. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that journaling be used as a supplemental approach for data gathering and interviewing should be the primary resource for collecting data. All collected data were analyzed for the purpose of understanding the process professional services organizations use to determine if employees are ready for promotion or advancement.

### ***Journal Prompts Analysis Plan***

The journal documents were analyzed using the coding and categorizing process. Themes were identified from the coding process of the journals and discussed with the dissertation chair

and committee members. A correlation between the themes and the central research question helped determine the usefulness and appropriateness of the content based on the research being conducted.

### **Data Synthesis**

After analyzing the data collected, it was synthesized using CERQual as a thematic synthesis approach. Downe et al. (2019) described the Confidence in the Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative Research (CERQual) as a new process that can be used to synthesize the data that has been collected during the research process. Colvin et al. (2018) said, “CERQual includes four components for assessing how much confidence to place in findings from reviews of qualitative research (also referred to as qualitative evidence syntheses): (1) methodological limitations, (2) relevance, (3) coherence and (4) adequacy of data” (p. 33). After determining the initial codes, the data were grouped into themes. The themes were grouped together by common descriptions. They were represented by the first order, second order, and third order. The data was manually reviewed using the CERQual approach, and the level of confidence was determined as being high, moderate, low, or very low. The results are shared in the dissertation’s findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness can best be described by asking a simple question: “can the findings be trusted?” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). The four pieces of criteria that can be used to assess the trustworthiness of the findings are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this section, information is shared about the steps taken to ensure the data presented met the threshold of trustworthiness and validated the truth of the study, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

## **Credibility**

Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined credibility as something that “establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants’ original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants’ original views” (p. 121). Credibility was established and accomplished using the following methods: (a) triangulation, (b) peer debriefing, and (c) member-checking.

### ***Triangulation***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), triangulation occurs when “researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study” (p. 328). The researcher used transcriptions of recorded interviews, a focus group discussion, and journal prompts to ensure the validity and accuracy of the data collected for this study. Rich, thick descriptions were also provided with the data. Themes or codes were used to document evidence of information that is consistent among different types of data collected. This further produced evidence of accuracy for the research and the triangulation method used for validation.

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Peer debriefing was utilized as a method for ensuring the credibility of the research information being provided. Creswell and Poth (2018) described this approach as having someone who is very familiar with the context of the research or the phenomenon play devil’s advocate with the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer team working with the researcher reads over the transcripts, checks the processes used for interpretation, and reviews the findings. Additionally, they ensured the researcher followed the procedures accurately and eliminated any unconscious biases in my interpretation of the findings.

### ***Member-Checking***

Member checking is a critical component of the validation process for the research being conducted. The process “involves taking data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). The validation of the themes and the outcomes includes input from the participants. They also advised the researcher if anything was missing from the analysis. The members did not have access to the raw data from the interviews but were able to discern from the overall conclusion if their voices were heard and if their lived experiences were included in the research. Having a sign-off from the participants or focus group validated the data, the research analysis, and the conclusion.

### **Transferability**

Transferability can be described as “the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). The researcher used thick descriptions when describing the findings of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While I created a place in the research for transferability to be applied, it is up to the reader to determine if they will use the approach of transferability when reviewing the findings.

### **Dependability**

The dependability criteria denote that over time, the findings have proven to be stable (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The dependability of the study was confirmed through rich, thick descriptions of the identified themes in the data and member checks to ascertain the correctness of the data. Additionally, as the researcher, I kept a journal of my reflections during the process. Each of these methods added credibility to the techniques used in the study. The study can be

replicated by others using the process described for conducting the research. The dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director reviewed the process used and approved the dependability of the research upon completion of an inquiry audit.

### **Confirmability**

The confirmability of the study was verified through rich, thick descriptions of the identified themes in the data and member checks to ascertain the correctness of the data. Additionally, as the researcher, I kept a journal of my reflections during the process. Each of these methods adds credibility to the techniques used in the study. The confirmability criteria used established “that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination, but clearly derived from the data” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Consideration is given to the privacy of the participants. Since the research participants included Blacks who currently work in professional services organizations, the names and organizations in which they work were not identifiable. If so, that could have a negative impact on the participants’ careers if their authentic thoughts were disclosed and shared publicly. To protect the data, all participants’ names and professional organizations were replaced with pseudonyms. Participants were provided a consent form that was to be completed and signed before being interviewed or before participating in a focus group discussion. Participants were also advised that participation was completely voluntary, and they may have withdrawn from the study at any time prior to the findings being published. The recordings used during the data collection process were secured on a thumb drive, which is being maintained in a locked box at the researcher’s residence and will be destroyed after three years.

## Summary

This chapter described the methodology used to collect, analyze, and validate the data used for this study. The research design used for this study was qualitative, and the approach was hermeneutical phenomenological. The qualitative design provided the best way to gather the data by hearing the lived experiences of the participants and capturing their thoughts via a video recording. The data was collected through individual interview questions, a focus group discussion, and journal prompts that aided in providing deep and thick data focused on aspects of the central research question. The interpretive framework used for the study was CRT. The researcher analyzed, synthesized, and ensured the trustworthiness of the data. Trustworthiness was accomplished using triangulation, peer-debriefing, and member-checking approaches to validate the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of Black professionals who have ascended into leadership roles in professional services organizations. The central research question was: What are the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations? The research questions were: *Research Question 1*: What signals have Black professionals experienced in professional services organizations? *Research Question 2*: How have altered signals influenced the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who were promoted into areas of senior leadership in organizations? *Research Question 3*: What do Black professionals perceive to be the social norms, expectations, and protocols of those who aspire to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations? Chapter Four begins with a chart and a brief description of the ten participants in the study. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym and identified as being a Black professional between the ages of 20 – 70 years old who served in a leadership role within a professional services organization. Data was collected from the participants using semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the research data and outlier findings.

### Participants

The 10 participants in the study were all Black professionals who have worked in professional services organizations. Their ages ranged from mid-40 to mid-60 years old, and the average age was 54. Four males and six females participated in the study. Seven of the participants are married and have children. Three participants are single, and one has children. Regarding the highest level of education for the participants, two have doctorate degrees, five

have master’s degrees, two have bachelor’s degrees, and one has a high school diploma. The industries in which they have served in leadership roles include legal, television media, finance, luxury retail, utilities, commercial real estate, higher education, fintech, healthcare, and advertising. The number of years they served in leadership roles ranged from five years to 40 years, and the average number of years was 18. The participants are described in the chart below and in narrative form.

**Table 1**

*Black Professional Participants*

Black Professional	Years in Leadership Roles	Highest Degree Earned	Title	Industry
Cornell	17	High School Diploma	Vice President	Commercial Real Estate
Imani	10	Juris Doctor	Chief Diversity Officer and Law Firm Partner	Legal
Kevin	15	Bachelors	Brand President	Luxury Retail
Linda	35	Masters	Director of Marketing	Advertising
Melanie	15	Doctorate	Managing Director	Energy
Reginald	8	Bachelors	Technology Manager	Finance/IT
Serena	40	Masters	Fitness Director	Healthcare
Sheila	15	Masters	Senior Associate Program Officer	Higher Education
Tia	17	Masters	SVP of Talent Management and Chief Diversity Officer	FinTech
Timothy	5	Masters	Executive Producer	Television Media

**Cornell**

Cornell is a man in his late 40's. He has served in commercial real estate leadership roles for 17 years of his career. Those roles include serving as Vice President, Senior General Manager, and Regional Property Manager. He is single and has two children. Cornell also has a high school diploma and several certifications. He is a staunch advocate of mentorship and believes that the representation of Blacks matters in professional services organizations.

**Imani**

Imani is in her late 40's and has worked in leadership roles for the past 10 years. She is a female practicing attorney who is also the Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer at a global law firm. She is married and has three children, ages 21, 17, and 15. Her oldest child is a college student at an HBCU. Imani graduated from law school with a Juris doctor degree over 20 years ago. During her career, she has only worked in law firms and has served as the Chair of a Practice Group and the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Prior to entering the legal field, she worked as a first-grade teacher in an urban setting. As the teacher, she found that she functioned as an advocate for her students, their parents, and those in the community who wanted child development to be a priority for their district. This led her to consider a different career that would benefit a wider body of people. She found her niche when she entered the legal field.

