

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN: THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF  
EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN  
WOMEN IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSION

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By

CHRYSTAL HICKS, B.A., M.B.A.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all the African American women that participated in this study and bravely entrusted me with the honor of telling their stories. I admire each of you for not only who you are as professionals, but also for who you are as human beings. Life is given meaning by the degree to which we add value to the world. All of you, through the work you do professionally and personally, positively impact so many lives on daily basis.

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## ABSTRACT

CHRYSTAL HICKS

### PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN: THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN

WOMEN IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSION

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Research on organizations, occupations, and work seldom examines the experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination among African American women in the human resource profession. Furthermore, the bulk of research on employment discrimination is quantitative, utilizes limited national sampling, and primarily covers the analysis of legal artifacts (e.g., consent decrees, court cases) and the meta-analysis of research findings in publications. Qualitative inquiry of employment discrimination tends to rely on simulated experimental research techniques or a limited number of case studies instead of in-depth interviews of actual events and experiences.

To fill the lacuna in the literature, this study examines the experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination among African American women in the human resource profession using data from in-depth semi-structured interviews. Results of this study show that African American women in the human resource profession experience employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment in hiring, compensation, promotion, training, job assignments, job classifications, and performance

evaluations due to their race, gender, and/or the intersectionality of their race and gender. Such marginalization and discrimination greatly impact the career opportunities, career advancement, workplace interactions, and emotional and physical health of African American women.

This study adds to the literature on employment discrimination by focusing on African American women in the human resource profession. The findings of this study suggest that employment discrimination or unfair workplace treatment against African American women in the human resource profession is a real thing that continues today. The findings also have practical implications for employers to develop policies and practices that combat, reduce, and eliminate discrimination in all aspects of employment in the human resource profession and perhaps other professions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Research Problem.....	2
Significance of the Study.....	5
Researcher’s Positionality.....	7
Black Feminist Thought.....	7
Reflexivity.....	9
Organization of the Dissertation.....	14
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE....	16
Legal Construction of Employment Discrimination.....	17
Rights Consciousness.....	20
Employment Discrimination – Intersectional Analysis.....	23
Employment Discrimination – Influence of Social and Cultural Norms and Values.....	27
Upbringing.....	29
Stereotypes and Archetypes.....	30
Employment Discrimination – Dynamics of Work and Workplaces.....	33
Organizations.....	34
Occupations, Professions, Work.....	36
Employment Discrimination – Emotional and Physical Health.....	40
Coping Mechanisms.....	42
III. DATA AND METHODS.....	46
Sampling Strategies.....	47
Snowball.....	48
Participants’ Characteristics and Demographics.....	49

Methods of Data Collection.....	53
Methods of Data Analysis.....	56
Thematic Analysis.....	57
Content Analysis.....	57
Trustworthiness.....	59
Credibility.....	59
Transferability.....	59
Dependability.....	60
Confirmability.....	60
IV. DECODING THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSION.....	62
Life Lessons: I Know Where I Come From and Who I Am.....	65
The Realities of Workforce Participation.....	68
Summary.....	72
V. IS EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION MORE THAN AN EMBODIED FEELING?.....	73
Through Our Lens.....	73
What Matters.....	76
Summary.....	78
VI. EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION IS A REAL THING, IT IS ALIVE.....	81
Hiring, Promotion, and Compensation.....	81
Training, Performance, and Job Assignment.....	86
Termination and Layoff.....	88
All Other Aspects of Employment.....	89
Undermining Authority and Discrediting Ideas.....	89
Employee Interactions.....	90
Experiential Comparisons with Other Professions.....	92
Summary.....	94
VII. EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AND UNFAIR TREATMENT: WHY US?.....	96
Career Progression.....	97
I Want That Job.....	97
Show Me the Money.....	99
Workplace Support.....	99
Professional Networking.....	99
Communication.....	101



Expectations of Perfection.....	103
Summary.....	105
VIII. WE DO NOT JUST SURVIVE, WE THRIVE.....	106
Emotional and Physical Stressors.....	106
The Masks We Wear At Work.....	108
Coping Techniques.....	108
Summary.....	110
IX. A CALL TO ACTION.....	111
The Profession of Human Resource.....	111
Organizational Culture, Policies, and Practices.....	114
Summary.....	115
X. CONCLUSION.....	116
Summary of the Findings.....	116
Implications of the Findings.....	132
Limitations.....	138
Directions for Future Research.....	138
REFERENCES.....	140
APPENDICES.....	157
A. Interview Guide .....	158
B. Consent Form.....	161
C. IRB Approval.....	164
D. Curriculum Vitae.....	166

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The presence of African American women's voices in contemporary research and discourse on employment discrimination has been negated and silenced (Sanchez-Hucles 1997). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to eradicate employment discrimination in the United States, yet minority populations still experience discrimination. Critical to the elimination of employment discrimination are studies that examine the perceptions of employees, micro and macro-aggressions, and the legal tenets of anti-discrimination laws. Prior research on organizations, occupations, and work has not comprehensively examined how workplace behavior is affected by race, ethnicity, and gender (Turner and Shuter 2004). Also, research studies have been limited in demographic scope to participants in specific geographic and metropolitan areas and only certain organizations and industries (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Quantitative studies characteristically have not focused analysis at the level of individuals and groups. These studies typically cover legal court case outcomes, anti-discrimination law interpretations, and meta-analysis studies (Deitch and Hegewishch 2013; General Social Survey 2016; Hegewishch, Deitch, and Murphy 2011; Mays, Coleman, and Jackson 1996; Quillian et al. 2017; Smith 2002; Triana, Jayasinghe, and Pieper 2015). Qualitatively, few studies investigated perceptions of employment discrimination among a national sample of individuals and/or groups, African American women in the United States, and human resource professionals (Barrett, Cervero, and

Johnson-Bailey 2003; Barrett, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey 2004, Tyner and Clinton 2010). Additionally, most qualitative inquiries of employment discrimination used simulations versus in-depth interviews such as the utilization of “student raters instead of actual recruiters” to examine attitudes towards hiring and resume screening (Deros, Ryan, and Serlie 2015:660). As such, this study fills a gap in the literature and influences the narrative about what has been written about African American women in the human resource profession, their work experiences, and their perceptions of employment discrimination. My study has significant contributions to multiple academic disciplines: African American studies, feminist discourse, sociology, and women’s studies.

## THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination among African American/black women in the human resource profession in the United States. For purposes of this study, I draw upon the legal definition of employment discrimination as defined by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This anti-discrimination law “prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex (aka gender), and national origin...in all employment practices” (U.S. Department of Justice 2016). Employment discrimination refers to employment practices that intentionally (i.e., disparate treatment) or unintentionally (i.e., disparate impact) result in an applicant or an employee being treated unfavorably because he/she is of a certain race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Campbell 2010; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission *N.d.*). Employment practices are defined as hiring, termination, layoff, compensation, promotion, training, job assignments, job

classifications, and all other terms and conditions of employment (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2016; U.S. Department of Justice 2016).

The human resource profession is a field of work that handles the formulation and implementation of organizational employment practices, policies, and strategies for employee recruiting, training and development, employee relations and ethics compliance, compensation and reward management, and performance management (Society of Human Resource Management 2012). I utilize the definition provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for the ethnic/racial category of African American/black, which includes all persons with origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. In this study, African American and black are used interchangeably. Women are defined as all individuals that self-identify their gender as women/females.

Scholars suggest that perceptions of employment discrimination are largely dependent on employees' knowledge of their legal rights under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which has also been referred to as *rights consciousness* (Hirsh and Lyons 2010; Ortiz and Roscigno 2009; Saperstein 2006). Other scholars emphasize micro and macro-aggressions such as the role that society plays in shaping perceptions of employment discrimination. "Workplaces simply are reflections of the larger society in the United States...what occurs at the macro-level trickles down to the micro-level" (Barrett et al. 2004:94). Additionally, scholars indicate that even if individuals perceive they were subjected to discriminatory actions and behaviors in employment, they may still be reluctant to provide affirmative answers to research studies of perceived

employment discrimination as well as to report their perceptions to their employers.

Victims' reluctance to report employment discrimination is attributed to social and cultural norms, organizational culture, and emotional/psychological well-being (Browne and Misra 2003; Goldberg 2011; Grillo 1997).

Five primary research questions guided this study:

1. Do African American women in the human resource profession experience employment discrimination?
2. What types of discriminatory employment practices (e.g., hiring, termination, layoff, compensation, promotion, training, job assignments, and job classifications) have African American women in the human resource profession experienced?
3. Do African American women in the human resource profession experience employment discrimination based solely on race, sex, age, national origin, or religion, or on the intersection of race, sex, age, national origin, or religion?
4. Do experiences of employment discrimination affect the health and work experiences (e.g., work performance, relationships with co-workers and supervisors/managers, interactions with customers) of African American women in the human resource profession?
5. What factors (e.g., work environment, rights consciousness, social and cultural ideals/archetypes, emotional/psychological well-being, etc.) influence decisions to report or not report employment discrimination?

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will make significant contributions to African American studies, feminist discourse, and contemporary sociological inquiry of organizations, occupations, and work. This study focuses exclusively on the experiences of African American women in the human resource profession, which are an under-represented population in employment discrimination studies with respect to race/ethnicity, gender, and profession. Human resource professionals are guardians of discrimination-free work environments and tasked with investigating allegations of harassment, discrimination, and retaliation. Therefore, they are positioned to articulate perceptions of employment discrimination based on their own experiences as well as the experiences of other employees. By focusing on the experiences of African American women in the human resource profession, this study investigates how personal experiences and secondary exposure (i.e., experiences of others) affect perceptions of employment discrimination. Secondly, by examining African American women, this study fills a gap in the literature on work and occupations, as most prior studies concentrated on the experiences of Caucasian women (Christo-Baker, Roberts, and Rogalin 2012).

Also, in most employment discrimination studies, “gender and race are investigated as separate and distinct variables” (Turner and Shuter 2004:171). Therefore, this study expands sociological theories concerning intersectionality, rights consciousness, and social/cultural race and gender norms. This study advances knowledge of employment discrimination determinants for African American women in the human resource profession. This study provides specificity to workplace treatment

that creates differential work experiences for African American women. Lastly, past studies of employment discrimination that utilized in-depth interviews have not provided participants with a definition or explanation of employment discrimination nor solicited participants' understanding of the concept. As such, this study is revolutionary in its approach to investigating perceptions of discrimination because it is the first research study, to my knowledge, that asked participants to define employment discrimination in their own words and to identify their knowledge of the tenets of anti-discrimination laws.

The findings will provide practical organizational strategies to eliminate discrimination in employment. For instance, given that most organizations assign the responsibilities to investigate all employee allegations of employment discrimination to human resource professionals, consideration should be given to establishing separate practices and procedures for reporting and investigating allegations raised by employees that work in human resource departments. This approach ensures that human resource professionals have the same access to independent investigators (i.e., individuals that work outside the employees' department) like employees in non-human resource roles receive. Additionally, organizations establish policies to cultivate work environments that are free of discrimination, but a consistent interpretation and application of those policies may not exist across all departments and office locations. Hence, the actual employment practices vary and often times create disparate impact for employees, specifically in this study for African American women in human resource. Therefore, organizations should implement broader and more rigorous strategies, on a regular basis, to reexamining all employment policies and practices to assess compliance.

## RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

My researcher positionality aligns with *black feminist thought* and is grounded in my own race/ethnicity (e.g., black/African American) and gender (e.g., female).

Accordingly, “ordinary black women” like myself produce black feminist thought (Collins 1986:16).

### *Black Feminist Thought*

One of the hallmarks of black feminist thought is that black women are the authority of their own experiences and are most qualified to give voice to the lived experiences of African American women. Historically, black women had to become their own advocates and “learn how to stand alone” (Lorde 1984:112). For Collins (1986), black feminist thought involves women cultivating strategies to position black women’s experiences at the forefront of all political and social discourse to initiate social change and self-empowerment (pp. 13,17, 19).

The fundamental principles of black feminist thought underpin my epistemology. Black feminist thought is focused on self-empowerment, commonalities of shared experiences among black women, lived experiences, and personal accountability (Lindsay-Dennis 2015:510). It is a “system of ideas” immersed in the political and economic status of black women (Calhoun et al. 2012:414). While the early tenets of black feminist thought relied on women exhibiting strength, perseverance, and being methodical rather than emotional; contemporary scholars allow for women to exhibit a more comprehensive range of emotions such as weakness, sorrow, and anger. “Black feminist thought encompasses general knowledge that helps black women survive in,



cope with, and resist our differential treatment” (Collins 2000:31). Springer (2002) notes that contemporary black feminist thought is concerned with identifications of not only who black women are, but also who they are not.

Lorde (1978) also believes that black women’s liberation meant “freedom from the pain she knows” and experienced historically (p. 98). In many ways, black feminist thought purports that empowerment of self is paramount for the liberation of African American women. This perspective is shaped largely by the fact that basic civil liberties were granted to women via anti-discrimination laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As a result, black women no longer engage in activism for the objective of law enactment; rather, activism is based on the need to have individual rights of civil liberties, granted by the law, realized. For McKenzie (2014), activism requires daily participation in confronting the issues concerning one’s own life as oppressed black women. She makes a distinction between survival and liberation noting that freedom is a “whole different journey altogether” (McKenzie 2014:95).

Essential to black feminist thought is the notion that experiences of African American women are heterogeneous. As such, African American researchers that investigate the lived experiences of black women are not necessarily privileged insiders solely based on their race and gender (DeVault 1996). Researcher’s credibility is principally influenced by an understanding and familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. Black feminist thought advocates for researchers to position themselves as interrelated versus apart from the research in order to understand how they affect the “context and knowledge produced” (Akman et al. 2001:214).

Additionally, my positionality and reflexivity utilizes an outsider-within status because I previously worked in various leadership positions within the human resource profession for more than 18 years. I have experience in various functional areas of human resource including compensation and reward management, diversity and inclusion, recruiting, and training. Also, I specialized in investigating allegations of employment discrimination, harassment, and retaliation. My exposure to the lived work experiences of employees is the catalyst for my dissertation research. My professional career is advantageous for this type of research inquiry because I possess a vast knowledge of anti-discrimination laws, various organizational workplace policies and practices, and countless conversations with employees about their work environments.

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity is an epistemological assumption in all feminist discourse and research inquiry. In order to position myself within the context of my research, I reflected on my career progression and identified three pivotal experiences. First, similar to some participants in this study, I did not necessarily seek a career in human resource; instead, I was steered towards the profession. I worked as a retail manager in the early 1990s and engaged on a daily basis with the resolution of various employee-related issues (e.g., absenteeism, performance management, compensation administration, etc.). One day, I commented to an African American male colleague that I wanted a career change and he suggested I pursue a career in human resource because I handled employee-related issues exceptionally well. I considered his suggestion and explored job postings, but abandoned the idea because I found that even with a college degree I did not meet the minimum

requirements of most employers. Job postings required several years of experiences in the human resource profession.

After consulting with a friend that worked in human resource, I learned that my best opportunity to land a job in human resource was to be hired by someone I knew. Her comment demonstrated the social closure aspect of the profession. Several years later, while working in another industry, I obtained a position in a human resource department via an internal job posting/transfer. It is worth noting that the organization had a stipulation that employees could only apply for transfers after one year of employment and I did not meet that requirement at the time. As such, I did not have any intention on applying for the transfer, until a white female friend/coworker convinced me to do so. Since I did not meet the minimum tenure requirement, imagine my surprise when I was extended an interview and ultimately hired by the regional human resource manager, who was an African American male.

Interestingly, it was not until I began my dissertation that I reflected on my initial entry into the profession and the way my own race and gender as well as that of my friend/coworker and the hiring manager may have influenced our individual behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, and decisions. I pondered questions like why I initially felt compelled to adhere to the tenure policy for job posting/transfer. Was my thought process akin to how Michelle Obama, former first lady of the United States, once described herself in *Becoming*...“a box checker...a devoted follower of the established path” (Obama 2018:89-90)? Why did my friend/coworker believe it was acceptable for me to apply for the position without meeting the minimum tenure requirements? Did her status

as a white woman contribute to her ideology about job postings/qualifications? I wondered why the hiring manager made an exception to the organization's policy on tenure. Did my racial and gender identification and his status as a black male influence the hiring decision?

The second meaningful experience in my human resource tenure occurred during a time when I reported to another African American male. I met with my manager to inquire about my future salary potential and he immediately said that he "did not know why I was asking because I would never make as much money as he made." He also shared his current salary. Puzzled by his response, I asked if he was serious or joking. He stated that he was serious and wanted me to "understand my reality." I advised him that his response was not appropriate. I stood up, looked him directly in his eyes, and said in a stern but calm voice that "I agreed with his statement, I would not make as much money as he made...I would eventually make more money than he ever would make in his lifetime!" The following day, I started an external job search because I knew he would not fairly administer my compensation. Unfortunately, I also knew his comment was inappropriate, but not unlawful per the anti-discrimination laws so I did not report our interaction to anyone. Given that we were both human resource professionals with a wealth of anti-discrimination law knowledge, I was fully aware that my manager knew the difference between appropriate and not appropriate language and lawful and not lawful communication. In addition, he knew the manner in which his statement was phrased did not necessarily provide substantiating evidence that he took or would take actions to negatively impact my compensation. I also concluded that he knew I would not

report the interaction because it did not rise to the level of a violation of law. Therefore, it was crucial to speak up for myself in that moment. The interaction was a reminder that human resource professionals engage in inappropriate workplace conduct. The dilemma is: The human resource department is there to protect the organization, but who is protecting human resource from themselves?

This leads me to the last pivotal experience, which occurred during my investigation of a sexual harassment allegation. During a very emotional interview with the alleged victim, she paused for a long period of time while responding to a question I asked her. Instead of asking her to continue with the answer, I waited for her to begin again. At the conclusion of her answer, she thanked me for my patience, thoroughness, and ability to make her feel comfortable. She commented how delicately I proceeded with my questions throughout the interview. Then she asked “have you ever been sexually harassed at work?” In all my years of investigating allegations of harassment, discrimination, and retaliation, not one employee ever asked me about my personal experience. I responded truthfully and told her I had not ever been sexually harassed at work. Based on my response of not having a similar experience, I asked if that impacted her comfort level with continuing the interview and she said no. After the interview, I shared my experience with several of my peers. We discussed how, even if we experienced harassment, discrimination, or retaliation, disclosure to an employee would compromise our ability to be seen as an objective, impartial, and unbiased human resource professionals. My peers and I also acknowledged the internal complaint process

for us feels different from a non-human resource employee's experience because if we made a complaint human resource would investigate human resource.