**Kevin**

Kevin works in the luxury retail industry as the President of a brand within the professional services organization. He holds a bachelor's degree and has held leadership positions for 15 years, including Director, Senior Director, and Vice President. Kevin is a single man with no children. He is in his late 40's and says that his motivation to continue to climb the

corporate ladder is, simply put, money. He also says that networking has helped bring him to his current level of success.

### **Linda**

Linda is the most seasoned participant in the study, and she is on the back end of her career. She is in her mid-60's and has served in leadership roles for 35 years. She earned an MBA from a prominent PWI. She has worked in the advertising industry as the Director of Marketing. Additionally, she has held positions as Marketing Manager, Senior Marketing Manager, Circulation Manager, and Director of Marketing. While working in higher education, she served as the Strategy Director. She is married and has two sons who she shares life lessons with in relation to being Black while working in a professional services organization. She tells her sons and her students that education and credentials are the keys to professional success for Black employees.

### **Melanie**

Melanie is a female in her early 50's who is a consultant, Chief Operating Officer, Founder, and entrepreneur/business owner. During her career of 15 years, she has served professional services organizations in the energy industry as the Director and Managing Director of Talent Development. She is single and does not have any children. Prior to becoming a Managing Director, she earned a doctorate degree, yet she says the degree did not help her to gain the position to which she was promoted. Melanie feels strongly that mentoring and "mentoring in the moment" have led to her success in being promoted into leadership positions during her career. In turn, she has become a mentor to others.

**Reginald**

Reginald, a man, is in his mid-40's and works in the finance industry as a Technology Manager. He holds a bachelor's degree in Business Management. He has held leadership roles for eight years of his career. Reginald is married and has two children, ages 24 and 16. He says that he has learned that he must work harder than others to be placed in leadership positions. He believes that people need to look the part by being clean cut and sharp while speaking proper English in order to show that they can fit into a leadership role. He has also had to make decisions about how to best handle racist situations at work.

**Serena**

Serena has served in leadership roles for 40 years. As a woman in her early 60's, working in the healthcare industry and for a professional services organization that is predominately white, she has experienced racism at work. Serena is married and has one adult child. During her tenure, she has learned the value of education and professional development. As a Fitness Director, she has pursued and achieved an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree. Serena feels strongly that everything she does has to be better than what everyone else is doing.

**Sheila**

Sheila is a female in her mid-50's who works in higher education. Most recently, she served as a Senior Associate Program Officer of a professional services organization. She has a master's degree and has served in leadership roles for the past 15 years. Sheila is married and has two children. She attributes much of her success to receiving sponsorship from other Black professionals in her organization. Being invited to be groomed by Black leaders who were a part

of the “underground railroad” helped to refine her resume, hone her skills, and provide opportunities for her to display her talents.

### **Tia**

Tia is in her late 50’s and works in the Financial Technology (FinTech) industry. She is a female with a master’s degree who has served in leadership roles in professional services organizations for 17 years. Most notably, she has served as SVP of Talent Development/Chief Diversity Officer, President of two Foundations, and Vice President of Diversity. Tia and her husband have a blended family with five children. Tia believes that leadership is defined by how people cultivate talent in others. With this belief, she strives to be a mentor, a sponsor, and a coach to Black professionals in her professional services organization to help prepare them to move into leadership roles.

### **Timothy**

Timothy works in the television media industry as an Executive Producer. He is a man in his mid-50’s and has served in leadership positions for five years. While working for a television station, he has served as a Senior Reporter, a Talent Acquisition Specialist, and Co-Chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee. Timothy earned a bachelor’s degree at an HBCU and a master’s degree at a PWI. He is married and has one child. During his career, he has benefited from having relationships with White leaders in media who value diversity and understand that Black representation matters. He says they realize that it is good for the business.

## **Results**

There was one central research question guiding this entire study. Additionally, there were three research questions used to describe the experiences of Black professionals working in professional services organizations. The results in this section were produced using data from the

individual semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussion, and the journal prompts. The prominent themes, and data from the sub-themes ascribed to each theme, are presented as follows.

### **We Shall Overcome**

The first theme found within the data was Black professionals in professional services organizations had to overcome many obstacles in order to receive promotion. Obstacles are defined as a lack of visible Black representation in leadership, racism in all forms, and signals leading Black professionals to consider resigning. Serena shared that she discovered, after working for over 30 years, “in an organization that’s over 50 years old and working in an industry that’s described as a White industry, and 86% of the workforce are Black, and less than 1% of leadership are Black, [that] there’s a problem.” There are obstacles in the organization that Black employees are not able to overcome. These obstacles are keeping them from being promoted to leadership positions.

As was shared in chapter two, there is an assumption when Blacks enter predominantly White workplaces, they will have to contend with racism and discrimination (Assari & Moghani Lankarani, 2018; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Killough et al., 2017). Organizations should eliminate or decrease blatant forms of discrimination, which are obstacles, in the workplace (Delgado et al., 2017). Racism shows up as a lack of Black professional representation in leadership positions. Eight out of 10 participants indicated there were many obstacles to overcome. For instance, Serena indicated that as the only Black leader in her professional services organization, she had to overcome several obstacles to be promoted to a director role. The data revealed that representation matters, racism is a problem in professional services organizations, and some find that in order to move up, they should consider moving out of the organization.

### ***Representation Matters***

When Black employees are a part of professional services organizations, they are often looking for a reflection of themselves in leadership. Linda said that when she looked at the eight members of senior leadership in her organization, nobody looked like her. When Imani joined her first law firm, a prestigious northern region law firm, she was the only Black associate. Cornell shared that when he first joined his company, “there was nobody else that looked like me, so I didn't have anybody else on the executive level to look up to. Even when I left, there were no Black men on an executive level at that particular company.” When Black employees see themselves represented in leadership, it gives them hope, encouragement, and belief that they, too can reach that level of the organization. When they do not see it, they often do not believe it will happen. As Cornell shared, “the difficulty for me was, again, not seeing somebody on the executive level that looked like me. So in my mind, I would probably never grow to that level at that particular company.”

### ***Racism***

According to Poole et al. (2021), racism is systemic oppression. Many of the participants described experiences akin to racism. For example, Tia said, “I've faced discrimination. I've faced micro-inequities. I have been marginalized. This has happened tons of times. I've been suppressed by white men, like mansplained, and talked down to.” Racism is one of those elements that people often recognize immediately when they are experiencing it. Serena described her experience with racism, this way:

I'd never called it racism until recently. We hired an African American male as our first Black person in senior leadership. He had gone through in one week what I had gone through, when I first started working there 30 years ago. People were spying on him.

People were listening to his phone calls. People were just trying to tell him what to do.

Weird stuff. I mean, they used to track how many pens I used, they wanted to know how many phone calls I made. I'm like, what kind of place is this?

When trying to hire Black team members, Cornell said he experienced how “they will change the rules sometimes depending on who they want in that role. And I've seen that happen a number of times.”

### ***Resignation***

There are many reasons why people leave professional services organizations, and the participants of this study were able to state some of these reasons. Imani shared that she left a job when she was overlooked for a promotion. Sheila asked Black professionals before they make the decision to resign, to consider if it's worth being the “fiancé of 15 years who keeps getting empty promises” or hears “we are working on it,” “we don't have enough in the budget,” or “we are shifting things” but continues to see the organization's “I don't care” attitude. Many of the participants who had endured racism, microaggressions, and being overlooked for promotional opportunities shared that, at some point, they felt that “enough is enough,” and left the organization for better experiences. As Serena said, “And I think the biggest challenge for me is trying to maintain a sense of value in an organization that doesn't value me and not getting so discouraged that I forget why I'm coming to work every day.”

### **Support from Others**

The second theme found in the analysis of the research findings was that support from leaders of influence is necessary for achieving promotional and advancement success. Support from peers, mentors, sponsors, advocates, and allies helps to move the needle forward for Black professionals who aspire to move into leadership roles in professional services organizations.

Melanie, who serves as a managing director in a utility professional services organization, said, “What I will say is what I was also fortunate to have sponsors in the organization.” Having that type of support helps to get Black professionals over the promotional line and into senior leadership roles.

### *Mentors*

As mentioned in chapter two, the best vehicle to use for achieving leadership roles in professional services organizations is mentoring (Catalyst Report, 2009; Roberts et al., 2018; Wingfield, 2020). The participants agreed. Seven of the 10 participants (i.e., Imani, Melanie, Sheila, Timothy, Kevin, Cornell, and Linda) mentioned that they benefitted from relationships with mentors during their careers. Linda shared that “all of my professional mentors were Caucasian, Jewish, and White.” Imani participated in “one-on-one, informal mentoring.”

Melanie stated:

I was open to being mentored in the moment because I recognized that leaders had strengths in different things. If I saw somebody move a group to consensus, I wanted to explore. I could watch and read the room, but I wanted to get in their head and understand more about that. There could be another leader who was very great during a midst of crisis and change, being able to come to the room and bring a sense of calm and resolve. So, I wanted to learn from that leader with that. So that's what mentoring looked like for me.

Additionally, all of the participants mentioned the importance of mentorships for Black professionals who want to advance or be promoted into leadership roles. Some of the participants also attributed their professional success to mentoring that took place through external connections made via networking opportunities afforded them because of the professional

development opportunities they were offered. Joining professional groups provided access to additional mentors who were willing to assist with professional development. Melanie, Sheila, and Kevin still maintain relationships with mentors who assisted them many years ago.

### *Sponsors*

Sponsors and sponsorship programs can be used as a pipeline resource to advance and promote Black employees into leadership roles (Olsen et al., 2016). Timothy shared that a sponsor could make sure that “your name is in the right room, and when you are not even in the room, but your name is in the room, then that's a wonderful thing.” Reginald applied for a position and was told the hiring manager was still looking for the right person. Here’s what he said happened next:

And to be honest with you, at that particular point and time, it angered me because I felt I was that person, so why are you looking for someone else? And one of the partners made a phone call to the hiring manager and said, ‘Hey, Reginald is amazing, and we don't want to lose him. It'd be a travesty to lose him.’ And two days after that phone call, I got the promotion.

As Imani shared, she appreciates sponsors because they are “being a voice for me when I'm not able to be in the room to be a voice for myself.” Tia said that her experiences have shown her that

endorsement may not always come from your direct hire, your manager. You should get endorsement, and this is where sponsorship comes in, which is different from mentorship, which is different from coaching.

It worked for Melanie. She said she was “fortunate to have sponsors in the organization” which led to her being promoted and to her professional success.

### *Advocates*

At times, Black professionals have to become advocates for themselves (Bell, 1990). As Serena mentioned, “we need to not be afraid to advocate for ourselves.” If Black professionals are fortunate and good at building relationships, they will find advocates in their White counterparts. Such was the case with Kevin, as he shared his promotional experience in his journal prompt.

I'll go to the space when I was promoted from vice president to president of the brand company. It came through the advocacy of a lot of White men and White women who supported me in getting to the next level, because they knew what I was capable of and could do in the president's role. It was also due to a high level of relationship networking. I was able to show up as my authentic self and get the results that I needed. I also exceeded expectations from what they needed which got me promoted from vice president to president.

Linda connected with someone at a marketing conference who would become her advocate. She said, “I met a wonderful Jewish woman. She was a vice president of marketing. She got me on the board of directors of some of the regional marketing organizations, and that was such a great exposure for me.”

### **Strategies for Promotion and Advancement**

The third theme revealed in the data analysis is that Black professionals must develop strategies that will lead toward their promotion or advancement in professional services organizations. Those strategies should be developed using information gained from professional development opportunities, knowledge gained from educational experiences, and insight provided through networking. One strategy that works is to ensure Black professionals are on

someone's succession plan. As Kevin shared, "I always challenge, especially Black and Brown professionals, to figure out whose succession plan you're on. If you don't know whose succession plan you're on, shame on you! If you are on nobody's succession plan, even more shame."

### ***Professional Development***

When the opportunity presents itself, Black professionals should engage in professional development for upskilling and for networking. When a professional services organization does not make opportunities available, Black professionals should seek out professional development on their own. Imani's advice "for Black professionals is to get what you need from outside the organization to equip you to be able to navigate structures and processes that weren't built for us." The research participants shared their strong belief in the positive impact of professional development. Serena said that Black professionals should "pursue learning, pursue professional development, pursue personal development. Never stop working on your ability to be competent with your skill." As a professional who has served 40 years in leadership roles, she also shared, "we need leadership training, even with the leaders that have been there for years." Professional development can provide training and in areas that are not technical. During the focus group discussion, the following was mentioned.

If you come in the door, and you're compassionate, and you've got skills, you've got some knowledge and abilities, I can train you. I can train you to do equipment, but I can't train you to be nice to people. I can't train you to have compassion. I can't train you to have character.

Another topic within professional development is cultural competencies. As a participant mentioned during the focus group discussion, "just because you feel uncomfortable with a

particular race doesn't mean you should not engage with them.” Imani has attended professional development sessions during her career. She said, “I’ve also participated in professional development opportunities in legal. There are a variety of industry groups, particularly for folks who are diverse-identifying in some way, shape or form.” Linda’s professional development included attending sessions that were held over multiple days. She said, “when I worked in the big corporate office...they had a lot of professional development. They sent me out to several sessions, overnight programs. I was on the road quite a bit. They really were focusing on developing my skills.” Regarding professional development sessions, Kevin shared that he has, “gone through several of those that are external and attended things...that would help kind of push my career to the next level.” Tia mentioned that sometimes, that people have to “seek professional development.” Ultimately, she said that she attended “countless leadership programs that various corporations put me through over the years as I was matriculating through and going up [the corporate ladder].” Professional development is vital for advancement and promotion to leadership positions for Black professionals in professional services organizations.

### ***Education***

One of the key indices used as a signal to determine high-quality candidates for promotional and advancement opportunities is education (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012). When hiring managers are advised that a candidate has an observable and verifiable college degree, it sends a signal to the receivers (e.g., hiring managers) that the person is a qualified candidate (Certo, 2003). They may also feel that since the candidate has a degree, they have the wherewithal to identify and secure funding to secure their education (Kharouf et al., 2020). Alternatively, the signal may also indicate that the candidate without a college degree may be deemed as being inferior in quality and lacking in

problem solving and critical thinking skills that are needed to obtain a college degree (Certo, 2003).

Most of the participants shared strong opinions about education being the necessary ingredient for promotion in most professional services organizations. Sheila shared that at her university, a person could not get a job as a secretary without having a bachelor's degree. Five of the 10 participants have master's degrees. Two have doctorate degrees. During the focus group discussion, two of the five participants said that advanced degrees were required for senior leaders to have in their professional services organizations. However, this was not true for those working in commercial real estate, luxury retail, or private healthcare. Melanie joined her organization with a doctorate degree, yet it had no bearing on her employment. Cornell said he thinks that education is important, but in most of the organizations where he's worked, he has witnessed how "sometimes they use that when it's to their advantage to put a particular person in that role that they want to put in the role." Advanced education is important and helpful for those who are preparing to move into leadership positions, but in the case of the participants, it did not always guarantee access to higher levels within professional services organizations.

### ***Networking***

Networking is one of the best ways for Black professionals to connect, engage, and assist each other with gaining opportunities to work in leadership positions in professional services organizations (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019; Ng et al., 2005; Thacker & Freeman, 2021). During the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, participants shared their experiences with BRGs and ERGs. They discussed the fact that networks could often be found in BRGs and ERGs. Since it can be tough getting noticed inside of an organization, becoming the chair or co-chair of a BRG or ERG demonstrates

leadership potential to decision makers. Sheila shared that in the higher education industry, employees who hold those leadership positions are a part of the pipeline for other leadership roles in the organization. Tia mentioned that she started networking with people who were already in the role she was aspiring to be in as well. Kevin's take on networking is that "sometimes we think networking is that you're asking for something. It's not that you're asking. You're just getting to know it may lead to something and it may lead to nothing. I also think it's a lost art."