Over the course of my career in human resource, I developed a great appreciation for just how self-sacrificing the career specialization is and the unique psyche it takes to handle the enormous responsibilities of ensuring employees have safe, productive, and non-discriminatory work environments. In essence, human resource is care work. In a study conducted by Catalyst, respondents perceived human resource as a feminine occupation (Catalyst 2005). Data from the U.S. Department of Labor on employment supports the Catalyst findings in that women comprise the majority of human resource management positions (69 percent) as compared to men (United States Department of Labor 2017b). Also, scholars describe human resource as a gendered occupation, but to my knowledge, research studies have not examined the racialized aspect of human resource and how the work experiences of African American employees are affected. According to Jones (2010) in the early 1990s, "organizations made a show of hiring highly educated black applicants, but then relegated them to separate departments...human resource and diversity offices" (p. 285). Considering that I entered the profession of human resource in the 1990s, I was able to reflect on my own work experiences and workplace interactions in addition to the experiences of other minorities in human resource. It is at that point that I realized there are multitudes of workplace dynamics that have not been empirically explored that directly affect the lives of African American women. Hence, this is my initial starting point for inquiry, to better understand

the work experiences of African American women in the human resource profession and employment discrimination.

In conclusion, the professional skills I accumulated from my background in human resource allow me to build rapport with individuals from diverse personal and professional backgrounds; retain a proficiency of appropriately handling sensitive and confidential information; and possess knowledge of interviewing techniques (e.g., formulation of research questions, techniques to probe further on participant responses, and display of appropriate emotions) were critical to this study. To my knowledge, there are very few, if any, other researchers and scholars currently producing academic literature and conducting studies of employment discrimination with my unique professional and academic background. While, my professional experience provides a good foundation to understand the macro-aggressions and micro-aggressions of employment discrimination, it does not constrain my ability to objectively conduct this research study and analyze findings. My role in this study is a researcher, not that of a human resource professional, nor an expert in determining whether participants' experiences meet the legal tenets of antidiscrimination laws.

## ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the legal, sociology, psychology, and feminism literature on employment discrimination. The literature review explores multiple theories and concepts of gender, race/ethnicity, organizations/occupations/work, anti-discrimination legislation, and employment discrimination. Chapter 3, describes the study's methodology, inclusive of

participant selection, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 – Chapter 9 present the findings corresponding to the major research questions. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the findings, implications of the findings, limitations, and the direction for future research in Chapter 10.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Employment discrimination, in the context of work, occupations, and organizations has been studied qualitatively and quantitatively by multiple disciplines such as legal studies, feminism, sociology, and psychology. Research and academic discourse from legal studies focus on analysis of litigation such as interpretations of anti-discrimination laws, local/state/federal court case rulings, and EEOC investigation outcomes (Ortiz et al. 2009; Triana et al. 2015). Legal research on employment discrimination found that court case outcomes have been historically unfavorable to African American women as courts typically rule in favor of employers (Carbado and Gulati 2001). Study findings also revealed that black women as compared to white women were disadvantaged in legal pursuits of employment discrimination because more white women had attorney representation, which supported not only race and gender differentiation, but also class differences (Ortiz et al. 2009).

As an extension of legal studies, “black feminists were the first to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class” (Springer 2001:156). Intersectionality is focused on the “vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” with relation to a race/ethnicity, gender, and class praxis (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013:787). Prior sociological studies of employment discrimination focused on race and gender comparisons, with a primary emphasis on compensation employment practices. In the

realm of psychology, a fairly recent advancement in the study of employment discrimination is how victims' well-being (e.g., physical and mental health) is affected. According to Pavalko et al. (2003), African American women were more likely initially to suppress their responses to discriminatory events, which created more negative mental and physical health effects long-term (e.g., high blood pressure, depression).

#### LEGAL CONSTRUCTION OF EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

Employment discrimination is theoretically a legal concept regulated by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which is an anti-discrimination law that “prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin...in all employment practices” (U.S. Department of Justice 2016). Employment discrimination is defined as employment practices that intentionally (i.e., disparate treatment) or unintentionally (i.e., disparate impact) result in an applicant or an employee being treated unfavorably because he/she is of a certain race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Campbell 2010; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission *N.d.*). Employment practices encompass hiring, termination, layoff, compensation, promotion, training, job assignments, job classifications, and all other terms and conditions of employment (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2016; U.S. Department of Justice 2016).

One of the most significant anti-discrimination employment lawsuits was *McDonnell Douglas v. Green* in 1973. *McDonnell Douglas v. Green* established that for disparate treatment to occur, the “employee must first establish a prima facie case of discrimination, after which the burden shifts to the employer to present some legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for the decision, and finally, the burden shifts back to the

employee to prove the reason offered by the employer was merely a pretext” (Campbell 2010:4). In addition, the “court has read the disparate-impact provision as designed to address actual, but difficult to prove, discrimination” (Campbell 2010:4). To oversee compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the EEOC was established in 1965.

The law was enacted to ensure that all “workplaces are environments free of discrimination” and a person’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin does not create a “barrier to opportunities” (Campbell 2010:3). The promise of equality purported by civil rights legislation is not realized for all. Prior studies found that black employees, at all levels in organizations, as compared to white employees experienced more discriminatory workplace treatment such as: unfair workloads, under-utilized knowledge and skills, negative performance reviews, denied promotional opportunities, harassment, close and punitive supervision, intimidation, disparaging jokes, stereotyping, exclusion from networks that regulate access to information and opportunities (Browne et al. 2003; Elliott and Smith 2004; Hammond, Gillen, and Yen 2010; Roscigno, Williams, and Byron 2012; Yoder and Berendsen 2001). According to Delgado (1987), micro-aggressions like exclusion were the main impediment to equality. As such, there is also an emerging body of empirical evidence that suggest that “subtle mistreatment may be more harmful than outright discrimination” in a work setting for black women (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:163). Subtle mistreatment, also known as subtle discrimination, includes all workplace experiences and behaviors that attempt to create micro-level inequities (e.g., disempowerment) within a macro-level context for minority populations,

but are not violations of anti-discrimination laws. Subtle mistreatment occurs in the course of everyday workplace interactions and is typically ambiguous, unconscious, unintentional, invisible, and sometimes difficult to describe and identify. However, the impact of subtle mistreatment for minority populations is impactful as it reinforces historical attitudes that minorities “do not have the same status as the majority” at work (Laer and Janssens 2011:1222).

Specific to gender and class, anti-discrimination laws essentially defined and constructed an identity for every woman based on an ideal type, which is a white middle-class woman (Grillo 1997). Similarly, civil rights laws defined the experiences of all minorities based on the experiences of minority men (Grillo 1997). Crenshaw and Matsuda asserted that law is not only built on a racial norm, it is also gendered (Crenshaw 1992; Matsuda 1991). Matsuda called for equality of all, void of subordination of some, when she said an advantage for one should not result in a “disadvantage of someone else” (Matsuda 2000:2195). “Doing law as a feminist means looking beneath the surface of law to identify the gender implications of rules... [because] tight legal analysis never assumes gender neutrality” (Bartlett 1990:5). Crenshaw (1988) believed laws fail to acknowledge the intersectionality of race and gender, which adversely impact minority women in employment discrimination lawsuits.

Crenshaw’s legal examination of employment discrimination further gave voice to the unique experiences of African American women. Crenshaw (1989) asserted that “black women, like black men, live in a community that has been defined and subordinated by color and culture,” which acknowledged the intersectionality of race,

gender, and social/class status (p. 162). According to Crenshaw (1989), black women's "femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their blackness effectively denied them any protection" (pp. 158-159). Interestingly, while African American women were more likely to self-report employment discrimination based on race, they were less likely as compared to white women to self-report gender discrimination (Pavalko et al. 2003). This may be akin to an intersectionality dilemma described by a participant in Martin's (1994) study that believed she experienced employment discrimination, but was unable to identify the cause as gender, racial, or a combination of both because she felt that as an African American, in every work-related interaction, she was always the "last one on the totem pole" (p. 393).

As evidenced by a study conducted by the Catalyst organization, African American women reported more discriminatory treatment, such as exclusion, than women of other races (Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas 2006). Also, there are only a handful of studies that used human resource professionals as subjects. One study conducted by Tyner and Clinton (2010) found that human resource professionals reported more gender discrimination than other occupations like attorneys and police officers. Another study by Barrett et al. (2004) of human resource professionals and their career development found that "race was a hardship," which limited career progression, hindered variation in work assignments, and mentorship opportunities (p. 88).

### *Rights Consciousness*

Scheingold (2011) developed the "myth of rights" concept (p. 5). He argued that it is a myth to believe that "litigation can evoke a declaration of rights from courts; that it

can further be used to assure the realization of these rights; and finally that realization is tantamount to meaningful change” (Scheingold 2011:5). Per Scheingold (2011), the legal system created a false consciousness because rights are assumed an entitlement of every citizen, but in actuality rights “ripple out into the real world in an exceedingly conditional fashion” (p. 123). In addition, Scheingold illustrated how the legal system was an effective and viable option for those in the majority versus minority population. Minority populations typically do not have the same financial resources, access to legal professionals, and time to await remedy that those in majority populations have. Essentially, people are not equal and do not experience similar treatment within the context of the law. Scheingold believed that litigation does not fundamentally change societal conceptions of race, gender, and class. “Legal tactics provide no alternative vision of social ordering” (Scheingold 2011:214).

Carbado et al. (2001) believed that systems of discrimination (e.g., employment) were under-theorized and future research should go beyond analysis of the effects of intersectionality on employment discrimination. While participants in past studies of employment discrimination identified race, gender, and class as a hardship, minimal research exist that examined how rights consciousness (e.g., knowledge of anti-discrimination laws, employer/organizational policies) impacted perceptions of employment discrimination and workplace inequities (Elliott and Smith 2004; Barrett et al. 2004). Furthermore, anti-discrimination laws placed the greatest burden on victims to identify employment discrimination and report/file formal complaints with their employers, state, and/or federal agencies (Avery, McKay, and Wilson 2008; Hirsh et al.

2010). “Perceptions of discrimination constitute the first step of remedying discrimination, naming is arguably the most critical stage in the dispute framework because the extent and nature of subsequent legal challenges depend on what behaviors workers perceive as injurious and subject to legal interventions” (Hirsh et al. 2010:270). For instance, in one study African American women spoke of incidents of unequal pay, but did not recognize those incidents as potential gender discrimination (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Alternately, even when African American women recognized workplace behavior and treatment as discriminatory, they may not have reported it. As an illustration, consider the high profile case of Anita Hill, an African American female attorney and former employee of the EEOC. When Anita Hill gave her statement to the United States Senate Judiciary Committee on Clarence Thomas, former chair of the EEOC and current U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Hill explained why she never raised a complaint, while employed at the EEOC about the alleged conduct of Thomas. Hill explained that “telling at any point in my career could adversely affect my future career...the course that I took seemed the better, as well as the easier approach...remain silent” (Smitherman 1995:23). Hill further explained that she decided to tell the truth about her work experience only after the United States Senate Judiciary Committee contacted her.

The Hill case raised an important concern regarding the scholarship of legal and critical race theory approach to research. Specifically, investigating employment discrimination only at the unit of analysis of court case outcomes and/or anti-discrimination law interpretations excluded workplace experiences that employees

considered discriminatory, but did not report to anyone within the organization nor any outside agency (i.e., EEOC). In addition, workplace experiences that may not have risen to the level of a violation of anti-discrimination laws, but did violate organizational anti-discrimination policies were not typically captured in legal and critical race theory research studies.

#### EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION – INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

“Black feminists were the first to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class” (Springer 2001:156). Crenshaw, a legal and critical race theorist is credited with coining the term intersectionality. Theories of intersectionality have been considered the most important scholarly contribution in the advancement of women’s studies (Nash 2008). According to the intersectionality approach, analysis of race, gender, and class yield not only identity markers that are interactive, but also they have multiplicative properties. Therefore, race plus gender plus class determines how individuals experience social interactions. There was a consistent theme in intersectional discourse that oppression, discrimination, and marginalization were not homogeneous for all subordinated groups. While women of all races were marginalized due to gender, the experiences of minority women required a distinct discourse because they were impacted by the intersectionality of gender, race, and class.

The *matrix of domination* theory is interrelated to the concept of intersectionality. “As early as 1977, the Combahee River Collective, issued a stirring and highly influential manifesto in which they argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality should be integral to any feminist analysis of power and domination” (Davis 2008:73). Similar to the matrix



of domination, intersectionality theories contend that race/ethnicity, class, and gender have an interlocking effect in society. Additionally, other identity markers such as age, sexuality, and religion intersect with race/ethnicity, class, and gender (Andersen et al. 2010; Rogers et al. 1997). Patricia Hill Collins is the leading scholar on the matrix of domination theory, which is grounded in feminist discourse. Collins (1990) stated that individuals could be a “member of multiple dominant groups and a member of multiple subordinate groups” (p. 229). Intersectionality also points out that sites of subordination and domination (e.g., race, class, privilege) are not hierarchical. “Thus race is not inherently more important than gender, just as sexuality is not inherently more significant than class and ethnicity” (Andersen et al. 2010:943). Collins (1991) stated that race, class, and gender oppression occurs simultaneously and at any given time, one form of oppression may be more salient than others. Ultimately, all forms of oppression contribute to a system of domination, in other words a matrix of domination. Scholars referred to the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as the “big three, the triptych, the trinity, the Holy Trinity, or the litany” (Dupuis-Deri 2016:37). The matrix of domination permits the continued subordination of minority populations (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic classes, and women) socially and economically.

The matrix of domination was analyzed from a micro-level (e.g., impact on individual lives, groups) and macro-level (institutional structures). Research indicated that the matrix of domination has a compounding effect, when investigated through a micro-level and macro-level lens (Dupuis-Deri 2016). “Oppressed groups struggle not

only against the boundaries dividing them from privileged groups, but also against boundaries constituted by mixes of privilege and dis-privilege” (Rogers et al. 1997:497-498). Hence, depending on the circumstances, individuals may experience social privilege and social closure. Collins (1991) provided an interesting analogy that black women were stigmatized as “obstinate” and white women as “obedient” and this essentially subordinates each along racial and gender boundaries (p. 18). Similarly, black men may experience social privilege because of their gender, but social closure because of their race and class. Paradoxically, black men may recognize their subordination based on their race, but fail to understand they experience privilege because of their gender. This is similar to how white women may internalize their experiences as a result of their race and gender. Per Fellows et al. (1998) experiences of privilege and closure perpetuate the matrix of domination because individuals “advance [their] own claim for justice by distinguishing [themselves] from other women, [but] we are assuring injustice for all.” (p. 340).

From a sociological perspective, theoretical concepts for the matrix of domination can also be found in the classical writings of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Alexis Tocqueville, and Max Weber. Sociologists argued that gender, class, and race do not just co-exist in social interactions, but they actually intersect with one another as well, creating various assemblages and connections to things that are visible (e.g., language) and invisible (e.g., hegemony). In a sense, social context is more important in establishing intersectionality than is one’s individuality. “Social inequalities are seen by Durkheim in the context of progressive social differentiation, itself a product of

increasing social interactions or moral density” (Pakulski 2005:157-158). Marx believed social divisions occur along class lines (e.g., bourgeois, working class) and each class shares a common consciousness, which organizes social life (e.g., home, work, capitalism) by class divisions. Tocqueville offered an alternative perspective, asserting that while class divisions and inequality exist, class distinctions would be less noticeable over time. According to Tocqueville, “social changes will bring nearer to the same level...the master and servant, and in general superiors and inferiors...woman...more equal to men” (Pakulski 2005:156). With that said, Tocqueville did not necessarily believe racial equality would be achieved even if slavery was abolished (Pakulski 2005). Weber concluded that status groups were more critical than social classes in stratification because status groups possessed characteristics that included race/ethnicity, gender, and prestige.

While theories of intersectionality and the matrix of domination have been critical to discourse on race, gender, and class, there has been limited literature about how to conduct research using an intersectional methodology. In addition, most research studies have not specifically examined the work experiences of middle/working-class African American women and how race and gender discrimination impacts career opportunities and progression (Barrett et al. 2003; Collins 2000; Tyner et al. 2010). Some scholars believe the lack of research is because in the early stages of black feminism, class was not a significant element that determined social relationships (Jones 2010). In essence, race/ethnicity and gender were more important determinants. According to Collins (2000:61) “the black working class has been rendered mostly invisible within

contemporary U.S. black feminist thought.” This thought is echoed by other scholars such as Martin (1994) when she stated that researchers have treated African American women as “invisible or deviant cases” (p. 384). According to King (1988), black women have been “conceptually invisible, interpersonally misunderstood and insulted, and strategically marginal” (p. 60). As a result, empirical data was limited as to whether middle/working-class African American women still experience social closure, workplace inequality, and career advancement exclusion to the same degree as previously reported (Roscigno et al. 2012).

Therefore, it is challenging to solely rely on past empirical evidence to determine if “women face discriminatory pressures uniformly” (Ortiz et al. 2009:338). Browne et al. (2003) argued the need for more research and “theories [that] specify the conditions under which the intersections of gender and race are exacerbated or neutralized” relative to employment discrimination (p. 507). In a similar manner, Sanchez-Hucles (1997) suggested that black feminist epidemiology should be employed in research to dismantle the myth that African American women experience advantages in employment because of their race and gender.

#### EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION – INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS AND VALUES

Several studies examined how perceptions of employment discrimination were influenced by social and cultural norms. Browne et al. (2003) and Goldberg (2011) opined that race and gender discrimination was anchored in the process of stereotyping, which relates to Habermas’ theory that the penetration of rationalizing techniques and

agencies cause crises because of social reproduction, cultural transmission, and socialization (Calhoun et al. 2012). Yoder et al. (2001) found that African American women were keenly cognizant of how their race/ethnicity is tied to stereotypes of them. For instance, the *strongblackwoman* and *superwoman* archetype suggested that black women exhibit strength, perseverance, endurance, survival, rationality, and self-reliance (Harris-Perry 2011; Springer 2002).

Texeira (2002) stated that African American women's employment experiences reflected how they are treated by society outside of work. Walker's (1983) statement about black women being the *mule of the world* was in reference to their ability to survive horrendous conditions, overcome oppressive, and debilitating social, racial, and economic circumstances. Ortiz et al. (2009) proposed that when individuals reported employment discrimination only based on gender, further examination revealed the cause of employment discrimination was a combination of gender and race. Essentially, African American women experienced a phenomenon coined as the *double-jeopardy, double-negative, double whammy* of employment, in which African American women are discriminated against and relegated to subordinate positions because of their race/ethnicity, gender, and class (Avery et al. 2008; King 1988; Martin 1994). Yet, there was little empirical evidence to explain the "extent to which actual experiences of discrimination in the [workplace] produce perceptions of discrimination...versus pre-labor attitudes" (Mays et al. 1996:326).