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations who were promoted into leadership positions. The study utilized one central research question and three sub questions to describe the experiences of the participants. The responses to the questions based on research findings are shared below.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations? The perspective of the participants is that the promotional experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations are, at times, very different from the promotional experiences of their White counterparts. They seem to have to do more to get farther ahead. At times, the rules seem to change when it is time for them to be considered for promotions. Serena shared that some of the people in her organization want to move forward in their careers but cannot afford to attend school. Sheila said, "the higher level that you get to, the more the positions are not advertised. You'll see people internally being promoted. There was

never an opportunity for others to apply. And unfortunately, that's a standard of how those work.”

### **Research Question 1**

What signals have Black professionals experienced in professional services organizations? When Black professionals join professional services organizations, as Linda said, they have to “learn the signs of things and learn the language.” As Imani shared, when something is “articulated in formalized ways, maybe it's raised during performance evaluation, or there’s some recognition that, ‘Hey, this is a good, firm citizen,’ usually what we hear is this is a team player type of a person.” The signal the message sends is that the person is doing a good job and fitting into the environment. There are other signals sent that infer a presumption of incompetence based on prior work history with other Black professionals. As Kevin shared, “when you walk into any room of people that you don't know or you go into an organization of people that you don’t know, they assume that you’re like the others that look like you.”

When confronting racism in the workplace, as was the case with Reginald, Black professionals must make decisions about exposing racism and facing possible harassment or remaining quiet and acting as though it is not an issue. At the suggestion of leadership, Reginald went to Human Resources to complain about the racism he experienced in the workplace. He explained that “on one hand, I’m bothered at what was said, but then on the other hand, if I go on record and I’m there, then I’m labeled as this angry Black man.” He said, furthermore, “I feel like it’s, damned if I do; damned if I don’t.” The HR representative’s response was, “It's up to you, Reginald. You need to be able to decide which one you want to do.” Reginald received a signal of feeling devalued in the professional services organization. It caused him to consider leaving the organization.

## Research Question 2

How have altered signals influenced the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who were promoted into areas of senior leadership in organizations? Altered signals, provided by mentors, sponsors, and advocates, have influenced the promotional lived experiences of Black professionals who were promoted into senior leadership positions in professional services organizations. During the focus group discussion, Cornell shared that in his organization, a sponsor or advocate, who was a White leader in the organization, would often be the leader in a networking group for Black professionals. He said, “one of the things that really got to me was that they discourage allowing people to get together on their own, unless there was somebody present from a sponsor standpoint.” Additionally, some organizations have leaders who have formed an informal and unofficial “underground railroad.” As Sheila shared during her interview, Black professionals in her organization would seek out members of the “underground railroad” for help with upskilling, resume refining assistance, and interview coaching. The leaders also become sponsors and advocates for their Black colleagues and send altered signals to leadership about their skills and abilities with the intention of helping them advance.

Timothy shared his experience with getting hired by a television station. While attending the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) conference, he visited the booth of a television station in which he was interested in gaining an interview. He was told that the news director was not available, and he was encouraged to return later to meet him. When he returned, he found out that the news director, who was White, “went to [the] National Association of Black Journalists Convention looking for diversity.” He wanted to hire someone Black for his station. On another occasion, the news director told Timothy there were “all white people around the table.” He intended to change that situation, and he did.

### Research Question 3

What do Black professionals perceive to be the social norms, expectations, and protocols of those who aspire to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations? The social norms Black professionals perceive to be what are required to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations include attending social outing events, golfing outings, networking events, retreats, happy hour events, and other in-office events where leaders will engage and interact with employees. Engagement is the expectation for social norms. The issue is, as Tia suggested, that “you only engage if you are invited.”

When it comes to protocols, Tia said in her experience, she has found that, “the protocol is not waiting for managers to create the opportunity, but you go into the system, see what jobs are available, apply for it internally, and then you go get endorsement!” When a process is not in place which provides step-by-step instructions for how to apply and interview for promotional advancements, mixed signals are sent to the employee population on how hiring and promotional decisions are made. In those situations, getting promoted is usually based on sponsorships and relationships with hiring managers. Often, Black professionals find out about open positions after someone else has been interviewed and hired. Linda shared how she was asked to train someone how to work in her area, and later found out that person was being promoted to become her manager even though she had less education and experience than Linda. The signal she received was that she was not valued by the professional services organization.

A protocol that seems to be understood is that BRGs require a sponsor or a leader to be a part of the group. In some cases, the leader is not a part of the population for the BRG. Such was the case with the BRG Cornell was a part of in his professional services organization. The leader

was a White female, and the group was for Black professionals. He shared that the members felt intimidated when she was in the room attending their meetings. He said,

There were times when I would have to remind her that this is an opportunity for us to bring information to the company that they can use. We can't silence people when they want to speak up about something. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense to have this group if we're not going to seriously listen to people and take it back [to leadership].

Additionally, Cornell felt that the level of respect and the amount of change garnered from their group was different than from other BRGs. He said, "the other groups, LGBTQ Pride Group, and the Latinx, all of those other groups I think were actually heard and did see some change. But I didn't feel that way for the Black group." See a synopsis of the research questions, themes, and participants' quotes below in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Research Questions, Themes, and Participants' Quotes*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Participants' Quotes</b>
<u>Central Research Question</u> What are the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who work in professional services organizations?	We shall overcome	<p>"The higher level that you get to, the more the positions are not advertised. You'll see people internally being promoted. There was never an opportunity for others to apply. And unfortunately, that's a standard of how those work."</p> <p>"I have been in situations where I said, 'You know what? I'm not present in this environment, and I never will be because what I've got to bring is not enough to overcome what I feel is present in this organization.' And I said, 'And it's time to go.'"</p> <p>"Doing the little things where no one can try to stereotype you. I mean,</p>

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<p><u>Research Question 1</u> What signals have Black professionals experienced in professional services organizations?</p>	<p>We shall overcome</p>	<p>you're not going to ever get past the fact that you're Black, you just have to present yourself in the best possible light because it is true, that you have to work harder to get through, and constantly being aware, and being on the offensive, and on the defensive, to be able to succeed."</p>
<p><u>Research Question 2</u> How have altered signals influenced the promotional lived experiences of Blacks who were promoted into areas of senior leadership in organizations?</p>	<p>Support from others</p>	<p>"On one hand, I'm bothered at what was said, but then on the other hand, if I go on record and I'm there, then I'm labeled as this angry Black man."</p> <p>"We work in a world that the reality is everything we do is going to have to be better than anybody else."</p> <p>"We have to be super qualified." "[The news director] went to [the] National Association of Black Journalists Convention looking for diversity."</p> <p>"I was under the impression that if I did a good job, they would notice me, and they would say, 'Look at Timothy, he's doing such a good job. Let me go over to Timothy, and ask him, if he would like to have a leadership position?' That did not happen. Because they think you're happy, therefore, if you're happy doing your work, then why am I going to bother you? Because you're happy, I don't want to disturb your happiness."</p> <p>"Be a voice for me when I'm not able to be in the room to be a voice for myself."</p>
<p><u>Research Question 3</u> What do Black professionals perceive to be the social norms,</p>	<p>Strategies for promotion and advancement</p>	<p>"The protocol is not waiting for managers to create the opportunity, but you go into the system, see what jobs are available, apply for it</p>

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expectations, and protocols of those who aspire to attain leadership positions in professional services organizations?

internally, and then you go get endorsement!”

“Our business resource group (BRG) is a pipeline towards promotion.”

“Golf is a big thing. I have never played golf personally. There have been times I have felt disadvantaged from colleagues who did, and who were always out on the golf course with somebody.”

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### Summary

This chapter provided rich and thick descriptions of the lived experiences of Black professionals in professional services organizations. The obstacles they must overcome were discussed using the lenses of representation, racism, and resignation. Getting support from mentors, sponsors, and advocates helps Black professionals progress in their career trajectories into leadership roles. Having strategies in place, that are developed for learning gained through professional development, education, and networking helps to solidify the qualifications of Black professionals who want to advance into leadership roles in professional services organizations. In conclusion, Tia shares this advice for Black professionals, “have a sense of your own worth and value to navigate what is, in many ways, a hostile industry or an environment that was not built for you and is not built to support you.”

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic review of and record the lived experiences and encounters of those who work in professional services organizations and have achieved positions of leadership in their organization or chosen field. The results of the study aid in determining the role of education in the promotion of Black professionals to leadership positions. This chapter provides a summary of the interpretations and ideas found in the research data. This discussion will be shared in five subsections, including (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

### Discussion

The underrepresentation of Black professionals in leadership positions in professional services organizations is a real problem (Fowler, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Miller, 2020; Poole et al., 2021; Scott, 2018). Lower-level positions in professional services organizations are filled with POC, yet leadership in most organizations does not reflect the makeup of the employees (Borry et al., 2021). The results of the study show there are several reasons for the underrepresentation. The findings suggested that lack of representation, racism and resignations are all obstacles that reveal why there is an underrepresentation of Black professionals in leadership roles in professional services organizations. As Serena shared, “I think the biggest challenge for me is trying to maintain a sense of value in an organization that doesn't value me, and not getting so discouraged that I forget why I'm coming to work every day.”

Additionally, Black professionals need support. Those who mentor, sponsor, and advocate for Black professionals are helping to close the gap in leadership representation.

Strategies that are utilized help to level the playing field. The strategies include gleaning from professional development, engaging in advanced education, and exploring networking options.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The thematic findings of this study are focused on the underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations. The study found that obstacles must be overcome by Black professionals who aspire to be promoted or hired in leadership roles. Peer colleagues and leaders can be utilized as resources who can help Black professionals overcome obstacles. Employing strategies for success will help push Black professionals toward their intended goal of achieving a promotion or advancement into a leadership role in a professional services organization.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

The results match those observed in earlier studies. The participants indicated that representation in professional services organization leadership roles matters. They need advocates to speak for them when opportunities, known and unknown, are revealed. Networking is the key to successfully gaining promotion and advancement in professional services organizations.

The research data concurred with the literature review shared in chapter two of this dissertation. It was stated that BME employees and White employees note four areas of necessity for advancement to leadership roles. These areas include visibility, networks, development, and management support (Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Of the four areas mentioned, three areas were identified by the research participants as being necessary elements for promotion or advancement into leadership roles in professional services organizations. They were networks, development, and management support. Visibility was mentioned in the form of

being seen and heard within the organization. It was not a primary theme or sub-theme in the data.

**We shall overcome.** The participants in the study repeatedly shared that the representation of Black professionals in leadership roles, matters. When they do not see it, they tend not to believe it can be achieved. The reality is that Black professionals believe there is a glass ceiling and a sticky floor that was created by White male professionals that keeps them from advancing in professional services organizations (Sales et al., 2020). Many of the research participants mentioned that they had frequently, and in many cases been the only Black professional in a leadership role in their professional services organization. The burden of being “the only one” also carries the weight of paying the emotional and diversity tax previously stated in the literature review. They also felt the need to become the bridge to help others cross over into leadership roles.

As stated in chapter two, according to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), 8.6% of employees filling management roles who are 16 years and older are Black. Of that group, 5.9% hold chief executive positions. In comparison, 82.2% of employees filling management roles who are 16 years and older are White. Of that group, 85.7% hold chief executive positions. There is a vast difference in the number of Black professionals who hold leadership positions in the workforce.

The research participants mentioned that racism was something they had experienced during their careers and trajectories into leadership roles in professional services organizations. It was such a common experience that Linda said, “You’re going to face some racism in most cases. Obviously, there’s exceptions to the rule. I’ve faced it at every level. I’ve managed through it. And at this point in my life, I’m past the point of... I’m desensitized.” What Linda

shared is in alignment with the CRT theoretical framework used for this study. The CRT “is an interdisciplinary approach emerging from social activism...whilst acknowledging that oppressions cannot be neatly separated or categorized, CRT premises the significance of ‘race’ as an organizing structure and the endemic, insidious, and enduring everyday practice of racism in society” (Rankin-Wright et al., 2020, p. 1129).

Racism is a systemic and endemic problem in professional services organizations. Racism has ties to the “old boys’ network” (Carter & Davila, 2017). When Black professionals are unable to access that network, due to their race, it hinders their advancement into areas where the network reigns. Tia described the functionality of the old boys’ network in this way, “they’ll give you one seat, but White men are so challenged by it, because of their own internal struggles with this zero sum game...[That’s the old] boys club. It’s like internal mobility.” One reason for this, which was mentioned in the focus group, is that some groups of people, operate with blind spots. They are unable to see how the world works outside of their own environment.

The data reveals that when Black professionals have had enough, they see resigning as their only option. Several of the research participants mentioned that when they tried to demonstrate their leadership and skill abilities, and when they saw others being promoted over them with fewer qualifications and experience, they opted to leave their professional services organizations. The signals they received from the organization helped to influence their decision to leave. Michael Spence (1973) developed the signaling theory and asserted that everyone gives off signals and the signals can be used for hiring practices, determining promotional opportunities, and developing organizational effectiveness (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Certo, 2003; Drover et al., 2018; Karasek & Bryant, 2012; Kharouf et al., 2020; Spence, 1973; Sun et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2019). The signals Black professionals in the study group shared include, the

presumption of incompetence, being made to feel unprepared, nitpicking, shifted budgets, and relocated finances. Additional comments were made about being told that the organization is still working on finding a way to promote the individual, stating that things were shifting and not having enough in the budget to make a change right now. These microaggressions, exclusion statements, reactivity, and general feelings of discrimination are most likely the factors that in 2021 led one-third of Black women professionals to consider leaving their employment (Catalyst Report, 2009; Catalyst Report, 2021; Travis & Thorpe-Moscone, 2018). The issue is serious, and the findings revealed in the study match the literature used in the review for this dissertation.

**Supportive Leaders.** The research data reveals that most of the people who can help Black professionals advance into leadership roles in professional services organizations are the mentors, the sponsors and the advocates. Many times, they have a seat at the table where decisions are made or influence with those who make promotional and hiring decisions. The study participants adamantly voiced their appreciation for the support of mentors, sponsors, and advocates throughout their careers. They shared this information in their interviews, the focus group discussion, and the journal prompts. In his journal prompt, Kevin shared, “a lot of White men and White women that supported me to get to [the] next [level] because they knew what I was capable of in this president’s role.”

The literature review reveals resoundingly that mentorship was the greatest element used to achieve leadership roles in professional services organizations (Catalyst Report, 2009; Roberts et al., 2018; Wingfield, 2020). The research data from the participants concur with the literature. Each research participant shared how mentoring helped them achieve some level of success in a professional services organization. Some of the mentors were not a part of the organization where they served. Others participated in peer-to-peer mentoring within their organization.

Mentoring takes on many different forms. Melanie introduced a new concept for mentoring, which she called mentoring in the moment. She shared that following a meeting, she would stop an executive and ask how they were able to “move a group to consensus...I could watch and read the room, but I wanted to get in their head and understand more about that.” Her experience was of receiving mentorship in the moment. Additionally, she shared that “there could be another leader who was very great during a midst of crisis and change, being able to come to the room and bring a sense of calm and resolve. I wanted to learn from that leader.” Mentoring in the moment takes confidence, guts, and drive. When accomplished, the benefits reaped are rewarding.

Sponsors are generally considered to be champions in organizations. They usually have leadership roles that entitle them to have some influence with hiring managers and influence with decision makers. Reginald shared how one of the partners in his professional services organization made a call to a hiring manager about him and his skills. That one call directly led to Reginald receiving a promotion into a role previously filled by a White female colleague who resigned from the organization. Reginald benefited from his relationship with someone who would champion his cause as a sponsor.