## *Upbringing*

For African American females, social conditioning early in life was paramount to what they believed about themselves as well as how they believed they would be treated by society throughout life. Minorities are taught at an early age that they “have to be twice as good” as their Caucasian counterparts (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Wyche 2008). Scholars referred to this type of child-rearing as *strength training* because the parental aim is to prepare minority children, mostly girls, for the racial/ethnic and gender oppression and discrimination they will encounter in all realms of society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2005). A principle of strength training is that child-rearing for minorities has to be fundamentally different from non-minorities, in order for minority children to survive adulthood and not succumb to negative societal stereotypes and generalizations. Also, it is believed that strength training is necessary for minorities to be successful in all aspects of adult life (e.g., work). As an illustration, former U.S. President Barak Obama, explained the proverb in this manner, “you have got to be twice as good to get half as far...any error or lapse in judgment...would be magnified” by society (p. 295). Minorities tend to believe that regardless of how excellent their credentials are in comparison to their non-minority counterparts, they have to overcome their racial identity in order to exhibit power and have influence (Wyche 2008).

In the African American community, strength training embraces ideals that girls should learn skills to be self-reliant, independent, autonomous, self-confident, self-sufficient, flexible, courageous, and assertive (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Christo-Baker et al. 2012; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Parker and Ogilvie 1996; Woods-Giscombe

2010). There are also undesirable characteristics and emotions that are discouraged by parents of black girls such as being emotional, passive, irrational, vulnerable, angry, and fearful (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008; Gonzalez-Prendes and Thomas 2009; Parker and Ogilvie 1996). When Wyche (2008) interviewed an emotional wellness expert and she gave a personal testimony that "growing up [she] was taught that you have to be better than average in order to provide your worth...as minorities we tend to start out behind the eight ball because of the conditioning of American culture which tends to still feel that we are not as intelligent, equipped, or good." The participant's statement echoed the findings of various research studies on strength training in the black community.

### *Stereotypes/Archetypes*

Several studies examined how perceptions of employment discrimination were influenced by social and cultural norms relative to race and gender stereotypes and archetypes. Delgado (1987) stated that "Americans are influenced by both public and private norms with respect to race...public norm exhorts us to treat others in an unprejudiced, evenhanded fashion...[and] private norms...prejudicial behavior and speech are much more likely to appear" (p. 317). Generally, stereotyping deals with beliefs of negative images about a person or group that are often inaccurate. Stereotyping is typically a comparison of characteristics of the dominant culture with those of a minority culture.

Historically, African American women have been described in academic literature and in the media as emotional, sensitive, sly, paranoid, aggressive, attention-seeking, immature, irrational, angry, hostile, troublemakers, demanding, obnoxious, evil, brash,

lazy, emasculating, insubordinate, crazy, disgruntled, loud, mean, belligerent, domineering, unfeminine, deviant, sharp-tongued, and dangerous (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Collins 2000; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Harris-Perry 2011; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; King 1988; Martin 1994; McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas 2004; Morgan and Bennett 2007; Obama 2018; Ortiz et al. 2009; Proudford and Smith 2003; Wallace 1990; Walley-Jean 2009; Wyche 2008). Michelle Obama (2018) poignantly explained this when she stated “I have been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an angry black woman...I have wanted to ask my detractors which part of that phrase matters to them the most – is it angry or black or woman” (p. x). When African American women described themselves the images were more positive and they used adjectives such as “kind, strong, smart, independent, and powerful” (Harris-Perry 2011:194-195). Hence, African American women may struggle with congruence between how they view themselves and how others see them in a work environment. Some African American women attempt to bring uniformity between their inner-self and outer-self as they interact in the world, while others mask their true feelings and beliefs to the outer world. For the latter group, their public persona of strength is a “performance of smoke and mirrors which is exhausting yet necessary to maintain” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008:400).

The *strongblackwoman* and *superwoman* archetypes suggested that black women exhibit strength, perseverance, selflessness, endurance, survival, rationality, stoicism, restraint, and self-reliance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s 2008; Harris-Perry 2011; Springer 2002). Minority women personify notions of “making a way out of no way” and “doing



good by the whole” (Maparyan 2012:10, 47). Therefore, African American women are expected to negotiate their personal lives, while serving as a caretaker of others. In a few studies, African American women expressed concerns of not being able to live up to the *strongblackwoman* and *superwoman* archetypes and attributed failure to their inability to multi-task. The notion that black women should always exhibit strength is unrealistic and contributes to “this prescription of silent, ongoing struggle” at the expense of self-care (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008:398).

In similar ways, the archetype of the *beast of burden* reinforced an image of a black women that can endure not only physical tasks, but also emotional and mental hardship (Baker et al. 2015; Martin 1994; Wallace 1990). In Woods-Giscombe’s (2010) study, they found that African American women believed they had to display strength at work to be successful, while women of other races/ethnicities were able to show a range of emotion including stress. African American women are often constructed as “unshakeable, unassailable, and naturally strong” (Harris-Perry 2011:185). Hence, the act of acknowledging and self-reporting employment discrimination may be viewed, within the black culture, as a rejection of *strongblackwoman* ideals and submission to victimization and shame. Essentially, “seeking help means showing unacceptable weakness” (Harris-Perry 2011:215). The combinational effect may either empower or hinder African American women from reporting employment discrimination.

There are a few studies that suggested a more pronounced racial and gender identification, such as strong association with being an African American woman, contributed to more affirmative reporting of employment discrimination (Avery et al.

2008; Lee and Ahn 2013). To encapsulate this phenomenon, Carbado et al. (2001) devised the *fifth black women* terminology to explain the process through which an African American woman chose to express her race/ethnicity, for instance, with attire and hairstyle choices and was denied promotional opportunities. However, African American who did not express their race/ethnicity through their physical appearance were promoted. In another study, African American women that exhibited more of the *strongblackwoman* and *superwoman* characteristics in their employment believed they were more susceptible to mistreatment by white coworkers as it was presumed the women were resilient enough to handle anything (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007). “The image of invincibility...can become its own prison, an impossible standard to uphold, unrealistically raising the expectations of employers...and compelling a younger generation of black women to judge itself too harshly” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:21). The work experiences of African American women continues to reinforce their existence as outsiders.

## EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION – DYNAMICS OF WORK AND WORKPLACES

Scientific evidence demonstrated that employment outcomes are different for women and minority populations as compared to white men. According to Ortiz et al. (2009), “employers often harbor gendered beliefs about women as workers” (pp. 339-340). Blacks collectively experience “systemic disempowerment” resulting in experiences of employment discrimination (Crenshaw 2002:3; Quillian et al. 2017). Furthermore, research suggested that African American women endure more complex barriers in their work experiences (Christo-Baker et al. 2012). From a gender perspective,

the challenges that women face in their career progression has been referred to as the *glass ceiling*, which implies there are opportunities to break through and reach the top levels of management in organizations (Key et al. 2012). Conversely, when gender and race are taken into account, such as in the experiences of African American women, the phenomena associated with the indestructible and un-reversible obstacles that hinder their pursuits of career success have been referred to as the *concrete wall/ceiling*, *acrylic vault*, and *stained glass ceiling* (Parker and Ogilvie 1996; Pompper 2011). However, very little research explored the perceptions of black women about their workplace experiences and the psyche they personify at work (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

### *Organizations*

Workplaces are microcosms of the larger society because they are comprised of people in society and reflect the values, beliefs, and culture of individual employees as well as their collective identities. As such, each workplace has its own organizational culture, which guides company policies concerning employees as well as business decisions. Organizational culture has been described as the “glue that holds an organization together” (Tharp *N.d.*:2). The values and beliefs of the organization are represented in the composition and administration of employment practices, policies, and strategies for employee recruitment, training and development, employee relations and ethics compliance, compensation and reward management, and performance management. Specific to employment discrimination, organizational culture exemplifies appropriate employee behavior and conduct, which is typically outlined in organizational anti-discrimination as well as diversity and inclusion policies. Such policies support the

legal tenets of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but they do not necessarily contain the same language or legal implications. Anti-discrimination and diversity and inclusion organizational policies may address not only federal aspects but also state and city regulations, include employee guidance on how to report complaints and grievances to the organization, and explain disciplinary action for policy violations.

Researchers concluded that the majority of research on perceived employment discrimination focused predominantly on one tangible job outcome, hiring, which is the most difficult component to systematically assess without the evaluation of multiple employment documents (e.g., resume, interview guides, hiring statistics) and interviews with all parties involved in the hiring process (e.g., candidate, human resource, hiring manager) (Ortiz and Roscigno 2009). According to Donohue and Siegelman (1991), employee complaints regarding discriminatory practices in hiring have shifted to heightened concerns with employment terminations. As such, future research should consider the entire life-cycle of an employee to fully understand perceived employment discrimination. As described by Avery et al. (2008), the “key referent group responsible for heightening workplace [gender] salience was one’s coworkers, whereas it was one’s supervisor for race/ethnicity” (p. 244). Avery et al. (2008) noted that the more diverse employee populations are with respect to race and gender, the more likely employees are to perceive employment discrimination.

Based on the study conducted by Martin (1994), African American women were 61 percent more likely to report perceived racial discrimination as compared to 55 percent for gender discrimination and 48 percent for both race and gender discrimination.

Also, African American women were 61 percent more likely than African American men to report perceived racial discrimination (Martin 1994). As a comparison, the Catalyst organization's survey in 2018 found that 46 percent of African American women anticipated employment discrimination due to their race; 38 percent because of their gender; and 25 percent because of the intersectionality of their race and gender (Travis and Thorpe-Moscon 2018). "If African American women perceive their work environment to be discriminatory with few avenues for change, then the possibility of less effort directed toward high level job performance may be an outcome of such attitudinal perceptions" (Mays et al. 1996:325). For African American women, their departure from the workforce was driven by involuntary reasons such as firings and job eliminations (Ortiz et al. 2009).

#### *Occupations, Professions, and Work*

Much of the sociological research on gender in the workplace focused on compensation differences between women and men. According to the *comparable worth* theory, significant gender differences exist in wages of jobs that are typically occupied by women as compared to those traditionally occupied by men, which results in a devaluation of positions occupied by women. Opponents of the comparable worth theory asserted (1) there is insufficient empirical evidence to support significant gender differences in compensation; (2) it is almost impossible to determine which jobs across various industries should be included for analysis; and (3) implementation of compensation adjustment resulting in zero differential is not feasible in most situations (Fay and Risher 2000).

From a legal perspective, quite a few scholars believed that wage inequity with respect to *comparable worth* is sex discrimination and women are protected by anti-discrimination laws. This is not necessarily an accurate assessment because *comparable worth* is not a legal tenet of anti-discrimination laws. “Comparable worth was never defined in federal legislation” (Fay and Risher 2000:24). Title VII of the Civil Rights of 1964 does not mandate employers give equal pay to jobs that are comparable. Legal case law is “distinctly unfavorable” to warrant amendment of anti-discrimination laws regarding this issue (Killingsworth 2002:184). It should also be noted that comparable worth is based on gender wage gap analysis of *different* jobs that are considered characteristically comparable in job requirements. Relative to comparable worth, devaluation theory contend that jobs primarily occupied by women are not valued in society and norms are preserved through “cultural, institutional, and market mechanisms” (England 1992: 922). Theorists also believed that societal conceptions of women as “being less competent and status worthy” resulted in lower pay for jobs primarily filled by women (Dill, Price-Glynn, and Rakovski 2016:337).

Anti-discrimination laws, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibits sex discrimination based on an analysis of jobs within the “same workplace” that are “substantially equal” and require that men and women receive “equal pay for equal work” and analysis must be relative to job content (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2017). Therefore, from a legal perspective, anti-discrimination laws are aimed at closing the gender wage gap through analysis of *substantially equivalent* jobs not *similarly different jobs* (i.e., comparable worth). For example, a study conducted by

the National Partnership for Women and Families in 2017 found that women made \$10,470 less annually than men. Since comparable worth was not defined and mandated by Title VII of the Civil Rights of 1964 (Fay and Risher 2000), studies of employment discrimination must go beyond inquiries of compensation practices and include all employment practices (Browne et al. 2003; Leasher and Miller 2012).

In addition to compensation practices, previous research investigated employment discrimination at different career levels (e.g., entry-level, low-level, and high-level) across organizations (Ortiz et al. 2009). Study findings revealed that women in entry and low-level jobs experienced discriminatory treatment such as firing more than women in high-level jobs (Ortiz et al. 2009). On the other hand, women in high-level jobs suffered discriminatory treatment in the form of career progression closure and had more lateral job changes than promotional opportunities (Browne et al. 2003; Ortiz et al. 2009). Interestingly, women in entry-level and low-level jobs were less likely to self-report perceived discrimination as compared to women in high-level jobs (Bumiller 1988). This is an important distinction because African American women predominately occupy low-level and entry-level jobs across all occupational categories as compared to women and men of all other races (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). While not the sole reason, it is definitely a contributory factor as to why we know very little about the work experiences of African American women and employment discrimination.

Recent research on occupations, professions, and work included examinations of the characteristics of employment that are gendered and racialized. When race is perceived to influence interactions at work, minorities and non-minorities tend to have

different experiences. Minorities have fewer affiliations, mentorships, and sponsorships as compared to non-minorities (Blake-Beard et al. 2006; Elliot and Smith 2004).

Research suggested that minority women rely more on mentoring and networks for career advancement than white males, but they have more difficulty gaining access. One explanation is that the majority of mentors and sponsors are white males, since they occupy the majority of senior leadership roles in organizations (Wyche 2008).

Furthermore, the establishment of mentorships and sponsorships are affected by race, gender, and career level so it is more difficult for African American women because they typically occupy low-level and entry-level jobs (Mcguire 2000). Additionally, African American women experience more exclusion from networks within organizations that regulate access to information and opportunities, such as senior level management (Elliot and Smith 2004). “Black women have rarely been beneficiaries of support and help from their work colleagues” (Sanchez-Hucles 1997:571). Therefore, African American women tend to exchange information with those that are similar to them with respect to race/ethnicity, gender, and career level (Blake-Beard et al. 2006). Research findings demonstrated that homophily in workplaces perpetuates inequities in employment experiences.

Another area of inquiry has been workplace power, which is defined as the authority and control over others in a work environment and the association with influential individuals (Elliot and Smith 2004; McGuire 2000). Research indicated that white males experienced higher levels of workplace power than women and minorities (Elliot and Smith 2004). “White-occupied positions are perceived as more prestigious



than those typically occupied by [minorities]” (Key et al. 2012:394). “African Americans are underrepresented in managerial occupations” (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004:1007). Jones (2010) noted that a senior vice president at an organization commented that there was a “ghettoization of jobs in corporate America... that tended to keep blacks separate from whites in the same organization...they were rarely offered opportunities for promotion up and out of the racialized realm...” (p. 285). The most significant inequities in workplace power are found within the careers and workplace experiences of African American women (Elliot and Smith 2004). As such, studies found that African American women chose white-collar, gender-segregated professions (e.g., care work) to increase their workplace power and social status, but were cognizant that female-dominated work resulted in lower compensation as compared to male-dominated professions (Dill et al. 2016; Sanchez-Hucles 1997). As established by the research, there are significant challenges for women and minorities in their career advancement.

#### EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION – EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

A fairly recent advancement in the study of employment discrimination is how victims’ well-being (e.g., physical and mental health) is affected. For example, reflecting on the personal attackers from media and the public, Michelle Obama (2018) stated that she was “getting worn out, not physically, but emotionally...the punches hurt, even if I understood that they had little to do with who I really was as a person” (p. 264). Grillo (1997) argued that discrimination, oppression, and domination have “tremendous consequences for [women’s] internal psychic landscapes” (p. 2). Specific to African American women, admissions of less than stellar emotional and psychological health

compromise long-standing precepts of strength and resilience, which can lead to under-reporting of depression. In one study, a black woman explained “if we allow people to know we are breaking down, then it becomes a flaw in who we are” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008:401). In Woods-Giscombe’s (2010) study African American participants indicated they “suppress[ed] negative emotion to meet perceived expectations to be strong by society only when they [were] in professional settings” (p. 671). Hammond et al. (2010) stated that individuals who self-reported employment discrimination also indicated they were depressed as a result.

Scholars theorized that African American women believed workplace inequities were the result of their own doing and could be remedied by exerting more personal effort to be better (Harris-Perry 2011). Additionally, African American women manifested emotional stress physically through weight gain and hair loss (Woods-Giscombe 2010). Consequently, “feelings of helplessness might impair women’s capacity to speak up or seek help” (Sojo, Wood, and Genat 2016:33). Barrett et al. (2003) found that minorities and women have been taught that they generally should not “whine or complain” in life so this feeling may be transportable to reasons why they may not report perceived employment discrimination.

In 2018, Travis et al. conducted a qualitative study for the Catalyst organization and found that minority employees experienced an *emotional tax*, which was defined as the “combination of feeling different from peers at work because of gender, race, and/or ethnicity and the associated effects on health, well-being, and ability to thrive at work” (p. 4). Furthermore, the higher the emotional tax, the more likely employees were to

resign employment to eliminate the negative health outcomes. It was reported by Giuffre and Williams (1994) and Ortiz et al. (2009) that victims were also unlikely to report allegations of employment discrimination to employers for fear of not being seen as credible, not believing they have enough evidentiary documentation, and/or allegations not being investigated for their legitimacy. Additional studies suggested that feelings of intimidation and a general lack of confidence in anti-discrimination laws halted individuals from reporting employment discrimination (Coser 1988). Participants in the Avery et al. (2008) study indicated their apprehension to report employment discrimination was due to concerns of being ostracized. Other studies found that individuals that reported allegations of employment discrimination to their employers believed they were more susceptible to continued discrimination and future retaliation (Sojo et al. 2016). In other words, the personal consequences can be greater than the benefits of reporting employment discrimination (Saperstein 2006).

### *Coping Mechanisms*

Only a handful of studies on employment discrimination explored how African American women manage stress, their coping strategies, and supportive resources. There was some empirical evidence that African American women primarily rely on their “faith, religion, and spirituality” which is an acquired skill from childhood (Woods-Giscombe 2010:676). African American women practice faith, religion, and spirituality by attending church, participating in religious group activities, mediating, and praying.

Sociological theories provide valuable insights into how individuals use religion to understand their existence in society. Per Durkheim’s (1912) statement, religion served

as the basis for the organization of social life. In contemporary society, religion is validated and appreciated for its functionality to individuals and society (Berger 1974). As an example, there may be certain aspects of religion that are more relevant to an equal rights activist than to corporate executive in the context of social and psychological functioning (Berger 1967, 1974). “The specificity of religious experience, then, is not to be sought in its breaching of the paramount reality, but rather in the characteristics that structure its finite province of meaning” (Berger 1974:130). For example, there are trends of identification as *born-again Christians*, individuals that believe they are *spiritual* but not *religious*, and there is *patchwork religion* in which components from various religions are combined into a new religion (Berger 2001). According to Berger, this is an example of how religious discourse is used today to rationalize secular decisions and modify life circumstances.