Sponsors may inform colleagues of potential job opportunities of which they may not be aware (Baker et al., 2021). During the focus group discussion, several participants mentioned that they sponsored others in the organization who were Black professionals. They would ask if the person had considered applying for certain roles and opportunities. Others introduced Black professional colleagues to leaders with influence. One participant shared that she would give her Black professional colleague an opportunity to present information during a meeting that the leader would normally have presented. This gave other leaders in the professional services

organization an opportunity to experience the professionalism, presentation style, and abilities of the Black professional colleague.

As Kevin shared during his interview, “I think that when you get beyond allyship, and you go to advocacy, that's when you turn the knob.” An advocate is one who understands the strengths of an individual and will fight for them when they cannot speak up and fight for themselves (Baker et al., 2021). Linda shared that she left an organization because there was no one, above her to advocate for her. Imani mentioned that her experience included having a White attorney colleague advocate for her and share feedback from a client with her that was helpful. They made mention to others leadership attorneys that even though her hourly numbers were not where they should be, the quality of her work was high. Several participants mentioned that they were in the position to advocate for others. Additionally, many mentioned that Black professionals should advocate for themselves. This is an agreement with what was mentioned in chapter two about Black professionals, especially Black female professionals, being encouraged to be advocates of themselves to advance into leadership roles (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977; Butler et al., 1997; Griffen, 2019). The data clearly points out that when advocates (and allies) are supporters of Black professionals, it helps them to advance into leadership roles in professional services organizations.

**Strategies for Promotional Success.** To help Black professionals advance into leadership roles in professional services organizations, they should develop strategies for their success. One strategy that works is participation in professional development training opportunities. As was shared in chapter two, providing access to learning and development opportunities is essential to the success of moving professionals from one level to another, especially as it relates to moving them into leadership positions (Forbes, 2020; Harrison et al.,

2022). When Black professionals ask to attend professional development events, some White employers do not fully understand the scope and necessity attached to the request. It provides Black professionals with a sense of belonging and acceptance in the organization (Killough et al., 2017).

As was discussed in the focus group, when opportunities present themselves to take classes and to learn, Black professionals should take full advantage of those opportunities. Tia shared that she sought out professional development. She attended countless leadership programs and attended lots of professional development conferences. Sheila attended many internal professional development offerings at the higher education institution where she worked. She also shared that if a person's leadership believes in them, they will invest in them. When professional development opportunities are not offered, it might be best for the Black professional to invest in themselves. That is what Melanie did. She shared the following.

When I think about training, formal training, most of that came from my level of investment in myself. So again, it's that I wasn't the type that was dependent on the organization giving me things. My postgraduate work was an investment in myself, raising my hand to go to classes, a willingness to invest in myself.

Education is another strategy that can be used to help elevate Black professionals into leadership roles in professional services organizations. Serena shared that education is important and it does not matter if it is formal education or informal education; it is all important. She also shared that they have several positions in her professional services organization where experience should be the qualification for acceptance in the role, but a degree is required to do the job. She feels this is to ensure the playing field does not get leveled, and certain types of individuals are not wanted in those positions. The signal is clearly being sent, according to

Serena. Linda shared that she believes that credentials are necessary for Black professionals to have when they want to advance into leadership roles. Sheila shared that in the field of higher education, “you know if you have a bachelor, if you have a masters, if you have PhD, they look at it differently, it's how you're education... they look at how many degrees you have.” The education factor differs depending on the industry and position being discussed.

As was shared in chapter two, there is an assumption that education is the great equalizer for Black professionals, but this has not proven itself to be true (Griffen, 2019). Most of the participants in the study group shared that education is very important; however, their education may not have been the deciding factor in gaining access to leadership roles in their professional services organization. What education will do is equip Black professionals with knowledge, information, and understanding about their areas of expertise and influence. The research does show that some professional services organizations change requirements for the education factor at-will. When viewed through the CRT lens, this does have a direct impact on Black professionals being advanced into leadership roles in professional services organizations.

Moreover, networking appears to be the most popular strategy being used by Black professionals for advancement into leadership roles in professional services organizations. Previously stated literature findings suggest that networking is key to organizational and professional advancement (Ng et al., 2005); however, BME employees are commonly unable to network with those in authority (Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). For this reason, they may have to find outside resources for networking opportunities. One form of networking mentioned by Timothy is to simply knock on the door of an executive leader and ask if they have five minutes to chat. If so, the conversation should be focused on getting to know the person, personally. He suggests asking about their day or the weekend. Inviting them to lunch or

to have coffee is also an effective way to engage the leader. In Kevin's journal prompt, he shared that relationship building is an essential component of networking and it has worked for him.

During the focus group discussion, there was a lot of conversation around BRGs, also known as ERGs. These groups have built in opportunities for networking. They are typically focused on a particular demographic group or commonly themed cause. BRGs and ERGs focused on Black professionals provide opportunities for engagement with other Black resources that can help motivate, inspire, and refine group members. The research group shared that these groups also provide pipelines for leadership roles in professional services organizations. The power of BRGs, according to a focus group member, is that when a person is a "Co-Chair or Chair of a BRG, know that senior leadership has their eye on you. And so, people see as that opportunity, an incentive to move up in leadership, and not just come in as the committee level." Used appropriately, it can help advance a Black professional into a leadership role within a professional services organization.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of the study reveal two implications for leaders and hiring managers in professional services organizations. The implications are discussed in the following two sections.

#### ***Implications for Policy***

Since most of the participants indicated, they were aware of inequitable hiring and promotion practices taking place in companies, professional services organizations should consider creating policies for hiring managers to follow when considering candidates for promotional and advancement opportunities. The policies should be universally applied for all hiring and promotion decisions. They must be diversity, equity, and inclusion compliant and should be posted on an Intranet where all employees have access to the content. The policies

should include posting all job openings, salary ranges, and qualification requirements.

Additionally, 30% of the candidate pool, for promotional and advancement opportunities should be Black and minority professionals. The protocols and procedures for advancement into leadership roles, specifically, must be stated and addressed. Adherence to the policy must be compulsory and strictly followed. When not followed, corrective actions must be taken which may include termination for non-compliance of the policy.

Several of the participants mentioned the concern employees in their organizations had around needing approval from their supervisors to apply for a different position within the professional services organization. It was also mentioned that supervisors would allegedly hold employees back from being promoted or advanced because the supervisor did not want the person to leave their department. Employees who want to apply for a position within the professional services organization, should be able to do so without approval from their supervisor. The hiring and promotion policy should allow anyone, in any part of the organization, to apply for any position for which they feel they are qualified to hold. Some organizations do not allow internal talent transfers to other parts of the organization. This type of policy can be detrimental to Black professionals who are limited to advancement opportunities that are only in their part of the organization. Alternatively, when someone has to obtain approval from their supervisor to apply for another position, if they are an exceptional employee, the supervisor may withhold approval because they wanted to stop employees from going to the next level. Approval to apply or move to other parts of the professional services organization should not be included in any hiring and promotion policy.

Because participants indicated Black professionals in their organizations feared retaliation if they filed a complaint with HR, companies should consider utilizing an ombudsman

in professional services organizations. When employees have formal or informal complaints about the lack of Black leadership, microaggressions delivered by supervisors, or being treated differently than their White colleagues, a policy should be in place that allows them to share their thoughts and concerns without fear of retaliation. The policy should include providing access to an ombudsman for employees who need a sounding board and advice on how to handle their specific situation. Additionally, employees who request a resolution to their complaints should also have access to this resource. The ombudsman should be a neutral party who is intimately familiar with the professional services organization protocols. The person would function as an intermediary for leadership and employees' concerns, alike.

The focus group indicated that there are times when a change is made to the education requirement for a position to ensure a specific individual can apply and receive a promotion or advancement into a specific position. If a policy is in place that requires a college degree in order to qualify for an advanced or leadership position, the policy should be reviewed to determine if that is absolutely necessary for success in the role. If review findings deem that the college degree requirement is not necessary for the role, the education requirement should be removed. For roles that require certification, that must be updated on an annual basis, the education requirement component of the hiring policy should be retained. All policies should be evenly distributed and applied across the entire professional services organization.