Religion, spirituality, and faith have a prominent place in feminist discourse on women’s life experiences. Womanism makes the connection that women experience pain and suffering at a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. Womanism offers prescriptions of survival in response to oppression. Maparyan (2012) believed that womanism minimized oppression and marginalization by altering women’s thought processes/energy, the energy of others, and things within the world. There is a “triad of concern” in womanism, which emphasizes human-spiritual, human-human, and human-nature relationships (Maparyan 2012:36). Essential to womanism is the idea of spirituality. Spirituality embodies either opportunities and/or limitations. Maparyan (2012) suggested that self-reflection and reflexivity, known as spiritual archaeology,

could build spiritual practices that benefit the world. Self-reflection and reflexivity requires that one discover and acknowledge the totality of their spiritual experiences and how experiences shape how they interact within a social setting.

While some African American women engage in more of an internal process to deal with employment discrimination and stress, others choose an external means. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) described a *shifting* process where African American women attempt to minimize discrimination and stress by modifying “how they look or present themselves, how they speak, where they work, and whom they spend time with” (p. 66). As one participant explained in reference to shifting, “she was not misrepresenting herself so much as expressing...[what] she believed others would find acceptable” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003:118). Other African American women may choose to deny any negative experiences occurred, avoid or delay addressing the issues, or engage in activities to numb their suffering such as excessive eating, unnecessary shopping, drinking, or taking drugs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008). In a study of African American women executives, one participant indicated that she “favored avoidance and indirect strategies... [and] models excellence” (Parker 2002:256-257). Scholars have not privileged one coping technique over another and instead consider all of the above mentioned practices that black women employ as vital *weapons* to deal with the unfair and discriminatory treatment they endure at work (Christo-Baker et al. 2012; Robinson and Nelson 2010). This study will add specificity to the particular importance of investigating employment discrimination in all employment practices and the personal

outcomes such as employees' physical and emotional well-being to produce contemporary theories.

## CHAPTER III

### DATA AND METHODS

A qualitative inquiry is most appropriate for this study's examination of the work experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination of African American women in the human resource profession for three reasons: 1) it provides a deeper understanding of the contemporary work life of black women from their perspective; 2) it explores aspects of employment discrimination that little is known about from human resource professionals' perspectives; 3) it addresses very sensitive, personal, and emotional issues associated with employment discrimination. I use black feminist epistemology and methodological practices to investigate work experiences and employment discrimination. Therefore, I strive to "do the work of excavation, shifting the focus of standard practice...to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible" (DeVault 1996:33).

For data collection, a narrative approach was employed via in-depth participant interviews to promote unconstrained dialogue, storytelling, and free expression of beliefs and experiences. I conducted participant interviews in a manner that was consistent with feminist methods such as displaying "empathy and mutual respect" and active listening to probe further as necessary (Parr 2015:198). For data analysis, I used thematic and content analysis and followed an inductive process to assess emerging themes from participants' interviews. This study investigated: (1) employment practices that intentionally or

unintentionally result in African American women, who work in the human resource profession, being treated unfavorably because of their race, sex, national origin, or religion; (2) considerations to report or not report employment discrimination; and (3) whether employment discrimination affects the work experiences and health of African American women.

### SAMPLING STRATEGIES

The population of interest for this study is African American women in the United States, who are at least 18 years of age, and currently work or have previously worked as a human resource professional. For the purpose of this study, African American refers to individuals that self-identify their ethnicity/race as being African American or black. Women refers to individuals that self-identify their gender as female or woman. For age, it is essential that participants are fully participating in the workforce with respect to hours worked and not limited by maximum work hour guidelines set by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and state employment laws for individuals under 18 years of age (United States Department of Labor 2018).

The study included participants from all geographic areas within the United States to obtain a more representative sample of the U.S. workforce (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and class). As indicated in prior research studies, racial and gender composition of employees, their immediate work group/team, and supervisors/management affect perceptions of employment discrimination (Avery et al. 2008). Experience as a human resource professional encompassed non-managerial and managerial positions, all career levels (e.g., entry-level, mid-level, senior-level), and all functional areas such as talent



acquisition (i.e., recruiting), learning and development (i.e., training), employee and labor relations, ethics compliance, compensation and reward management, and diversity and inclusion (SHRM 2018). Experience in major employment industries was inclusive of manufacturing, retail, telecommunications, financial services, insurance (e.g., healthcare, property, and casualty), travel, media, advertising, and property management. The diversity of career levels, functional areas, and industries contributed to this study's ability to generalize findings to a wider population.

### *Snowball Sampling*

Snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit participants for this study. Snowball sampling was utilized because the participants of interest, U.S. African American women in the human resource profession, are not easily identifiable from the larger working population and can be difficult to contact/locate for research studies. The appropriate number of participants for qualitative research varies from one to several hundred participants, but most scholars agree that the number of participants is primarily driven by the researcher(s), the phenomenon being investigated, and the resources available (Terrell 2016; Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Prior qualitative research studies of employment discrimination that used more than one researcher to conduct interviews and analyze findings averaged 10-20 participants (Barrett et al. 2003; Giuffre and Williams 1994; Melaku 2016). Taking into consideration I was the sole researcher and employment discrimination is a complex phenomenon that requires in-depth interviews and data analysis, I determined the appropriate sample for this study was 12 participants.

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board of Texas Woman's University, I began snowball sampling by initially identifying 15 potential participants from my personal network of human resource professionals. This approach to sampling aided in establishing the study's credibility because potential participants were familiar with my professional human resource work experience and my personal identity. Hence, for most participants, their participation was predicated on what Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) described as "knowing who I was...someone they trusted...someone they heard about...someone they had met personally...or that I too was a black woman" (p. 396). I contacted individuals from my personal network via email and phone. I explained the details of the study and invited them to participate. Participants were advised that participation in the study was voluntary and did not include any monetary/non-monetary incentives for participation. Participants were advised they would select their own pseudo names for usage during the interviews to maintain confidentiality. Ultimately, eight individuals from my personal network agreed to participate in the study. Subsequently, my personal network of human resource professionals recommended nine additional potential participants who fit the demographic and occupational requirements of the study. My recruitment email and contact information was forwarded to potential participants. After speaking with those individuals referred and explaining the study, four individuals agreed to participate.

#### *Participants' Characteristics and Demographics*

The study was designed to obtain demographic information that aligned with the protected classes in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (i.e., race, color, religion,

sex, and national origin) to fully examine employment discrimination and work experiences. There is also evidence in the literature that educational attainment, credentials, career level, and the type of work performed affect perceptions of work experiences and employment discrimination. As such, demographics in those categories were also obtained for this study.

I interviewed 12 female human resource professionals, of which eleven participants self-identified their ethnicity/race as African American/black and one participant self-identified as Jamaican/black. The age of the participants range from 31 to 54 years of age, with a mean age of 46.8. All participants self-identified as Christians. The study is comprised of participants from every U.S. geographic region as defined by the U.S. Census: South, Northeast, Midwest, and West. Equally important was to have a representative sample from states with high employment levels in human resource. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, for human resource managers, Texas has the fourth highest employment level (United States Department of Labor 2017c).

Specifically, more than half of the participants in the sample currently reside in the South region (seven participants in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area of Texas and one participant in North Carolina); followed by the Northeast region (one participant in Connecticut and one participant in New York); and the Midwest and West regions each had one participant (Ohio and Arizona respectively). Additionally, several participants previously resided and worked in human resource positions in the following states: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. It is also worth noting that all participants currently work or previously worked for

organizations that have multiple offices across the United States and internationally. Therefore, participants currently provide or previously provided human resource support to employees across all U.S. states and territories including Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico as well as internationally to Asia, Europe, and Mexico. As such, the participants' knowledge of the work experiences of employees and organizational environments across the United States is vast.

The U.S. Department of Labor reported that the educational level needed for human resource management positions was a bachelor's degree (United States Department of Labor 2017a). As such, the majority of participants in the study exceed those educational requirements and are highly educated and credentialed. All participants attended college; the majority obtained bachelor degrees; most of the participants achieved graduate degrees; several possess two graduate degrees. Specifically, one participant pursued an undergraduate degree but did not graduate; all others obtained bachelor degrees in various fields such as African American studies, biology, business management, communications, economics, history, human resource, mathematics, political science, and urban studies. Nine participants attended graduate school, in which five obtained master's degrees in human resource management, one participant obtained degree in business management, and one participant majored in social counseling. Also, one participant obtained a juris doctorate in law. The remaining participant attended graduate school, but did not obtain a degree. Relative to credentials, all participants but one currently hold or previously held one or more nationally recognized human resource professional certifications and/or related field certification. Examples of credentials held

by participants are Certified Benefits Professional, Certified Compensation Professional, Certified Diversity Professional, Certified Emotional Intelligence Professional, Professional in Human Resource, Senior Professional in Human Resource, Society of Human Resource Management Certified Professional, Society of Human Resource Management Senior Certified Professional, and state bar certified in law.

The participants in this study possess an extensive depth of work experience in the human resource profession. Participants' work experience range from three and half years to 25 years in a variety of industries including advertising/marketing, banking, consumer goods, construction, financial services, insurance (e.g., healthcare, property, and casualty), manufacturing, medical, property management, print media, travel, telecommunications, and retail. The sample also represents all functional areas of human resource such as benefits, compensation and reward management, diversity and inclusion, employee and labor relations, ethics compliance, human resource information systems (i.e., payroll), learning and development (i.e., training), and talent acquisition (i.e., recruiting).

The career progression of participants was dynamic and diverse, with starting positions in the human resource profession in entry-level to mid-level jobs such as human resource intern, human resource interviewer, human resource legal intern, human resource manager, human resource recruiter, human resource recruiting specialist, human resource representative, human resource rotational associate, human resource trainee, and senior compensation analyst. With career maturity, the majority of participants are currently in or previously held senior-level management positions within human

resource. Specifically, nine of the 12 participants currently hold job titles of employee relations manager, head of human resource, human resource senior director, human resource vice president, principal/sole proprietor, senior director of compensation, senior human resource business partner, and senior manager of diversity and inclusion. Two participants, currently work in mid-level non-management positions as a lead consultant and a talent acquisition specialist, but one of the participants previously held senior-level management positions in human resource (e.g., human resource director) and the other participant previously worked in a non-human resource mid-level management position. The remaining two participants do not currently work in human resource, but previously held mid-level positions as a human resource manager and human resource recruiting manager.

## METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study was collected via semi-structured face-to-face and virtual interviews with participants from December 17, 2018 - January 8, 2019. I conducted seven face-to-face interviews in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area of Texas at locations of the participants' choice to give participants agency over the space in which they were most comfortable to articulate their experiences and to ensure the setting was private (e.g., participants' home). According to McCorkel and Myers (2003), interview setting "influences which aspects of [one's] identities are in play" (p. 213). For participants that reside outside of the immediate Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area of Texas, I conducted five virtual interviews utilizing video conference software of the participants' choice (e.g., FaceTime, IMO Chat, and Skype). I conducted virtual

interviews at my private home office and participants selected the location of their choice (e.g., home).

Participant interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreeable date and time. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, I explained and reviewed the consent to participate in research form and obtained participants' signatures. I explained to participants that interviews would be audio recorded for transcription by a paid transcription service and analyzed by me to ensure the accuracy of the participants' experiences using their own words in order to report the study findings.

Interview questions were designed to provide insight into the real experiences of employment discrimination among African American women in the human resource profession. As illustrated by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) voice is a "poignant reflection of the experiences of empowerment and powerlessness that pervade people's lives as they attempt to speak up and out, are silenced, and resist demeaning characterizations" (p. 396). Interview questions focused on participants' demographics, work experience, career progression, work environments, and employment discrimination (Appendix A).

I utilized a narrative approach to understand how participants constructed, interpreted, and gave meaning to their work experiences (Josselson 2013). During the interviews, participants were initially asked demographic information about their race/ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, religious affiliation, education, and credentials. To understand participants' human resource experience and career progression, participants were asked to provide their years of experience, positions held,

industry experience, and job responsibilities. Additional questions about societal and cultural norms were asked of participants. The primary questions asked of participants were:

- a) What does unfair workplace treatment mean to you?
- b) What does the term employment discrimination mean to you?
- c) Can you describe any laws that specifically relate to employment discrimination?
- d) In your work experience, have you ever been discriminated against or treated unfairly when applying for a job, transfer, promotion, or pay increase, training opportunities, performance evaluations, job assignments, or job classifications, termination or layoff?
- e) What do you believe was the reason why you were discriminated against or treated unfairly ... race, color, sex, national origin, or religion?
- f) What are your general sentiments about what African American women experience in terms of discrimination in the workplace?
- g) Do African American women that work in human resource face more unique challenges in their employment than African American women that work in other fields/occupations?
- h) If you experienced discrimination or unfair treatment, did you report your concerns to anyone at your employer or to anyone outside of the organization?
- i) How have your experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment affected your physical and/or emotional health?



After each interview was conducted, an initial analysis of the audio recording was completed so that initial participant responses could be compared with subsequent interviews. This process continued until all interviews were completed and the data saturation point was reached. The data saturation point was reached by the twelfth interview. Audio files were uploaded electronically to the professional transcription service on a secured computer network with encryption and no personally identifiable participant information was included. Once the audio files were transcribed, they were sent to me electronically. During the process of transference with the transcription service, no adverse incidents occurred.

#### METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

For this study, I utilized thematic and content analysis to understand employment discrimination and “produce a fuller and more understanding portrait” of work experiences of African American women in the human resource profession (Josselson 2013:30). While some scholars make precise delineations between thematic and content analysis, I relied on Padgett’s (2008) perception that there may not always be clear boundaries and flexibility is important. Past research study findings and discourse on organizations, occupations, work, and employment discrimination produced several themes and concepts, but I chose to use an inductive versus deductive data analysis approach. “Inductive analysis is a process of [analyzing] the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions...analysis is data-driven” (Nowell et al. 2017:8).

### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis was selected because it allowed me to identify themes and understand how participants construct meaning from their work experiences (Terrell 2016). A theme is defined as a “unit of meaning that emerges naturally” from in-depth interviews (Abitan and Krauth-Gruber 2015:478). I listened to the audio recordings of participants’ interviews and read each interview transcripts. I made notes on each of the interview transcripts of my initial thoughts about potential overarching themes. Then, I created a Microsoft Excel document to capture all overarching themes and specific participants’ responses that align with those themes. I examined each overarching theme to identify sub-categories. Next, I developed definitions for each overarching theme and sub-category. I continued a process of clustering responses into overarching themes and sub-categories until the data did not reveal any new themes. Also, I created a table to document the sequential process of clustering and re-clustering of the themes as well as the evolution of the names and definitions of the themes and subcategories. This was an important component in the refinement of the themes because a few themes initially surfaced as marginal and were later determined to be significant. Conversely, some themes went from significant to insignificant in the analysis process. Finally, I determined how the final themes are inter-related and serve as an articulation of the “overall story” relative to the primary research questions (Nowell et al. 2017:10).

### *Content Analysis*

“Content analysis refers to the process of organizing and quantifying the contents of the data into pre-determined categories relevant to the central research question(s)”

(Makieson, Shlonsky, and Connolly 2018:5). I used content analysis to understand how participants' responses such as specific words, phrases, and narrative patterns were used to convey apparent and underlying meanings about their beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and perspectives regarding their work experiences and employment discrimination. For example, when participants described stereotypes and generalizations most often associated with African American women in a work setting, the first descriptor several participants used was aggressive. When asked how they viewed themselves, participants thought of themselves as assertive, not aggressive. Hence, the narrative pattern relative to stereotypes uncovered that aggression is a prominent negative attribute and not widely acceptable workplace behavior, while assertiveness is a positive attribute of African American women. This was a noteworthy semantic distinction by participants and reflective of their real life experiences, especially given that Merriam Webster dictionary denotes that aggressive is synonymous with assertive.

In this study there were also certain questions related to employment discrimination in which it was important to use content analysis to examine the frequency of participants' responses and quantify the data. For instance, participants were asked: In your work experience, have you ever been discriminated against or treated unfairly for a job, transfer, promotion, or pay increase. By measuring the frequency of affirmative responses to this question, I was able to assess the overall collective experience of participants with employment discrimination.

## TRUSTWORTHINESS

### *Credibility*

In qualitative research, it is essential to establish internal validity in research methods. My work experience in the human resource profession, my familiarity with the phenomenon being investigated, and the use of snowball sampling facilitated the establishment of the study's credibility with participants. Furthermore, credibility was achieved through my engagement in reflexivity and broad review of the literature and prior studies on work experiences and employment discrimination. To establish credibility, the data collection methods used were well-established practices within qualitative research and black feminist thought epistemology. Specifically, the utilization of in-depth interviews to gather data, the development and composition of interview questions to investigate the primary research questions of work experiences and employment discrimination, and narrative approach to capture participants' responses, support the study's internal validity. Lastly, as outlined in the consent form, participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed of their ability to opt out at any time during the study.

### *Transferability*

As illustrated by Shenton (2003), when the researcher employs thick description of the contextual aspects of the phenomenon, it allows readers to "compare the instances of the phenomenon described...with those that they have seen emerge in their situations" (p. 70). Hence, to confirm external validity this study included expanded descriptors of the participants' demographics including their ethnicity, race, age, religion, educational

attainment, credentials, years of experience in the human resource profession, current and previous job titles held in human resource, functional areas of human resource experience, multiple industry experience, states of residency, and states of employment. In addition, the specific number of participants and data collection methods (e.g., number of interviews completed, duration of interview sessions, and time period data was collected) was explained.

### *Dependability*

Scholars opined that it is nearly impossible to establish complete reliability in qualitative research (Shenton 2003). As a result, qualitative research should, at a minimum, demonstrate a comprehensive explanation of the methods of data collection and data analysis as well as logic. As described in this chapter, specific processes were followed to collect and interpret the data.

### *Confirmability*

Objectivity and integrity are critical elements in qualitative research. To achieve confirmability, I engaged in reflexivity prior to the commencement of the study, during the data collection and analysis phases, and at the conclusion of the study. Also, all research choices were described in great detail from the initial decision of the phenomenon to investigate and researcher epistemology to the methods used for data collection and analysis. In addition, direct quotes from the interviews were used to substantiate that findings were derived directly from the data collected from participants. Smart (2009) stated that feminists and sociologists “adopt this style in order to bring their texts alive and introduce a greater authenticity to their accounts” and to give “voice to the

voiceless” (p. 299). Lastly, when applicable, the study findings were correlated with existing literature.