### ***Implications for Practice***

All participants of this study shared that there were small numbers of Black people in leadership roles in their professional services organizations. These organizations should consider running internal audits. This will help them to understand the percentage of leadership roles being filled by Black and minoritized professionals in their professional services organizations.

This information should be made available to all employees who have an interest in reviewing the data. Pipeline programs may also be put in place to help increase the candidate pool by up to 30% participation of Black and minoritized professionals.

Professional services organizations may also want to consider conducting a quarterly review of their turnover rates of Black professionals in their organizations. The study participants shared that when Black professionals do not see individuals who look like them being promoted and advanced, they tend to believe it will not happen for them either. For this reason, many leave professional services organizations. An audit of exit data may reveal trends that should be reviewed for change considerations. If lack of representation, slow advancements, and lack of engagement are indicated in the exit data, the professional services organization may want to put additional programs in place to mitigate the issues expressed by Black employees who have left the organization. Conducting periodic pulse surveys may also help to identify issues, and address concerns.

All of the focus group members mentioned that their professional services organizations have BRGs or ERGs. These groups should be created and made available in professional services organizations. Having a BRG or ERG specifically focused on Black professionals provides a safe space for conversation, collaboration, and connectivity. Peer to peer engagement, along with leadership support, can add to the overall comfortability of the professionals in the BRG or ERG. The groups can also be used as pipelines for leadership roles in professional services organizations. As was shared in the focus group conversation, “our BRG is a pipeline towards promotion.” It provides an opportunity for Black professionals to serve in a leadership capacity as chair or co-chair of the group.

Additionally, professional services organizations should conduct employee engagement surveys, annually. Two of the participants mentioned the importance of running engagement surveys annually to check the pulse of the people. They mentioned that “the data speaks for itself” and “benefits the organization.” The surveys should be distributed organization-wide and completed anonymously. This will provide insight into the lived experiences of Black and other professionals within the organization. The data should be scrubbed and analyzed to uncover any potential diversity, equity, or inclusion issues that may not be apparent to the leadership of the organization. If the leaders sense that Black professionals, in particular, are not being seen, heard, respected, advanced, promoted, or understood, they should convene a focus group to further understand the problems at hand. Using a BRG or ERG for this purpose may also be helpful.

Lastly, Black professionals want to participate in professional development opportunities. As Melanie stated, “if I wasn't open to development myself, personally and professionally, I wouldn't have survived.” Professional services organizations should include funds for professional development in their annual budgets. Education opportunities may be achieved by attending conferences, seminars, webinars, and classes. Leadership development opportunities should be made available to those who aspire, or who have been deemed appropriate, to advance into leadership roles. The payoff for the investment will benefit the organization and the Black professionals.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

In reviewing research on how Black professionals can advance in professional services organizations, the research indicates that when Black professionals are given access to visibility, networks, development, and management support, they have a chance at being promoted into

leadership roles (Thacker & Freeman, 2021; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). The research conducted in this study confirms the results of the previous research. Black professionals believe that being seen and heard gives them access to opportunities for advancement. Being a part of networks, receiving professional development and support from leadership were all mentioned, thematically, within the research data.

What stands out as significant and as an extension of previous research is how support from leaders can include being on a leader's succession plan. Black professionals should inquire as to whose succession plan, they are named on. If they are not on anyone's succession plan, they should identify and build a relationship with a sponsor with who they can succeed professionally. This is important for several reasons. It provides an opportunity to receive guidance for professional development for the next level role. It also requires a commitment from the sponsor to help prepare the Black professional to succeed in the professional services organization or beyond and gives sustainable hope to the Black professional that they are being supported, seen, and heard. This leads to validation, affirmation, and motivation to continue pursuing a leadership role in a professional services organization. The signals Black professionals send to leadership should clearly communicate their desire to advance into leadership roles. If the signals they receive from the organization do not indicate this is a priority for the professional services organization, or if they consistently see a pattern of Black professionals being looked over for advancement, they should consider leaving the organization.

This study was conducted in 2023, which was three years after the George Floyd incident which took place in 2020. George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered at the hands of Derek Chauvin, a White police officer, who knelt on George Floyd's neck for approximately nine minutes while arresting him for allegedly using a counterfeit 20-dollar bill to pay for items at a

convenience store (Meikle & Morris, 2022). Following this traumatic event, many organizations and government agencies engaged in and instituted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and programs. Joe Biden, while running for the office of President of the United States of America, in light of the George Floyd situation, “concluded that more African-Americans must be seen in prominent jobs. His choice of Kamala Harris, who is part African-American, as his running-mate proved popular” (The Economist, 2020). Following, upon winning the presidency, he named Lloyd Austin as the defense secretary. He was the first African-American, four-star general to preside over the Pentagon.

Some of the changes that were made in organizations were sustainable. Others were not. This study collects data from Black professional leaders who were in leadership roles before May 2020 and are still in leadership roles. Their experiences span the George Floyd dividing timeline of organizations making changes to include Black professionals in their visible leadership roles. While the previous research revealed a lack in the representation of Blacks in those roles, the current data reveals that this lack of representation has not changed, post-George Floyd. This is confirmed by additional research, which shows that “two-thirds of workers think that when it comes to racial inclusivity, when it comes to, you know, these pledges that these companies did, two-thirds of workers think that things are either the same or have actually worsened since 2020” (Filippino et al., 2022). The research data indicates that low representation of Black professionals at top levels of leadership in professional services organizations remains a problem.

The research findings further reveal that systemic racism still exists in professional services organizations. The root of racism is tied to the theoretical framework of CRT. It drives decisions that are made and excludes viable Black professional candidates from being offered

opportunities for advancement in professional services organizations. As shared in the literature review, one of the basic tenets of CRT is to legally put a social, economic, and political barrier between White and non-White people (Gillborn et al., 2018). The research data shows that when criteria are put in place for compliance and accountability, “there is a lot of ‘objective’ criteria that is articulated... that’s not always objectively applied.” This accounts for some of the social, economic, and political barriers (e.g., obstacles) which Black professionals must overcome when working in professional services organizations.

The research findings also reveal that signals are being sent from the organization to attract Black professionals to professional services organizations. According to the literature review, prestigious professional services organizations use the signaling theory to attract potential job seekers to their organizations (Jones et al., 2014). The study demonstrates how organizations are using the signaling theoretical framework to attract minority employees. As Kevin shared, his organization includes “equity, inclusion, and diversity as one of our core values.” Tia shared that, “anything that's sexy right now around DE&I, they love...because it’s a headline.” After hiring employees, moving them into advanced leadership roles is where the challenge comes into play. As Kevin said, “now with equity, inclusion, and diversity, we’ve asked what percentages of minorities hold positions of leadership at what level? How about the VP plus community, the director plus community, who sits where?” When asking the questions using the lens of the signaling theory, one must surmise that there is a problem. Signals were sent to attract Black professionals to the organization, but signals were not sent to promote Black professionals in the organization.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was limited to a sample size of 10 participants. Each participant identified as a Black professional. The limitation of race was used to better understand the lived experiences of those who are the subject of the phenomenon being researched and discussed. One major limitation of the study was the variation of industries in which the Black professionals served and worked. Ten industries were represented by the ten Black professionals in the study. This limitation made the Black professional participant the sole voice being heard throughout the study about the underrepresentation of Black professionals in their industry. While the experiences shared amongst the participants were similar, the nuances shared for the industries were singularly focused. An additional limitation is noted in data collection, as all of the participants did not complete, submit, or provide journal prompts. This presents the possibility that there were additional themes or significant results that were not included in the study results.

One limitation of this study was the use of journal prompts as a data collection method. After conducting the first three interviews, it became apparent that receiving the journal prompt documents from the participants was going to be a challenge. They were asked to write a journal entry describing one of their promotional experiences. To ensure I received the journal prompts in a timely manner, I asked the participants to record their stories using their phones and send me the audio file. When that process also resulted in a delay in receiving the journal prompts, I implored a different method to receive the data. When an interview was completed, I asked the participant to stay on the video recording line and simply share one promotional story. Each participant who was asked to do this gladly followed through. For future use of the journal prompt data collection method, I recommend using this process. It makes the collection process easier and more convenient for the researcher and the participants.

The study was delimited to include Black professional participants. The group included participants who were between the ages of 20 – 70 years old and those who were serving or had previously served in leadership roles in professional services organizations. This group was selected because there was a gap in the literature which discussed their experiences as Black leaders in professional services organizations. A hermeneutic phenomenology was selected over a transcendental phenomenology because the approach provides methods for research, which “are the description of personal experiences, conversational interview, and close observation” (Guillen, 2019). The abstemious method used in the study was intended to approach the phenomenon using a specific process of reflecting on lived experiences (van Manen, 2014).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several recommendations for future research that should be implored based on the findings of this study. First, the review of the literature revealed a disparity between the educational levels of Black professionals and income equity. Black professionals over-invest in their education, yet they do not benefit, financially and equitably, from the investment at the same level as their White colleagues and counterparts. This should be researched further to understand why this phenomenon is happening. Second, further research should be conducted to understand the outlier that was discovered during this study. Black professionals want to educate and inform White colleagues on what it means to be Black while working in a professional services organization. The implication appears to be that White colleagues do not understand when they are engaging in microaggressions, how certain activities do not fit in the cultural norm of Black professionals, yet they are used to benefit from promotional and advancement opportunities and understand how to have an appropriate and engaging conversation about race, racism, and reform. Lastly, while this research was based on experiences held by all genders,

there should be an additional study that specifically looks at the experiences of Black male professionals, Black female professionals, and Black non-binary professionals. This study revealed some differences in the experiences of Black female professionals and Black male professionals, even though that was not the intention of the study. Further research should be conducted that looks specifically at the inclusion phenomenon as it relates to being a Black professional working in a professional services organization.

### **Conclusion**

This hermeneutical phenomenological study provided an opportunity for readers to hear the lived experiences of Blacks in professional services organizations who have advanced or been promoted into leadership positions. Their voices told their stories of overcoming obstacles, finding supporters, and developing strategies for advancement and promotion. Their encounters with racism in the workplace, lack of Black representation in leadership, and signals being shared that led them to resign were told transparency, openness, and resolve. The literature and the participants agree that mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy/allyship are vitally important to moving the needle forward and getting more Black professionals represented in leadership roles in professional services organizations. This is possible when a plan has been put in place that is sustainable and will bring about effective change.

The plan should include creating organizational policies that are reviewed using the critical theory lens. This will help move the needle move from simply managing diversity through initiatives to actually making an impact in the organization by changing people's behavior and attitudes. Practices should be instituted that do not send signals that may potentially dissuade Black professionals from submitting applications for promotion and advancement opportunities. Further research should be conducted that provides insight into the income

disparity experienced by Black professionals with college degrees in professional services organizations and the need to educate and inform White professionals about the realities of being a Black professional working in a primarily White organization. Additionally, broader research should be conducted on understanding the variations of lived experiences of Black males, Black females, and Black non-binary professionals as it relates to a lack of Blacks in professional roles, in professional services organizations. Ultimately, professional services organizations should ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be promoted or advanced in their organization, and Black professionals should be represented in every area of leadership.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval

Date: 1-13-2023

**IRB #:** IRB-FY22-23-709

**Title:** A phenomenological study on the underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations

**Creation Date:** 12-13-2022

**End Date:**

**Status:** Approved

**Principal Investigator:** Marcia Stokes

**Review Board:** Research Ethics Office

**Sponsor:**

### Study History

<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Expedited	<b>Decision</b> <span style="color: #c00000;">Approved</span>
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### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b> Marcia Stokes	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> mstokes23@liberty.edu
<b>Member</b> Marcia Stokes	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> mstokes23@liberty.edu
<b>Member</b> Sherrita Rogers	<b>Role</b> Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> syrogers@liberty.edu

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** A phenomenological study on the underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership roles in professional services organizations

**Principal Investigator:** Marcia Stokes, Ph.D Candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Study

You are invited to participate in a study. To participate, you must be Black and employed in a leadership role in a professional services organization. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to conduct a systematic review of and record the lived experiences and encounters of those who work in professional services organizations and have achieved positions of leadership in their organization or chosen field. The results of the study will show if education is a determining factor for African Americans' to be promoted to leadership positions.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a 60-minute interview about your rise to leadership in a professional services organization. The interview will be recorded using Microsoft Teams.
2. Possibly participate in a focus group discussion about experiences in the rise to leadership by Blacks in professional services organizations.
3. Provide names of other Black leaders to potentially interview for the research project.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include insight into organizational structures of professional services organizations and their promotion practices.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked laptop and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked laptop for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Marcia Stokes. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [marciastokes@gmail.com](mailto:marciastokes@gmail.com). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sherrita Rogers, Liberty University.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

#### **Your Consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## Appendix C: Catalyst No-Fee License Agreement

### LICENSE AND RELEASE

This License and Release Agreement (the "**Agreement**"), dated as of November 3, 2022 (the "**Effective Date**"), is by and between Marcia Stokes ("**Licensee**") and Catalyst Inc. ("**Licensor**")

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### **Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions**

1. Please describe your professional journey. CRQ
2. Explain what has worked for you to achieve success in a professional services organization. SQ1
3. Describe the challenges you have faced when attempting to be successful in a professional services organization. SQ2
4. What professional development, training, mentoring, or sponsorships have you received that have helped prepare you to serve in senior leadership roles? SQ2
5. When (if ever) have you felt your race influenced your ability to be promoted into areas of senior leadership? SQ1
6. When (if ever) have you felt your education level influenced your ability to be promoted into areas of senior leadership? SQ2
7. What are the social norms employees typically engage in when they want to advance into leadership roles? SQ3
8. Describe the expectations employees have when they want to advance into leadership roles? SQ3
9. What are the protocols that are generally followed by employees when they want to advance into leadership roles? SQ3
10. What suggestions, policies, or advice do you have for leaders in organizations who are open to change? SQ2
11. What advice do you have for Blacks who work in professional organizations who would like to be promoted or hired into senior leadership positions? SQ3

12. How can work colleagues demonstrate allyship in professional organizations where Blacks are not being promoted or hired into leadership roles at the same level of consistency as their White colleagues? SQ3
13. At what point do you feel it is appropriate for Black professionals to leave professional services organizations where they do not see themselves and other Black colleagues being promoted or hired into leadership roles? SQ2
14. What motivated you to continue pursuing leadership roles within professional services organizations? SQ3
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion about your experience with advancements and promotions as it relates to Blacks working in professional services organizations? CRQ

### **Appendix E: Focus Group Questions**

1. Please describe your role in the professional services organization for whom you work (or have previously worked). CRQ
2. How are employees advised of advancement opportunities within the professional services organization? CRQ
3. What is the professional services organization's process for determining how promotions are determined and applied? SQ1
4. From your experience, how is race factored into the decision-making process when determining whether to promote individuals within the organization? SQ2
5. From your experience, how are educational levels factored into the decision-making process when determining whether to promote individuals within the organization? SQ2
6. Which business resource groups (BRGs) are available in your professional services organization? SQ3
7. What types of employees are allowed to participate in BRGs? SQ3
8. How does the professional services organization encourage employees to participate in BRGs? SQ3
9. To whom do mentors, sponsors, and advocates, who are members of BRGs, share information with about potential leaders within the group? SQ3
10. What else would you like to add to our discussion? CRQ

## **Appendix F: Participant Protocols**

The participants in this study were employed, retired, or formerly employed leaders who work or have worked in professional services organizations. They have experience working in a supervisory, middle management, or senior management role for at least three years. The participants' ages vary between 20 and 70 years old. Participants identify as Black males and females who work for professional service organizations. Professional services organizations include companies who offer legal services, healthcare services, higher education, engineering services, entertainment services and other services (Burlew & Johnson, 1992). At minimum, each participant possesses a high school diploma. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that studies should include 20 – 60 interviews, this study included interviews with 10 participants.

### **Appendix G: Focus Group Protocols**

The focus group consisted of five participants who were individually interviewed. The members of the focus group were selected based on their indications of hinderances to achieving leadership roles, their gender, and the amount of time they served in a leadership capacity.