## CHAPTER IV

### DECODING THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSION

The findings of this study are presented in Chapters 4 through 9. Chapter 4 provides details of the participants' upbringing, explains how societal stereotypes and generalizations affect how they present themselves at work, and the challenges they have in obtaining acceptance from non-minority coworkers. Chapter 5 explains the core beliefs that participants have about the work experiences of African American women and employment discrimination. In Chapter 6, I provide specific examples of participants' experiences with unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination in all employment practices and policies. Chapter 7 focuses on an evaluation of the impact that race, gender, and its intersectionality has on employment discrimination. In Chapter 8, I explain how participants cope with the emotional and physical stress of employment discrimination. Lastly, Chapter 9 summarizes the factors that affect participants' willingness to report unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination.

Beginning with this chapter, I focus on creating a better understanding of the experiences of African American women because as one participant stated, "especially in human resource, we can be seen as potentially cold, not feeling, or empathetic when that is not our intent." The majority of the participants expressed an immense passion for the human resource profession. Queen conveyed how she "fell in love with human resource

and the opportunity to touch people's lives because people spend a great amount of time at work.” Gloria, a Senior Diversity and Inclusion Manager, explained that human resource is at the “intersection of [her] passion and skill” and she is “happy to drive the strategy for diversity and inclusion at [her] organization.” Micah, a Senior Human Resource Director, said human resource is the “perfect convergence of [her] skills and passions because it is about helping individuals, teams, and organizations realize their potential.” Kodiak, sole proprietor of a consulting company, explained that she has a “passion for inclusion, diversity, and developing people.” This sentiment was echoed by Optics, Head of Human Resource for an organization, who stated that she has a “passion for human resource and it leverages all of [her] strengths around relationship building and critical thinking.” Aspen, a Senior Human Resource Business Partner, is also “passionate for leadership coaching, leadership development, and organizational design/development.” Brenda, an Employee Relations Manager, shared that she enjoys human resource because she “influences the culture of an organization and the people” that work there. Nicki, a Recruiting Specialist, stated that she “loves being able to identify talent and figure out different strategies for the organization to build a better brand and improve the employee value proposition.” Halle, a Consultant, explained how she “enjoys counseling, coaching, and helping people problem solve.”

Professionally, the roles and responsibilities of human resource professionals require that they opine on matters related to the overall work experiences of employees and organizations, but they rarely share their opinions and beliefs about their own work experiences. Most often, human resource professionals are the ones investigating, asking



questions, and probing for understanding of individual and group experiences. Yet, in this study the roles were reversed and participants answered questions instead of asking them. As such, I had some initial reservations that participants may be guarded in their responses and may not exhibit vulnerability. According to Brown (2012), vulnerability is “sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them...being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process” (p. 45). Fortunately, all participants in this study demonstrated complete vulnerability and entrusted me to tell their stories. Several of the participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the study and said:

- “African American women and black women do not get an opportunity even to voice it, lots of times it is kept in our hearts and just goes with us to our graves so I am just thankful for this study.”
- “This is a great opportunity to definitely get some insight and just get into the core and get the conversation started about what we experience as African American women, especially in human resource, so I think what you’re doing is good.”
- “Appreciate you doing this research.”
- “This research is important.”
- “This is a very interesting topic because I have kind of innately felt there were differences and challenges unique to African American women in human resource.”

- “This is thought provoking and helped me think about the paths I have been on and what else can I do.”

The most reflective comment was shared by Micah, who stated that she “appreciated the questions asked because it also helped [her] realize that...everyone has a journey and the journey really does shape your experiences.” Therefore, I begin with a discussion of how participants’ upbringing and childhood experiences shaped their sense of self and influenced their professional lives.

#### LIFE LESSONS – I KNOW WHERE I COME FROM AND WHO I AM

Hodgkinson (2005) believed people strive to have a connection to other people and Madden (2010) thought “many human stories are framed by the theme of connection or lack of connection to [a] place(s)” (p. 37). A few of the participants spoke about how their current professional success can be traced back to the impact their parents and community had on their upbringing. Gena, who is 47 years old, described the relationship with her parents:

I did not grow up in a really close family, particularly with my parents, and I think part of it was within me to prove them wrong. They never said “you are going to fail” but I could not depend on my parents. I wanted to prove it to myself, but also prove it to them, that I will be someone, whether they believed it or not...I reflect on how far I have come and view myself as a successful African-American woman who did make it out of middle class inner city neighborhood.

Hence, Gena’s lack of encouragement from and connection with her parents was a factor in molding her life choices. Gena also described an encounter with a college dean that

attempted to discourage her from pursuing a double major and did not appear supportive of minority students. Gena's childhood experiences taught her that she will "meet people along your journey that make negative comments to you or make you feel like you cannot fight to do more to be better" and it is those experiences that serve as motivation to be better. On the other hand, Janice, a 49 year old, expressed that her career choices were motivated by a desire to have a better career than her parents, who were "blue collar workers." Janice said she always knew she wanted to work in an "office environment and be successful." Janice expressed how her parents instilled in her that success was dependent on her ability to "always do your best, always do 10 things better than the next person, not brag about it, be a good servant, do good work, own your piece, and be responsible for yourself." Similar messages were communicated to Janice from African American female teachers from middle school through college. Janice acknowledged that her parents and teachers' beliefs aided in her success, but also were a "disservice as [she] was not very good about touting [her] story and performance like the company's culture preferred [she] does." Optics, who is 48 years old, received similar messages in her childhood from parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles that she had to be "better in order to get access to same things as someone who was average and average is absolutely not acceptable and just because you see somebody else being able to get away with it does not mean that you will be able to get away with that as a black female." Optics' upbringing taught her to be self-motivated in her professional pursuits. Micah, who is 50 years old, explained how she "grew up in a single parent household and education was the way out." Micah did not have a support system of business professionals that could

prepare her for the corporate world and give her access to job opportunities as some other families may have had. She provided an example of nepotism to explain the disadvantage in childhood: “the fact that they knew the father was enough but when you do not know Micah's dad or Micah's mom or anyone in Micah's circle, then Micah cannot do whatever she wants to do.” Micah also spoke about her “first interaction with racism by a white female” during college, when the supervisor of the student teaching program gave her the “Twas the Night before Christmas” book in a Creole dialect and said “read this, I am sure you can.” Micah complained to the school, which “sparked an investigation of the school.”

The value of being surrounded by diverse populations as well as learning skills to adjust to environments when you are the only minority in terms of race/ethnicity and gender were valuable lessons taught to Halle, Kodiak, and Micah in their childhood. Halle, who is 54 years old, spoke of the normalization of being the only African American in her elementary school and going to a college where “excluding the basketball team there were only 25 of us.” By comparison, Kodiak, who is 53 years old, spent a significant amount of her childhood abroad because her father was in the military so they were surrounded by more diversity. Kodiak expressed that “race was secondary to [military] rank and we clearly knew our place from my father's rank more so than race, but race was a bigger issue when we moved back to America when I was a teenager.” Micah discussed the influence that her broader community had on her views about diversity:

I was not just around black people, I was taught by my community. I was raised in an inner city, but I went to the middle school and hung with a group of friends

that teachers literally called us the United Nations. We had Dawn who was Chinese, Hojung was Japanese, Heykiang was Korean, Shiba was Indian, and Hilda was Latina. High school, I went to an all-black school and there was also Latina. College was very diverse. Even to this day, I go to a church with over 130 nationalities. Diversity is very important to me and that is how I choose to live my life.

As illustrated above, discussions of participants' upbringing revealed that they were influenced by guidance and interactions with parents, extended family, and educators. Additionally, their childhood environments and communities affected their education and career preferences. The most prominent themes from participants' childhood experiences were: (1) importance of self-reliance, self-improvement, and intrinsic motivation; (2) navigating the world as a minority; and (3) development of tactics to deal with scrutiny and minimal recognition and support.

## THE REALITIES OF WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Participants in this study exhibited a strong sense of self, but disclosed that professional setting like work environments and interactions challenge their identities. For example, participants expressed discontent with the multitude of myths and stereotypes about African American women and the continual struggle to contest them in the workplace. Participants collectively said African American women are stereotyped as: aggressive, angry, bad attitude, bitch, confrontational, defensive, difficult to deal with and manage, do not reveal personal information about themselves, do not get along with others, emotional, harsh, hormonal, incapable of speaking without using slang and profanity, intimidating, lack good work ethic, loud, not good listeners, not hard workers, not intuitive, not bubbly, not fun, not cheerful, not knowledgeable, not smart, not

articulate, opinionated, poor, should be seen but not heard, strong, take shortcuts instead of doing the required work, talk back, too serious, tough, weak, and violent.

There were certain stereotypes cited in multiple interviews. Aggressive and angry were the most reported stereotypes and were mentioned by seven participants followed by bad attitude, bitch, and a lack of work ethic. As one participant pointed out negative perceptions of African American women “tend to linger sometimes unfairly and it is a constant battle that is being fought.” Consequently, at work “whether the African American woman is aware of it or not they are being held to a standard unfairly that they are not always told about.” Only one participant, Aspen, discussed positive stereotypes of African American women which is that they have a “solid & deep work ethic, good work ethic, good coach to others, and they have a sense of what's happening not just what you can see but what some of the undertones of the organization are.”

Additionally, a few of the participants noted that there were specific generalizations about African American women in human resource. Janice described how leaders in organizations “view you as having the capacity to kind of be that person to be that clean up, the fixer... [therefore] you have to be a chameleon or be a little bit more agile than say a non-African American counterpart.” Optics offered a viewpoint that African American women within human resource get “tagged a lot for diversity initiatives and programs almost to the point of biased or what I would say crusaders and radicals and it is a belief system that at times alienates some of your counterparts, particularly white men because they feel comfortable telling you to do that as the human resource person because we tend to take that particular cause up in a much more

passionate way than even some of our white female counterparts and certainly white males.” Queen suggested that if you are an African American woman at a “manager or director level that others assume you got to that level by pretty much stabbing other African American women in the back and that you are not supportive of other African American women in human resource or any realm of the company for that matter.”

I asked participants if the stereotypes and generalizations reflected how they viewed themselves and overwhelmingly they said “no.” Furthermore, Sheree stated that she “doesn’t view [herself] that way, but is cognizant that people could view [her] that way.” Gena conveyed the advocacy aspect of Sheree’s statement when she said she “feels [she] has a responsibility as being African-American female to help stop with some of these stereotypes.” Gloria echoed this sentiment when she said she “challenges [herself] every day to break down the barriers to stereotypes.” In a few instances, participants aligned with some of the stereotypes, but not in the same context as others may view them. For example, Optics acknowledged that “being strong probably fits in with [her] narrative of being independent,” but she did not necessarily consider that to be a negative attribute. Aspen, Micah, and Nicki made distinctions between being aggressive, angry, and assertive. For Aspen, the difference in the two adjectives is:

Aggressive means you are overpowering, you are pouncing on things, you are not really taking time to really understand what is happening, it is almost as if they believe you have already got your mind made up about a situation and you are just trying to get them to where you are. Assertiveness is still having the confidence, still knowing what you know but it’s in how you deliver it and how you get people to understand what page you are on. For me, it does not feel like I am having to drag you to where I need you to go, it is because we have taken some time to build a relationship, we are walking to where I need you to go and you understand it because I have been articulate to explain it to you and help you understand where we need to be.

Micah conveyed similar thoughts that aggressive is:

When you are confrontational in a way that there is meanness, there is deliberate intention to harm, or just getting your way no matter what but assertive is stating your opinion and standing your ground...I would view myself as passionate and assertive, not angry or aggressive.

Nicki expanded on the role stereotypes have played in African American women's self-expression at work:

I do not feel as if I am an angry person. Can I be passionate about something? Sure, because of the stereotypes and prejudice that we have had for so long, people automatically take passion to equal anger or aggressiveness when it comes to African American women. I can be passionate and that can be misconstrued as angry or aggressive at times.

As Brenda explained, in response to stereotypes and generalizations, participants engage in specific behaviors such as "overcompensating to make up the difference" in how they are perceived by employees and their own perceptions in an effort to "make other people feel comfortable and trust them to get what needs to be done completed." Sheree explained her strategy of being "pretty intentional about how people understand [her] background, what [she] has done, and [her] educational background...to make sure [she] is dealing with those stereotypes to nip it in the bud." Janice explicitly stated that "we cannot truly be ourselves because that may be intimidating to others." Micah explained that you have to "make sure you are adapting to every audience, it is like you are a chameleon all the time...you really do not get to be yourself until you are in your own environment, or with your own posse or tribe, because you have to be agile in that way to be successful at work." Optics provided an explanation for this phenomenon:

African American woman are having to really kind of come into the male world and oftentimes I am the only...95 percent of the time...the only African



American female in the room and in many cases the only female...not only do I have the gender issue, but I now also have a race issue where I am frequently the only person of that race in a room and I am expected to speak for the entire race on any given day on any issue.

In essence, there is a necessity to constantly *shift* at work. This dilemma relates to Collins (1986) belief that racial and gender minority groups are not comfortable “revealing their true selves” in every realm of their lives because they have been oppressed due to their identity (p. 23). Gena explained that:

It is not just about the work, it is also about your appearance and how you carry yourself, and will people take you seriously. You also have to think how you are representing us as a race and as a gender. It is not just yourself. I take that very seriously when I go into work every day that am I representing us well.

As argued by Queen,

You have to do so many things to make sure that you are presentable to the world, as an African American woman in human resource, because you are the face and forefront of employees and departments. Caucasian woman do not have to contend with any of that...they can just be who they are.

## SUMMARY

This chapter demonstrated how participants endured significant challenges at work due to racial/ethnic and gender stereotypes and generalizations. “As an oppressed group, women have had to develop a dual perspective, to understand the point of view of their dominators as well as the perspective developed through their own experience” (Sprague and Zimmerman 1989:74). Consequently, African American women in human resource feel pressure to continuously make compromises to create positive workplace outcomes for themselves and others.

## CHAPTER V

### IS EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION MORE THAN AN EMBODIED FEELING?

The previous chapter provided insight into the psyche of African American women's presentation of self at work as compared to how they are perceived by majority populations. As explained by Bhopal (1995), "we can view the world only from where we stand...since we occupy different positions due to our cultures" (p. 167). Since this study's focus is to understand the experiences of African American women in the human resource profession, a discussion of the dogma of employment discrimination as described by the participants' narratives is vital.

### THROUGH OUR LENS

While the legal definition of employment discrimination as outlined in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was instrumental to this study's research inquiry and design, the intent of the participants' interviews was to discover how they interpret anti-discrimination laws and its implications in real life situations. Also, since human resource professionals are uniquely positioned to articulate their own experiences as well as the experiences of others, their narratives reflect a collective understanding and testimonials of employment discrimination. Their responses reflect a historical viewpoint and a cautionary outlook for African American women:

Brenda: It does inherently happen and at least for me as an African American female I am kind of expecting it almost. I do not know if it is the lawyer in me or just my personality but I feel like it is inevitable and I am going to have to deal with it. I know ultimately regardless of where I am at in my career I am going to have to deal with being treated unfairly or discrimination as a woman and as an

African American woman.

Gena: You have to remember that they may not have African-American friends. They may not have us in their neighborhoods. They do not necessarily get to know us or try to know us, so they go off of what they see on TV, which is not a whole picture. It is not an accurate picture of who we are as a race, as people.

Halle: What I have found, even personally, I think people tend to try to give every benefit of the doubt and try to address every possible thing it could be. "Here is what I am seeing from you," instead of trying to understand what might be causing it. You just want to talk about what you are seeing because you know that if you bring up that race word or that gender word, then you are going to be throwing up a hard wall that is going to create even more of a barrier for you. That has been my experience personally so you try to get away from it and just let the person know "look, I feel like something is not right and I do not know what it is...I got the skills or capabilities...what else could it be?" You are almost saying to them, "look you and I both know what it is and you need to stop doing that."

Kodiak: I would say more so now my awareness of my skin color has been increased because of the [political] activities in Washington, D.C. and it is more so than I ever had in my life. I never was as aware of my color. Is it because we came out of eight years of having an African American president? Or is it that we have a president now who does not embrace differences or feels it is appropriate to disparage or to denigrate people because of characteristics they cannot change. So I do not know what is the cause of it, I do not. I just know I do feel different in this country, and I have never felt this way before.

Micah: I know a lot of black women in human resource and it is such a unique part of our journey that we do not even necessarily have to characterize it as ooh let me tell you about what happened to me and how I was discriminated against. The suffrage movement was not for African American women. I think that plays out every day in corporate America. I think my experience is...it is what we experience as black women in the workplace. Discrimination has become par for the course. You just see it as more the micro-inequities.

Nicki: I think also it was those other small things that occur that you cannot prove...it is not necessarily so tangible.

Optics: When you look at all the dynamics of race and gender, it certainly exists. In organizations, I think it is very nuanced. It is at times hard to identify because it often gets veiled under very hard to see things particularly if you got things that get weighted like performance goals. Trying to really isolate if it is an individual's performance issue versus other aspects that might be contributing to that performance...we try to get underneath that. There is a kind of frustration associated with that. Is it my gender? Is it my race? Or is it simply a personality disconnect and we just do not gel?

Sheree: I think we [African American women in human resource] have had conversations where it is “why was I not given this opportunity.” Or, you know, perhaps it was unfair. I do not think the words ever came out explicitly that I feel like I was discriminated against. It is not articulated in those words because whether it be interactions or whatever nothing is ever like overt. I think we have to be very cognizant, which irritates the shit out of me. I will tell you about people's perceptions. I think we have to be careful to not allow the idea that an interaction has or has not occurred because of my race and gender. And I do think about that. I mean, there are times I am like I wonder if that happens because I am black. Or I wonder if that happened because I was a woman. Or I wonder if it happened because I am a black woman. And it is really interesting to me. But there is been times when I have been in social setting, not work-related, when I have been with a white woman and something may have happened and her reaction might have been, “you think that happened because you are black?” And I am like, “I do think that.”

Unfortunately, participants anticipate that they will experience employment discrimination at some point in their careers. As a result, participants explained how their process of evaluating whether they experienced discriminatory treatment involved extensive self-reflection of their racial and gender identity as well as the conscious and unconscious motives of others. Participants' perspectives illuminated how “race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in black women's everyday lives they work together” (Collins 2000:269). Additionally, Gena and Kodiak identified the broader connections of employment discrimination to societal dynamics such as the media and politics. Halle demonstrated how an innate human desire for nobility might present challenges to an individual's willingness to assess the conduct of others as discriminatory. Also, Nicki, Optics, and Sheree discussed the difficulties associated with identifying specific behaviors and actions as discriminatory, especially when conduct is more subtle.

Collectively, participants alluded to the idea that there are experiences and interactions they deem to be unfair, but may not rise to the level of employment discrimination. This awareness, that may only exist because participants are subject matter experts, is captured in Halle's description of the process she undergoes when investigating allegations of discrimination on behalf of her employer:

I interview all the individuals who we think might have information to help us investigate allegations, which includes the person who reported it and the involved party to try and make a determination to the best of our ability about whether discrimination was likely to have happened. Sometimes we cannot prove it. We are not a court of law, so it is not definitive. There does not even have to be reasonable doubt. It is more like the prudent person standard...would the prudent person believe that discrimination probably occurred based on the evidence we have. If we are able to substantiate that, then we would take the appropriate disciplinary action. If not, but we feel there is some smoke without a lot of fire, we provide guidance to put the person who engaged in discrimination on alert that while we were not able to substantiate the allegation raised we see that there are some concerns and we want to make sure they understand what is expected of them moving forward.

## WHAT MATTERS?

Given that more than half of the participants currently have or previously had responsibilities and roles in investigating allegations of employment discrimination, I asked participants a series of questions to examine the practical and contemporary application of anti-discrimination laws within organization. Specifically, I asked (1) how would you define employment discrimination; (2) how would you define unfair workplace treatment; and (3) do you think employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment terminology/concepts are the same or different? In response to the questions, most participants thought unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination are fundamentally different principles. For example, Optics stated that

unfair workplace treatment could be “as simple as you say good morning and hello to everybody on one side of the office and shut out others,” while employment discrimination relates to “illegal employment practices.” Sheree expressed that unfair workplace treatment is not limited to the legally protected classes (e.g., race, sex) and can be “created by anyone against anyone else...meaning two white men could create that environment for each other.” Aspen further explained that:

Unfair workplace treatment means the company has a standard or a policy or a process that applies differently to different people. I would not qualify unfair treatment as only relating to African American women because anybody can receive unfair treatment. I think the practice, policy, or process can be typically handled one way, but we are going to do it differently. It could or could not be because of the person's race. It could be because the person works from home and does not work in the office. It is not necessarily tied to someone's race.

However, as Brenda stated the differentiation between unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination may depend on “how your company defines it and fits those terms into policies and procedures.” This belief is echoed by Janice’s statement that “unfair workplace treatment and discrimination can be one in the same because it just depends on the circumstance and the situation.” For a few participants, unfair workplace treatment may be the precursor to employment discrimination. For instance, Gloria said “unfair treatment in the workplace is an initial step, then it could level up to the discrimination, which is a higher level.” Micah states that “unfair workplace treatment creates the discriminatory practices...it evolves.”

When participants spoke of employment discrimination, descriptions aligned with federal and state legal definitions:

Aspen: It means that someone has looked at a person's race, sex, religion, age and decided based on that and not their qualifications to make some type of decision

regarding their employment. It could be their pay, a promotion, getting an opportunity to do a special project, or something like that. Means not looking at the qualifications of the person or the person's merit or what they bring to the table more than their age, sex, and things that we call protected.

Brenda: It is being treated differently or excluded from something like employment based on race, sex, gender, some sort of physical attribute, or any of those types of qualities. Employment discrimination is a legal term...it is a little bit harsher and more rigid.

Halle: Employment discrimination means making the decision to hire someone based on their race, ethnicity, or characteristics that are protected in Title VII. When I think of discrimination, I think of things that have been determined to be unlawful.

Kodiak: When an employer makes a decision based on factors that have no bearing on the ability to perform the job. So if an employer makes a decision to hire or promote based on those characteristics that a person cannot change or that are temporary...gender, race, physical appearance, health status, in some cases sexuality, ability or disability. Employment discrimination is pretty solid and oftentimes verifiable. Sometimes it is intentional and sometimes it is unintentional.

Micah: Employment discrimination is really about the systems and processes within an organization that really minimize or mitigate the contributions or the hiring and development of people of a certain group.

Nicki: It is discriminating against someone based on color, culture, gender within the employment terms within the organization or company. Of course it can be with external applicants and can also happen within the organization as well.

Optics: I definitely look at that in terms of Title VII and some of the other legal statutes that are in place. Are we adhering to our legal and compliance liabilities... very simply what does the law say and is that employer following the law as it is intended?

Sheree: Someone intentionally not getting a job or promotion because of their race, sex, or gender. You know, the protected classes. It is saying that there is a particular characteristic about someone that you are saying they cannot or should not have this job, or promotion, or whatever. It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of those protected classes...race, gender, age, sexual orientation.

## SUMMARY

As evidenced by the above responses, participants have a good grasp of the legal tenets of employment discrimination. Also, in the course of the interviews, participants

referenced specific anti-discrimination laws to substantiate their levels of proficiency such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and additional laws that are not the focus of this particular research study such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967<sup>1</sup>, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990<sup>2</sup>, and Title II of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008<sup>3</sup>. Participants also understood the concept of unfair workplace treatment. More importantly, because of their professional expertise, participants have intimate knowledge of how employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment manifest itself in everyday employee experiences and how organizational policies and practices address prevention. At the same time, it is important to understand that participants filtered their own experiences through the lens of their acquired knowledge and understanding of employment discrimination, unfair workplace treatment, and anti-discrimination laws. Hence, when participants were asked if they had been discriminated against or treated unfairly in their employment, a few responses were not definitive such as “it is kind of hard to say and I am not sure” and “I do not know if it was actual discrimination but that is how I felt.” This perspective relates back to Halle’s comment that employment discrimination is “unlawful” so it could be argued that some

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<sup>1</sup> The Age Discrimination Act of 1975 protects applicants and employees over the age of 40 from discrimination in all aspects of employment.

<sup>2</sup> The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits discrimination of people with disabilities in all aspects of employment.

<sup>3</sup> The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 prohibits discrimination based on genetic information in all aspects of employment.



participants did not feel comfortable labeling experiences that may not pass a legal examination in a court of law as discrimination. Ultimately, as demonstrated in this chapter participants' perceptions of employment discrimination embody their personal beliefs and values, their professional expertise, and organizations/companies' culture.

## CHAPTER VI

### EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION IS A REAL THING, IT IS ALIVE

Chapter IV and V laid the foundation and established a platform to be able to answer the first research question: Do African American women in the human resource profession experience employment discrimination? This chapter provides evidence for the second research questions: What types of discriminatory employment practices have African American women in human resource experienced? Furthermore, because some participants did not consider employment discrimination significantly distinct from unfair workplace treatment, both terms were used in the interviews. In this chapter, I share findings about the experiences of participants that address the following most significant interview questions: (1) Have you ever been discriminated against or treated unfairly when applying for a job, transfer, promotion, pay increase, training opportunities, performance evaluations, job assignments, job classifications, termination, or layoff? (2) Have you ever had discussions with other African American women in human resource that experienced employment discrimination?

### HIRING, PROMOTION, AND COMPENSATION

The employment practices that generated the most affirmative responses related to applying for a job, transfer, promotion, and/or pay increase. The data revealed common themes for this category of employment practices. Specifically, when applying for jobs and transfers, African American women are subjected to more scrutiny based on identity markers (e.g., name) than individuals who are of a different race/ethnicity and gender.

Also, African American women are promoted at a slower rate and less frequency than their majority counterparts and decisions are not consistently based on job-related qualifications. In addition, the compensation of African American women is marginally lower than coworkers of different race/ethnicity and gender. Participants provided the following insights that explained their overall thoughts:

Gena: They look at our resume and see we have the education and experience, but we do not even get the opportunity to interview and we know we are qualified. We do not even get the phone call. If you take a traditional name and maybe spell it slightly different, then you are probably not white because you did not spell it the traditional way. So the typical name S-H-A-R-O-N, but maybe you changed the S, with a C you are not spelling it the traditional way, then they question what your educational level is. Also, if you have names like Shenene, Shaniqua...it can cause unfair treatment.

Gloria: A manager I reported to shared, years later, that during the hiring process she saw my resume multiple times. She hesitated to call me because she did not want to pronounce my name incorrectly, but they would always narrow the applicant pool, rank it, and I would always go to the top based on my skills and experience. So, she finally called and I was hired. I was like, this is confirmation that discrimination happens. Also, when I do career coaching and talk to students, professionals, and job seekers I tell them do not share your address if you have the opportunity to do that initially because people have biases.

Halle: I was conducting an interview with a leader and the candidate was an African American female. I had to stop the interview and have the leader step out. I said you seem to be short with this candidate and not interested. The leader said I just do not think she is going to be good for this role and I said why because literally all she has said is good morning. I wanted to say but did not "It looks like you have a problem with her because she is an African American female." I knew though I was not going to let them get away with dismissing her for what appeared to be only because she was an African American female. Most often the times where I have seen a real violation of law or policy has been in hiring for African American women, whether it is determining the slate of applicants who are going to go to candidates or it is the selection from candidates to hires. It is the inability of that hiring manager or the recruiter even to articulate why they have deselected African American women. I wonder how many times have they done that because I was not there at the table to hold them accountable.

Janice: When I work with managers to recruit for a vacancy and I have diverse candidates slated I try to block out all names for the managers so they are truly just looking at the CV and the experience of the person. Because there have been times when they looked at names and addresses of individuals and say well they

cannot drive this far. But again the experience and the talent is what they need to be focused on, not the name, not where they live and things of that nature. There are other things too like one that may have gone to a historically black college or university, but you cannot block out the educational piece.

Queen: When I graduated from college I took a job screening resumes. That was years ago, but now it is done electronically. I remember the Caucasian guy that was over the screeners told us to our faces that if you came across anyone who has any ethnic names that we were not to put them in the box for them to be screened. So if they had a name like Bumqueesha, LaQueesha, or something like that...he went down a whole list of names. I definitely knew that it was some stereotypes when it comes to people's names attached to a resume.

Nicki: I usually hear well this person has this type of experience and they try to make it correlate to what the job is yet the African American woman somewhat does not have it and it never makes sense to me. We will go round and around in the conversation then we just end the conversation.

Relative to their own work experiences, nine out of 12 participants reported that they have been discriminated against or treated unfairly, when applying for a job, transfer, promotion, and/or pay increase and provided the below examples:

Brenda: In applying for a job with regards to my legal name, ethnic, I think there could be some implicit bias if somebody is evaluating...could be some things that they could garner from looking at my resume or my name could lead to some bias. Searching for my first job out of law school I had not gone on interviews and I felt like that was due to them looking at my resume and CV.

Gena: A white male was being promoted and we reported to the same person, but I was at a higher level. Our manager was going to promote the white male to the same level as me, making more than me, and this person had no management experience...well actually he did but it was not apples to apples. I actually had to speak up for myself because they were not trying to be fair about the situation. I am bringing x number of years of experience to the table and they thought it was okay to promote this white male at the same level as me and I said something. They made it right and I got a pay adjustment, but I struggled with did I have to speak up for them to do right.

Gloria: I learned when I moved into the management role that I was significantly underpaid compared to my peers because they shared their personal information, not from me prodding. I did not seek out anything based on that...faith handled it for me. I was given a significant increase prior to the director that I reported to retiring because she wanted to position me better due to the gap. She did recognize it and worked with the compensation department to correct it.

However, for the amount of time that I went without the increase, it was a disservice because it should have been corrected as soon as I moved into the role. It took a two to three year time frame for it to be corrected.

Janice: I feel like I was completely discriminated against. I applied for a job and actually got an interview with another insurance carrier after I talked to the recruiter over the phone and everything went well there. They scheduled the face to face interview and I went in for the face to face, I am sitting in the office, nicely dressed, professionally dressed, business suit, hair done, everything. I put my portfolio in my hand and the receptionist called the person I was supposed to be meeting with to tell him that I was there. He, white male, comes out and looks at me and made a face that says, “uggg...I will be with you in a minute.” We go ahead with the interview. I meet with two other leaders, white males, at this particular company. They were saying that the job required special projects and I would have to do x, y, and z, but they were not really certain what it would look like. I said well I can do that and this is what I have done at this particular company and here is what my current experience is so how would this experience work within this particular role? They said well I do not know. It was a blatant, blatant...they could not have been any more racist and discriminatory. In the second interview, that man, did the same type of dance that the other guy did. At one point, his phone rang, he stopped and took the phone call in the middle of the interview. He told me he does not know what the duties would be and asked what did the last person tell me? I felt very discriminated against.

Kodiak: I felt like there were jobs that I was qualified for but did not get because of my race. That was years and years ago.

Micah: I applied for a role and a majority male ended up getting the role. I was told that people did not know who I was and as a result I could not get the job. I was like “what do you mean by that...what do you mean people do not know who I am?” It was really that point, people needed to know me and bring my whole self to work, quote unquote. My performance was there, that was very clear, but people did not know me personally so as a result I was not gonna get the job. I am like but the job is based on the performance. But it was not based upon performance or education and was really based on access and who you know and how people know you and interact with you and how you make them feel comfortable in your presence. All of those things were really important to success and I felt like that was discriminatory. I think it was also a little bit of a cultural understanding issue. It should be okay if I do not wanna tell you about what I did every weekend and I do not wanna talk, in some ways, inappropriately in the office, about my quote/unquote shenanigans.

Nicki: Definitely. There was myself and another young white lady that I knew and we were going up for the same job. I had more experience and the other young lady was coming straight out of college. I had more experience with the workload and recruiting and based on the feedback I received from other people, I did very well in the interview. But the manager was looking for something different and wanted someone fresh and new to the organization with a different

background that could bring a little bit more diversity to the strategy pieces. So, I did not get the job and I felt it was some form of discrimination because she did not have experience. Also, prior to coming into human resource, I felt discrimination with compensation. I had a white female peer and we handled the same amount of states and managing the same number of employees, nothing different. After this person left the company her job was posted and it was posted at a pay band that was significantly higher than what my pay band was and I had been working there for quite a while. When I brought that up to my manager, white female, she made a lot of excuses. My manager also told her manager, white male, and they both told me it was different because of those particular states and how the manager that left was handling a little bit more complexity in statutes and legislation and all that stuff. It seemed as if they were adamant about not changing my pay band. The only other thing that I may not have known would have been maybe her performance reviews, but I had high performance reviews. So unless hers was starkly different, I would assume that we should have been pretty much somewhere on equal footing with pay. I did not agree at all with them because we did the exact same job so I brought it to human resource and there was an investigation. I did get a pay increase and I was satisfied with the resolution, but I always wondered...I will be honest...if they gave me the increase because they knew both my mother and my husband were attorneys and this could escalate to something else.

Optics: I think there has been situations where I have felt that they had their number of black women quota so to speak. I had a particular situation where I was not selected where I truly felt like that dynamic was going on because it kept getting emphasized...“we just hired so and so...we just want you to know we are committed to looking at talent like yourself.” It just seemed really awkward to continue to emphasize that particular hire.

Sheree: I think that there are times when they said “oh, you did the best interview, but we are going to give it to this guy over here.” What? I do not get that. I mean when I was a senior director of human resource I had a client group of 5,000 people. I had the same responsibilities as my white male boss. I had the largest client group in the organization, but I could not get a vice president title. There were people with vice president titles that had half the client group I had and half the staff size I had and half the responsibility. I had individuals from the business side and even from human resource also questioning why I was not a vice president. People from the business asked my boss “now why does she not have a vice president title...why are you not giving her a vice president title.” I had those conversations with my boss...what is the difference and he would say timing is not right and we are top heavy. Blah, blah, blah... and so for me it became okay... either I am going to do this or I am leaving this organization because I was at that crossroad. My boss would sort of brush it off. Eventually my boss was instrumental in ensuring that I got my vice president title, but it just took him a long time to get to where it should have been.

## TRAINING, PERFORMANCE, JOB ASSIGNMENT, AND JOB CLASSIFICATION

There were several overarching themes for training, performance, and job assignments experiences. With regard to training, participants believed that African American women are not given as many developmental opportunities to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities as their majority counterparts. For performance, African American women are unfairly held to a higher standard of performance, have fewer opportunities to make mistakes and errors, and receive more punitive consequences than women of other races and all men. Lastly, African American women receive fewer strategic job assignments and projects than their majority peers. The following comments support the themes:

Aspen: Being in human resource, you understand the undercurrents...expectations of higher performance standards than white peers...I have perceived that based on my experiences, based on me working with people. It was not something that was specifically spoken to me but it is my perception that I have this undercurrent to work in.

Gloria: In my experience I have been the only African American female leader several times over in different industries and the expectations and standards for me for my work compared to what my white female counterparts were not the same.

Optics: Generally, a complaint from an African American woman is usually centers on a couple of issues. One is the ability to progress in the organization and feeling like "I have posted for my third job and I still did not get selected for that job, and I feel like either my manager is saying something negative about me that is preventing me from getting these opportunities or it is because my manager unfairly rates me and provides feedback that is getting in my way of progression." It usually is around feeling stagnant and feeling like you are seeing other people surpass you and yet you are being asked to train the new hires and you cannot understand why that is not translated into you getting those jobs yourself.

In this study, six participants reported discrimination or unfair workplace treatment in training opportunities, performance evaluations, job assignments, and job classifications.

Aspen: I had a white boss and she would nitpick everything I did. She gave me a needs improvement on a goal and everything else was a meet goal. She said I did not lead and coach my leaders well and it was feedback she got. I asked who said it and she said I cannot tell you that. I thought if you are big and bold enough to say it then I need to know who you are because I want to question you and understand where you are coming from. Since she said she could not tell me I really felt like it was unfair. I cannot be blindsided. It would have been different if we were having conversations and she told me that you got to work on that, but she did not tell me and I was just like what is this on my performance review. I said well I cannot take a needs improvement. She said well Aspen you are getting a meets overall like she was trying to placate me. We finally came to a resolution where she changed that goal from a needs improvement to a partial meet. I thought that was an okay compromise, but I was trying to figure out what is it...was it really about me and my race and I am an African American female or is she saying just get better.

Brenda: With regards to performance evaluations in my previous role, I did. And I think it was because my previous company was very rigid about their performance evaluations and who got exceeds expectations. They would only give it to a couple people and it seemed like the people that always got it were the people that had been there forever. I felt like I was exceeding expectations. It was more of me being treated unfairly because I think it was probably a combination of my race and gender, but I do not know if it was. I do think had I been a little bit older and a white male doing the same things that I was doing then I would have gotten higher performance rating regardless of the tenure in the role.

Gloria: I feel like I have been treated unfairly by different leaders. I have seen where there are individuals who are positioned better from a training perspective and leaders are willing to dedicate more dollars. In the past, I had minimal support and when I have asked it is always stated that it is because of the budget that training cannot be supported. But again, I think certain individuals that were non-diverse talent were able to get the opportunities they wanted. One of the disappointments was when I sought out my graduate degree, which was in human resource management and unfortunately I did not get the support from my vice president of human resource at that time on my tuition reimbursement approval. I was told it could not be supported due to budget, but what was interesting about that whole situation is that I had such a great rapport with the client group that I serviced so when the business union president and his leaders found out they were appalled. So he offered the same discount that all of his employees got on tuition to me, which was a 30% discount and I was able to benefit from that.



Yeah, it was disappointing that my own vice president of human resource did not support my higher education in human resource management.

Halle: I have been given feedback on a performance review that I was not being bubbly, or not being friendly, and those sorts of things. That is not in my job description. The manager put in my review that business leaders said they would like to see you be more approachable and things like that. At the time, when I was having the conversation with that leader, I asked if it was professionalism because I am communicating professionally and the information I am sharing is correct. So I felt it was important for me to write in the review that while the manager offered this feedback it was also indicated there was no issue with my availability, there was no issue with my responsiveness, there was no issue with my professionalism. I also wrote that when I was presented with the feedback I confirmed with you that there were no issues with these things and so while I recognize that this is what they would like to see from me I am making a commitment to continue to do my job professionally and I am not required to be bubbly. I felt it was important to be on the record because they had put it in my review.

Janice: With job classification in my last job we were all seniors, but I know because I had access to everything in the human resource information system there were significant differences in our pay. My peers were African Americans and Caucasians and females and males, but some of them who were Caucasian females had less responsibility in terms of projects and extra duties or assignments, but yet they were given more from a monetary standpoint...one made 10 grand more and the other was paid 12 grand more than I was. We were all classified as seniors and the job descriptions were the exact same, but we sat in different units. The scope of the duties were a little bit different because I had more of a compliance aspect.

Nicki: I have seen my white female counterparts get a lot more coaching than I have and I have asked the same questions in regards to "hey I am interested in expanding my skillset so what more can I do...what are the other things." My manager who is also a white female always said "you are doing great, just keep doing what you are doing." But when my white counterpart and I talk she will tell me our manager said she "needs to do this and this and apply to this type of job if she wants to go into this field or more so in this field of human resource." I think it is my manager's own discrimination. I think she lump summed myself and a lot of the other African American females into just one bucket that we are not worth the coaching and moving up.

## TERMINATION AND LAYOFF

None of the participants experienced discrimination or unfair treatment with respect to terminations and layoffs. The majority of participants indicated that they have

never been terminated and/or laid off from an employer. The few participants that experienced a termination or layoff believed that the organizations' decisions were legitimate.

#### ALL OTHER ASPECTS OF EMPLOYMENT

There were also other incidents that participants believed were discriminatory based on their race and/or gender, but did not fall within the employment practices (e.g., hiring, pay, etc.) discussed above.

##### *Undermining Authority and Discrediting Ideas*

Participants expressed concerns that their knowledge, skills, and abilities are not valued in the same way that white men and women are at work. The following examples were provided by participants:

Aspen: I had some of my peer challenge a hiring decision that I made. They were both white females. One peer had the same group as I did but in another state and the other person was our employee relations specialist. They said our policy prohibited the selection. I said show me the policy and they showed me the policy. The key, I think, was our policy and practice had been different and our practice had been we made similar decisions in the past. I said we made similar decisions in the past and they said it is still wrong. I said you do not determine what is right or wrong, the business makes the decision, not human resource. I felt like we were peers and they did not have to come at me like that, for real. We can have a conversation about it but once they raised their voices that is where I am going to elevate too. They were saying things like you are going to do what I say. I said no we are not playing this game and if we need to get the business leaders in here and our bosses we can but I am not going to go back and forth with the both of you about this situation. I felt like it was an adversarial relationship because I was black, African American. I felt like I was being minimized and demeaned and they did not respect my decision. We ended up getting back together with our bosses. We worked it out where the business made the call, not human resource. My boss, white female, told me that I was going to get many more people like that in my career and coached me how to influence better. My peer ended up calling back and apologizing. We never really got to a better place but at least we could work together.

Brenda: Another African American woman in human resource that I know had an issue with the way the business did their overtime list. We have very specific

standards and procedures in our collective bargaining agreement about how you have to do it and the business was not doing that. It is one of the things the union dings us on and they may say they are going to file a grievance so human resource was trying to give them that council and tell them they were going to have to change it. At that point, all of a sudden everybody in the business is a lawyer and arbitration genius and they cannot imagine how they would lose if a grievance was filed. Ultimately, the human resource person is the expert. We are not going to tell them how to run their business, but if you make the decision not to follow the expert guidance there [are] going to be greater, broader implications. She did feel like they were treating her that way because she was a newer African American woman in the role and the managers were older white males that had been at the company for a long time.

Gloria: My experience is that ideas brought forth from the African American females are not embraced. If another ethnicity brings the idea forward, they are more supported and ideas come to fruition.

Micah: It will be like I will say something, then a male will say something, and they will be like “oh yeah and such and such” and I am like I just said the same thing.

### *Employee Interactions*

Some of the participants shared stories of inappropriate behavior by coworkers that was rooted in race and/or gender bias. For instance, I captured an exchange with Gena about a conversation with one of her previous managers:

Gena: We had a change in management and this particular white male did not have a good reputation. One day he decided to walk into my office and start off the conversation saying “hi B.”

Chrystal: What did he mean by B?

Gena: He meant the profanity of B-I-T-C-H, but I am just not saying it now. That was his greeting and I was totally caught off guard. I was totally floored. I did not know what to do. I thought he did not just call me that. My staff heard it too so I had to process it but I do not remember what I said. I know I did not go off because my whole staff heard this conversation. I know I basically cut it off like we need to just stop here. I am sure he could tell from my facial expression that he had just offended me. It ended quickly.

Chrystal: What did you do after the conversation?

Gena: I remember talking to a white female mentor that was in human resource who also used to be my manager in the past. I told her what happened and she looked at me like in total amazement...like that did not happen. I could also tell that she went into the human resource/legal mode and thought I am coming to her so what are we going to do...it was like without her saying it to me...please do not go file something. She said she wanted to talk to the head of human resource and asked if I could give her a day or so. I know he was not terminated, but I think he was written up for it. I also laid down some demands and they gave me all of my demands. The main thing I will share...because I do not want to go into that much detail...the main one I will share is that effective immediately I no longer had to report to him.

Chrystal: Were you satisfied with the resolution?

Gena: I felt there should have been a harsher punishment for him. I could tell by his behavior toward me after that something had been said or done because he stayed clear of me. I do not know if it was just documented that he had to go a period of time and stay away from me or whatever, but it was a few years later and came to me and tried to explain why he thought it was okay to call me that. He said “you know the young people today they are okay with that and I went around and I asked some other people if I used that word with them would they be offended.” I just basically looked at him and said I am not those other people and this is what that word means to me and I have never been called that word and I am not about to come to work and be called that word by you or anyone else. He said he still did not totally understand, but wanted come and apologize to me and I remember him apologizing.

Also, Nicki described an incident regarding office décor within the human resource department:

During Christmas, each cubicle row decorated for a contest. One of the cubicle rows of recruiters had put an elf on the shelf and pictures up. One of the pictures had a confederate flag with and a display of those plastic soldiers like people have growing up. It was very interesting because all my counterparts who were African American were like go see it, but no one said anything. I spoke up and said listen I do not know who put this picture up, but this needs to come down and come down now and we need to have a conversation with our own manager. The office coordinator said “oh we will just black the flag out with a marker...that is all we need to do.” She also went to director and our director said “oh that is so sad...oh my gosh” and swept it under and no one was reprimanded...no one was spoken to...there was no conversation within the office.

Many of the participants in this study have expansive professional networks of African American women in human resource. While it is not a constant topic of

discussion, participants indicated that experiences of employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment are discussed within their network from time to time. Yet, discussions do not entail the usage of unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination terminology. Optics stated that other African American women in human resource typically voice concerns to her that they “feel stuck...do not seem to be able to have a connection with a given leader or feel like they do not get a seat at the table or they are finding out about things after the fact that they should have known about beforehand.” Another participant stated that she heard concerns from her network about the “lack of high visibility projects, cross-functional projects, and strategic opportunities.” Kodiak shared a discriminatory experience that occurred with a colleague:

Someone I know in human resource, she is African American, has a Ph.D. and a number of years of experience as an executive coach. She worked in corporate America back in the '80s or '90s and had a white male colleague who she worked with very closely that was based out of an office in another state. They collaborated for many months before they got the opportunity to meet in person for the first time and when they did, the male colleague was absolutely shocked that she was a black person and could not believe it was her initially. The story she relayed to me was she introduced herself to him and he says “no...you are not the person I have been dealing with.” He organically refuted her immediately because he did not have the impression before meeting her that she was a black woman. I guess she does not have the vocal intonations that some people may assume goes with a black person and he was absolutely struck. After he said to her “no...you are not the one” he left looking for someone else because he was sure she was not his colleague.

## EXPERIENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH OTHER PROFESSIONS

Participants believed discriminatory experiences and unfair workplace treatment of African American women in human resource, in many ways, mirror the experiences of women in other professions. Drawing upon their work experiences in various human resource positions across many companies and industries, participants stated that “a lot of times the issues and complaints that I am dealing with do come from African American

women and cross the realm from the shop floor individuals up to my peers and colleagues.” Another participant indicated that all African American women experience employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment “because of systems and because of people’s behavior.” One participant captured the experiences of human resource and non-human resource African American women in this way, “in other parts of our business, like engineering, they have unique challenges too...it just is a different run of the mill, but everybody kind of has similar challenges.” Participants also noted that all African American women are “marginalized and the only difference is how it is manifested” in different professions. The most disturbing example of an African American woman’s experience at work was shared by Kodiak:

We have a family friend and she worked for an electrical utilities company. She worked on the power lines and hooked up meters and all that...blue collar work, which means that it was heavily male based and she was the only black woman. Unfortunately, she got breast cancer a few times and when she came back to work from battling it the second time the discrimination she faced was just disgusting. Her male coworkers left a noose on her desk, in her work area, on her first day back. This was only like three years ago. So that is extreme workplace harassment and a violation. There was a video of the employees coming and going into her workspace so they knew which employees did it. I believe those employees were reprimanded, but because they were in the union, they did not lose their jobs. I think the supervisor may have gotten demoted or definitely moved to a different area. What is interesting is at that time she was married to a medical malpractice attorney so he immediately drew up papers and everything because they proceeded to sue the utility company. She never went back to work after that and the company bridged her time so she could retire and gave her full retirement and medical and a lump sum. She got all that partly because her husband is an attorney and knew immediately how to go about navigating the issue.

Micah shared an example of gender bias:

An African American male business leader had an annual golf outing. He has a country club membership so he would invite groups, only men, from two offices and they would take a day off. When I found out about it, I asked about women. There are two African American females in his group. Literally, this is more gender-based. I said to him, “so you are not inviting Ashley, you are not inviting Gerri...they play golf so why are they not included in this?” Since the outing was

an entire day, I said “so when are they getting a day off to go to a spa?” I called the leader out on this because I had developed a rapport with the leader where I could do that. He did not invite them, instead he decided to cancel the golf outing and never had it again.

Conversely, some participants that believed African American women in human resource have more unique and nuanced challenges. One participant stated that human resource “has a harder battle than any other African American woman in, say the accounting department.” Gloria believed there is a distinction because “as an African American female in human resource there is this overall cloud around the professionals...there is a level of trust that is decomposed by everyone based on their own personal experiences with human resource departments...we hear the term human resource police...that stigma is there for human resource versus someone working in a business related field.” Brenda echoed a similar thought about African American women in human resource:

We are in a role where you have to tell people that they cannot do something a lot or give people counsel that they do not want to hear a lot and so your opinions are automatically diminished. Or when you give your opinions it is like you are coming from a place that they do not feel that you have their best interest in mind immediately versus whereas I think I have seen other people give the same advice and they give them that benefit of the doubt and believe they are really looking out for their best interest. It is a perception...there is a lack of trust...an inherent lack of trust and it leads to a lot of doubt or questioning of us and a lot of pushback on us.

## SUMMARY

For African American women, hiring, promotion, and compensation had the greatest impact on their experiences of employment discrimination and unfair treatment. In hiring, African American women have to overcome bias against their names, home addresses, education, and work experiences. Secondarily, opportunities to develop

professional skills and knowledge through training and job assignments were limited for African American women and they endured more critical feedback on performance evaluations. Also, African American women are not consistently given the platform to articulate their thoughts and ideas. Overall, in some instances the treatment of African American women in human resource is akin to the experiences of black women in other professions, but there are also distinctive circumstances between professions.



## CHAPTER VII

### EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AND UNFAIR TREATMENT: WHY US?

In this chapter, I explore the third research question: Do African American women in the human resource profession experience employment discrimination based solely on race, sex, age, national origin, or religion, or on the intersection of race, sex, age, national origin, or religion? The data revealed that participants generally attributed their experiences of employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment to their race, sex, or a combination of race and sex (refer to chapter VI). There was only one scenario with a performance evaluation, in which age along with race and sex, were cited as contributory factors for unfair treatment. Specifically, Brenda, who is 31 years of age, said she would have received a “higher performance rating” had she been “a little bit older and a white male.”

Participants did not report national origin and religion as reasons for employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment. This finding may reflect the homogeneous nature of the sample: all participants were born in the United States and are Christians. Also, participants postulated that being of a different national origin was not significant and may still result in the “same struggles” and “similar challenges” as African American women. It was also mentioned that the influence of national origin may depend on the organization’s diversity so “if you work for a global company...with an international scope job...then your [national origin] can help bring cultural awareness,” but if the organization is only based in the United States, then being a

different national origin “may create a different experience than ours.” For religion, participants opined that experiences would depend on how “present and visible religion is in the workplace” because “most people do not really speak about religion in the workplace...it is taboo” as well as there is an expectation that employees are “being respectful to other people’s beliefs.” To further explore participants’ perceptions of race and gender, I inquired about their career progression and workplace support.

#### CAREER PROGRESSION

For the most part, participants were satisfied with their career paths in human resource and felt accomplished relative to positions held and compensation. Yet, they acknowledged their progression was not without hardships and disappointments. Also, participants believed their career success was largely due to their drive, determination, and fortitude. One participant reported that “the field of human resource has been really good to [her]” and another stated that she “did not experience being pigeonholed because [she] was kind of forceful” in career pursuits.

#### *I Want That Job*

Participants described some of the challenges they faced in climbing the career ladder, noting that experiences would have been different if they were of a different race and/or gender:

Gena: I do not think I would have had to necessarily work as hard or gone through feeling like proving myself over and over again to get promotional opportunities. Part of the reason I left my last company was because I was in a situation where I wanted to be promoted and felt like I needed to be promoted. My job title and what I was doing did not match. I basically flat out asked “what do I need to do to get to the next opportunity” and got fluff answers. There were three of us who wanted to be promoted and I was the only minority. I just flat out told my manager one day I think you are going to promote someone else and told her which person I thought it was and she denied it. Then at her divisional meeting she announced the promotion of this person. Long story short, I was

already interviewing with other companies and I ended up later resigning.

Gloria: I feel like I would already be at a director level, which I am not, with my years of experience and background. I also feel like there may have been more opportunities even to surpass the director level at this point with my experience because I have seen backgrounds of individuals that are a different race and gender in roles in human resource that are director levels and above that have nowhere the experience that I have.

Halle: I think that I would have excelled farther and faster in my career, before I transitioned to human resource or even in human resource.

Janice: One of the most condescending things I experienced in my career is that I was good enough to move to a certain level, but not above that. They viewed me as the person to kind of be the clean-up, the fixer, but beyond that it was kind of hard to move into the next role or the next level. Yes, I did progress to being a director, but to move on to the regional vice president or the next type of level, it was hard. Because in my perspective ... and maybe it was the cultural office environments that I was a part of but I felt they would rather give that type of opportunity to my peers that were non-African American versus myself.

Micah: I would have progressed quicker and it would have been easier for me in terms of my trajectory. What I mean by that is there was an executive at a company that once said this, in like a very transparent way, and it was one of the things I appreciated, but he said this in an open forum. He said “you know at the end of the day I relate to men first...I am a white man, I relate to white men first.” He reflected how he interacts and relates to people and said after white men he relates to white women and at the bottom of the list was, believe it or not, after Asian and after Latina women was black women.

Nicki: For a white male the sky is the limit. If I were a white male I would have gotten a lot of exposure and opportunities, meaning that even though I did not have the specific background they were looking for I feel as if they would have taken a chance. The exposure piece, I feel within the job I would have been exposed to more different responsibilities and skill sets to allow me to further my career and enhance my skills.

Optics: I certainly think I would have advanced a lot quicker if I were a different race. I have seen others where we have similarly come up that have certainly moved on quickly up through the chain and I found myself trying to catch up a little bit.

Queen: If I were a different race, I know I would have been a director or vice president at this moment. I would not have had the challenges of having to basically, I will not say fight, but really had to prove myself over and over again that I am capable. I definitely know I would have a totally different experience and be far more advanced than where I am because of being an African American female. A Caucasian man, I feel like they are put in these positions and do not even have the background to be there and get it just because of who they are. I still think it is a good old boy network.

### *Show Me the Money*

Narratives also revealed how race and gender impact compensation decisions:

Aspen: If I were a different gender or race, my compensation probably would be much higher.

Gloria: It would not have taken me this long to get to the salary that I am at if I were a male. I would not have had to have the level of education nor the certifications. I have a specific experience within this industry whereas someone else was at a vice president level and really did not have the educational background that I have.

Sheree: I have a male Latino peer who is a vice president of human resource too and he is making more money than I am. My other peer is a white female. Part of me wants to say I cannot complain about where I am because I am blessed, but I also know if I was a white woman I probably would have gotten here a few years sooner.

### WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Participants expressed that race and gender influence how work relationships are formed and sustained as well as how mentorship and sponsorship impact opportunities:

#### *Professional Networking*

Aspen: I mostly work with white males and they seem to bond better with white males. I think where it may have taken me three, six, nine months to build those relationships, a white male may have done it in 30 days. Sometimes those relationships are built outside of work at happy hours and cocktail parties and things like that, which that is not something I enjoy, but I do it because that is where relationships are built. I feel like if I were a white male it is easier to do that and hang with the boys versus being an African American female. I am in human resource too so I do not want to be around people and them see me drunk or something. I have to act like I have some sense and not be all loose and free at those things that happen after work hours.

Halle: We all know that successful mentorships are built when you can find common ground and build on those things...whether it is career interests or personal interests. I understand from people that I have worked with in human resource that they found their counterparts, especially white males, tend to be able to build relationships with business leaders, whether they are females or males, much more organically than we can. When we talk about why or what is driving that, they have conveyed things like they do not see me as a business person, they will not invite me to their meetings, or they do not include me on things. So when we talk about how they can position themselves to get a seat at the table, or to build those relationships, they find what they are lacking is that commonality to build relationship. Personally, I experienced this when I was in sales. I had to learn how to play golf, which was not something I had grown up doing and it is

an expensive game, but I recognized that my peers were taking customers out playing golf and doing these things that were allowing them to get business. So I had to get on board or I was not going to be able to establish those relationships.

Micah: I think there is a reality and it is a reality because part of it is a perception, but it becomes my reality that I could acquire as much education as I want and still have to bang on that door until I am exhausted and it may not open. So I have learned that part of it is having the education, but the other parts of it is really about having access to leaders, access to the decision makers, access to people that can influence and provide opportunity and freedom. Right out of college I started in a role in HR so my story really speaks to the power of networking and having sponsors. I do not know if it is unique to African Americans...I think it could be anyone in human resource...we see it is about networking...we are in a community where we have referrals from the CEO and everyone has to jump through hoops to accommodate that referral. So it is access that facilitates more opportunities and that same access can adversely impact us as it has done to some of the people that I talk to.

Nicki: White men have more exposure to people in leadership.

Optics: We work with leaders outside of human resource so we have a unique ability to get advocacy. I have always said I am a business person that happens to be in a human resource function. How we choose to leverage that does play a big role in your ability to get sponsorship. I did not really have to break down any kind of barriers when I first got into human resource because I had sponsorship from a white male that I worked for when I did a legal internship. He was always picking up the phone and advocating in terms of getting me other opportunities in other organizations. Most of my sponsors have been white men and I think some of that really is because when you take on a sponsorship role you are exerting political capital and you are taking risk. White men have that ability to leverage that more in those roles. Certainly as I have moved through the human resource chain I had trusted advisor relationships with many senior level white men. They tend to be in those roles. It might be that they say "what are you doing for your career right now...I have some ideas" or "I heard from a colleague and I want to make sure I connect the two of you together and recommend you for that opportunity." White women have played more of a mentoring role, but in many cases have not had that same ability and status to move things in a significant way, but certainly there have been white women and black women that are crucial in terms of just advice.

Sheree: I have sponsors, a white woman and an African American male, within the organizations who helped to say this is what I should be doing and helped push it with the right folks to help me progress. I was given opportunities to engage in high potential employee programs...like Harvard mini MBA program. With sponsors, I made some pretty significant progressions in a short period of time.

## *Communication*

Participants conveyed that certain peculiarities exist in corporate environments, when communicating with individuals of a different race, gender, and functional expertise. Often times, participants have to adjust their communication style, self-regulate, and manage the expectations of others:

Brenda: I am constantly counseling people, whether it be on a contract or just on human resource type issues. I have to work extra hard to make sure they understand that I want to work with you to get to the answer that you want, but sometimes it is not necessarily going to be the way you thought we were going to get there. I try to overcompensate to make other people feel comfortable or to trust me so that we can get what we need to get to. This is my perception as an African American woman, even if it is not explicitly said it is an underlayer when counseling people that if I had said this as a white male it would have been taken differently.

Gena: If we speak in meetings with a certain tone, then we are angry versus us being passionate or feeling like we have to speak with a certain tone or certain amount of authority to be taken seriously or to be heard. We fight to even just get a seat at the table and when we have that seat and we speak we are judged sometimes just by the way that we speak. You could have a non-minority person not be making sense or using inappropriate language, but they come across as getting more credibility than us just because of our tone.

Halle: I have had other people tell me that I often remind them of so-and-so leader, who is a white female leader in human resource. They say "you talk just like her....you act just like her...that sounds like something so-and-so would say." This person they refer to her and I had different career paths to human resource, our knowledge and experience in human resource are similar, but they elevated her in a different way. I am kind of no nonsense and tend to not have a lot of bandwidth for extra stuff and I recognize that is a part of what people want from me but it is not a price I am willing to pay.

Janice: In my experience when you are having a discussion with a Caucasian male and they become elevated I did not match that level of elevation...being curt, terse...I did not match that demeanor. When he finished speaking and I tried to state my perspective or give my position, he cut me off. At that point, I had to step up and match that...cannot be passive nor passive-aggressive. So you kind of have to just know your audience and have to change in those moments and be candid, off the cuff, have a very transparent type of discussion and that makes folks, non-African American people feel uncomfortable.

Nicki: It is almost like African American women need to be quiet and do not have a voice. You are not allowed to have a voice. And when you do have a voice, it is looked

at as you are harming someone or harming the organization in some form or fashion. At the end of the day, it is about trying to quiet the voice we have. That could be in meetings when you are trying to make a point or trying to share and I never feel it is taken seriously.

Optics: When issues that affect African Americans are discussed I think there is probably at times a little more of a tendency to just hold my tongue a little bit on some of those and not engage probably in the same way, but I think we are living in an interesting political time and I think as a result things that I would not have said and let that conversation just move on, now I am stepping into it and saying “hey I just overheard you all” and bring myself into that discussion. So it is what I would call the courageous conversations that I think a lot of us are finding ourselves in, but I am feeling more comfortable doing it because at this point I have reached a certain level where I now have earned enough political capital that I think I can get away with doing it. But also I am just at a point in my life where I am probably thinking more of retirement than career progression and feel like with that comes a little more of a desire to make things better and easier for the next person to step into those conversations.

Queen: It is fascinating to them when African American women can articulate your point without using any slang, using any cuss words.

Sheree: If we do not allow for our counterparts or individuals we interact with, to, for lack of a better way of putting it, run us over. When we stand our ground and offer up our perspectives, depending on how that is articulated we come off as that angry black woman. I think this is true, not just for African American women, but women in general...sometimes we can be considered a bitch just because we are trying to articulate our perspective and have people understand it by being assertive. I am really cognizant about it because I have a team of 20 people and there are times when I am trying to help them understand and have to be relatively blunt because we do not have time to sugar coat. A director who works for me...I will ask her “how did that sound” because I think there are times when I am being direct. Also, when I am interacting with other leaders in the organization or other leaders in human resource and I have to express disagreement in terms of what is happening I try to be thoughtful around how it is being perceived. I am thinking about an interaction with a white female in our compliance department who spent a significant amount of time in the United Kingdom and she interacts with my team frequently. She comes at it from a completely different viewpoint because she is in compliance and my viewpoint is a human resource professional who is trying to build a culture where people want to be here. So the language that we use is very different. I find myself confronting her frequently about the language she uses. We had an exchange the other day about the position of power between my team and a manager. I said there is no position of power and we are working in this together and the language you choose to use when you are interacting with people is interpreted differently. I swear, every time we get on a call, I feel like it is a contentious conversation.

### *Expectations of Perfection*

Participants described an overwhelming awareness that they have to exhibit extraordinary performance at all times and felt it was unrealistic and emotionally stressful:

Aspen: I think African American women have to present themselves as more polished, more poised, more put together, more proactive. African American women have to consistently work on a level 15 on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the top of the scale. Sometimes we get the recognition, but if you are working at that 15 level all the time it is exhausting and you are tired. Everybody else is down here doing, in my opinion and experience, mediocre work getting by, while I have to do exceptional work. I have to always be right, there cannot be any mistakes, and there cannot be any errors because I am held to a higher standard. I feel like there is a standard for me that is higher than my white peers because of my skin color. My white peers are good being at five or a six level, but I feel like I have to be exceptional because the bar for me is high. I feel like the expectation for me is high because my experiences say they expect me to be average or below but I feel like I am not so I got to be up there.

Brenda: It is a lot to always have to feel like you have to be above and beyond every day. You cannot ever have a mistake. It seems like you get penalized for it extra. If you have a bad day it is the end of the world, whereas some other people have bad days or treat people like crap all the time. You do not get that benefit of the doubt.

Gena: I am always in fight mode. I feel like we are expected to work harder and work longer. We are possibly expected to sacrifice our families to get ahead. I do feel like a white man can do less, can even make more mistakes, not be held accountable for, not take ownership if it, and still be taken care of. African American women may bring all the skills to the table, you may know everything, but you come to work every day and are dealing with the challenges of the typical white male, who may not want you there. You are dealing with the challenges of other African American females who may feel threatened by you or they feel like they are competing for a seat at the table as well. You are constantly everyday dealing with challenges, not just the work, but of feeling a part of a team, of feeling like you are included. Who can you trust?

Halle: When I have coached other African American women, I talk about grace. The thing about having grace to make a mistake or forgiveness to make a mistake. I see so often in human resource the same individuals can make similar mistakes and one individual may get "well, let us give them another chance" or "well they really do well here," or "that is okay" or "we can forgive that." Whereas, their counterpart who is a female of color can make similar mistakes and there is no grace to give them a second chance. It feels like we invited them to the party and they messed up once and can no longer be here. There is less grace for error, because of my race, and my gender. It is a double whammy. The window is very narrow for any mistakes and the benefit of the doubt is rare or the grace to recover from a mistake is rare. It may be communicated to



you that you have that grace, but you do not necessarily find that is true. I always felt a pressure to do everything in excellence, be professional, stand up in my expertise, be very articulate in conveying my thoughts and feelings, or recommendations. It is very troubling to me that those things were perceived as being strong, or mean, or anything that was inappropriate or would require me to be coached about it. When, frankly I felt that if a counterpart did that who was not an African American there would not be a concern that was raised about that.

Janice: There was one time when my brother was in a major accident and fighting for his life in the hospital but I had to be at work to deliver reduction in force notices to employees whose jobs were being eliminated. I was unable to let my emotions show at work and only after I advised the employees of their job elimination did I inform my manager of my brother's accident. Then there was the time when I had to return to work seven days after the birth of my son to deliver another reduction in force notice to a different group of employees. There was also a time when I returned to work the day after my grandmother's death because work needed to be done. The feeling that I needed to come back to work on those time may have been self-imposed but no one else could pick up the ball and go run with it from where I was in the trenches. So I had to be at work to handle those things. What I learned from those experiences is that I sacrificed the opportunity for a very good bonding experience with my child. Those experiences also impacted my attitude so I decided from that point forward to choose my son and myself over the job.

Optics: I think I do not get nearly as many passes as you might see from my counterparts. When I mess up, the mess up is visible and it is remembered for a long time. I think I always have to go in when I take on a role knowing my stuff and putting in...I would say an inordinate amount of work because of just being black in general. I may find myself going to the extreme to demonstrate that I am capable and that I did not get this role just because of a particular program. I think it is tougher for me to say I do not know something. I am going to spend a lot of time trying to know that information. I am not willing to have my team, delegate to them, and get my team to know stuff. I do not feel as much like I have that luxury. I feel like I need to know everything my team knows. Not to say that they do not do the work, but it is kind of like I need to understand what they know so that I can go in this meeting and be well versed.

Queen: I think you always have to be a step ahead as an African American woman in human resource. You have to know your stuff and know it well. They expect more from you because they are expecting you to fail or for you to be lazy. Just a sense that you are not really qualified, regardless of whatever types of degrees and types of experience that you have. I do not know who can quote different legislative things because it is ever changing, but the expectation is that you are supposed to know off the drop of a hat, when a law changes as it relates to employment. They do not understand you need to study and be well versed and that you are not going to know immediately. Whereas a Caucasian woman is given time to research that issue and get back to them. If an African American woman does not know right off the top of her head it is a weakness, but I see it as a positive because you never want to give people inaccurate information, especially in regards to employment on any level because that opens you up to legal things when you are giving misinformation. When you work in a company that is predominantly

Caucasian, you are a minority and they are looking for you to prove yourself every time and that gets discouraging and exhausting. I have to come in and fight for my job every single day.

Sheree: As African Americans, it is questioned whether we are as smart as or work as hard as. I think we have to work a little harder. I think we have to prove ourselves.

## SUMMARY

The descriptive stories that participants articulated about their career progression and workplace support highlight that differential treatment based on race, sex, or the intersection of race and sex affects how African American women experience work in more unique ways than their majority counterparts and peers. The narratives also revealed that the organization of society, social institutions, and relationships shape the power and influence that African American women have in employment.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WE DO NOT JUST SURVIVE, WE THRIVE

This study investigated whether experiences of employment discrimination affect the emotional and physical health of African American women in the human resource profession, which is the fourth research question. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), the “challenge for black women in the workplace is to make a way for themselves without losing themselves” (p. 172). In this study, the participants who provided affirmative responses to unfair workplace treatment and discrimination questions reported that they processed emotions internally and did not display any outward signs of anguish in the course of their daily roles and responsibilities. In addition, for some participants, their experiences empowered them to speak up on their own behalf and to advocate on the behalf of other African American employees.

#### EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL STRESSORS

One of the most interesting characteristics about all the participants is they are highly self-aware and self-reflective about their lives and their work experiences. Participants were keenly mindful of the connection between workplace experiences and emotional and physical health. More than emotional impacts, participants experienced physical effects:

Brenda: It is definitely a mental strain and physical toll. Personally I have to focus on not getting pizza every day in the cafeteria and instead take a minute to myself or work out to relieve the stress.

Gloria: I am usually the only African American female leader and that is an added level

of stress and has been very toxic on my health because I work long hours and do not really exercise, eat healthy, and do not eat at the appropriate times. My health has decreased over the years and it has been more physical than emotional. But I know there are others that I have coached or given career advice to where it impacted them emotionally...their confidence in what they could do, their value to the organization, and communicating their marketability.

Halle: The lack of sleep is stress. I have talked to people that have had their hair fall out and adversely impacted their blood pressure. They sought counseling with professional counselors trying to deal with the workplace.

Janice: You have that front stage face that you do not share with anybody else. I do not want to transfer the burdens, those are my burdens so I just have to process how to get through it. The stress is one reason why I left human resource...I got burned out.

Kodiak: It is extremely stressful. The duality of knowing you need to have a job and knowing that you are in an environment that is less than ideal or that is unproductive has got to be an amazing amount of stress, especially if you are in a financial situation or economic situation where you need that job. It has to impact the soul and the psyche of a person.

Micah: I think it starts with emotional health because you have more on your mind to process than a person that is not a person of color.

Nicki: My experience affected me emotionally because I felt the organization or maybe it was just that leadership was not supportive and they did not care about me or my career or anything. I became dispassionate, disinterested at that point. I may not always take up for myself but I am going to take up for the next person and especially if it is an African American woman.

Queen: This is one of the main reasons I stepped away from human resource...it was highly stressful and definitely affected my mental health. I hold myself to such a high standard when it comes to my work and the pressure of producing at any job can take a toll on your health. In particular African American women do not put enough thought into it, but it definitely affects your mental health.

Sheree: It is taxing. I am a big believer in the holistic approach so my personal life impacts my professional life and my professional impacts my personal. I do not do a good job at separating the two. Frustrations at work manifests themselves in interactions at home with friends, family, and significant others. As I try to manage through it I have to be very mindful of those interactions not only personally, but in my work too.

### *The Masks We Wear At Work*

While participants may have been emotionally and physically affected by their experiences, several articulated the importance of not allowing their personal well-being to affect their performance and work relationships. Below are quotes from Aspen, Brenda, Janice, Micah, and Sheree describing their approach to work, after employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment situations:

Aspen: I feel like it made me strive to do even better. I was not trying to sit in the cut and figure out who said what about my performance. All I tried to do was figure out how do I work better with them.

Brenda: Ultimately it did not affect my performance or my day to day because I still trusted that I had a good enough relationship with my boss and I was also thinking that this company may not be for me.

Janice: I have my work that I have to do, I have people I have to support, leaders that I have to engage with, and employees that I have to engage with so they will never know that I am disgruntled with my own personal job satisfaction or my own interactions with my leaders. I have to be the advocate, the advisor, the counselor, and to do what is right for the company and for the employees because of my role as human resource.

Micah: I took the performance feedback and moved forward because at the end of the day it is not gonna change...I know the political game.

Sheree: My boss or whoever...the relationship is still going to be there and I am still going to have to work with that person and do our jobs. I have to think about how to not let it impact me negatively so that I do not find myself in a different position than I am today. I am a big believer that I am not going to give anybody a reason to take action against me. So if they are going to do something they going to have to go really, really hard to find a reason.

### COPING TECHNIQUES

Participants referenced various methods they engaged in to deal with the stressors of work. The most prominent coping strategies were a reliance on religion/spirituality, professional and personal support systems, and engagement in personal time:

Brenda: I think down time with other similar situated women, African American woman is extremely important. Being able to share your experiences, talk, and relate. I also exercise and have hobbies like going to different restaurants.

Gena: I started making sure I get a massage once a month. That was something that I thought was a treat to myself a couple times a year, but now it is important to me. My faith is also very important to me and it is really important to me to pray. I also have a support of circle of close friends that can relate to me and we can be there for each other. It is important for me to have my family and I have made that clear to my managers. There are certain things that I'm not going to budge on. An example could be, a child's extracurricular activity thing that I need to go to.

Gloria: Last year I tried meditation, which was helpful. The other piece is carving out time on my calendar, blocked time for my lunch break because I know I need that time to walk and do personal errands and things that bring my stress levels down. I know a lot of African American females who use exercise and several in my network are either professional trainers or fitness instructors.

Halle: I talk with friends to try and relax and unwind. Recreationally I drink wine.

Janice: I have to take 30 - 40 minutes or sometime the whole night to be with myself and have a glass of wine and watch TV.

Kodiak: I talk to friends and get counsel or coaching to see how I can navigate situations successfully.

Micah: I just have a great tribe and posse. I have a great network of people who sharpen me. I am very anchored in my faith in a way that allows me to kind of reflect. Every morning I get up, before I get out of bed, I will do my devotion. It is funny, I do not have a therapist, but I probably could use one. I have never had to tap into that and I think it is because of how I pray and all of my anchors and my faith. That has been my therapy. So technically my tribe and posse are my therapists.

Nicki: I go to church, pray, meditate, and look to my family to make me laugh in a sense. I feel as though our culture has that ability to alleviate things once you step out of work. Myself and my other African American colleagues in human resource...we would do a lot of praying, praying together, and a lot of meditation.

Optics: There is a spiritual aspect and I also have a sister that is in a very visible role herself so the ability to talk through it with family and friends who may have similar experiences of being the only one is good. I like to read and I take time off for myself to travel.

Queen: It always helped me to have friends that had been in human resource. I recently joined a Facebook group of African American human resource people and they share stories back and forth. So just having an outlet to talk to other people who have experienced it. I am of age now too where I do not take things as personal as I did when I was younger.

Sheree: I exercise and that has become a great outlet for me to relieve stress. I rely on friends and family, quite honestly, frequently. I am blessed enough to have a decent support system in my life that will let me get this off my chest and then move on.

#### SUMMARY

Participants shared a range of options to cope such as mediation, prayer, exercise, travel, and conversations with family and friends. While the methods varied, the commonality among all participants is that they participate in some type of activity to relieve the pressures of work.

## CHAPTER IX

### A CALL TO ACTION

The final component of this study was to investigate the factors that influence participants' decisions to report employment discrimination. The main themes associated with whether a participant reported unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination was (1) human resource professional creed/ethos and (2) organizational culture, policies and practices.

#### THE PROFESSION OF HUMAN RESOURCE

The role of a human resource professional is to enforce and monitor compliance with the organization's employment policies. Hence, when employees raise grievances, concerns, and complaints that another employee violated the organization's policies, practices, and/or federal, state, and local anti-discrimination laws, allegations are investigated by the human resource department. By and large, the majority of employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment complaints are presented by employees that work in non-human resource roles. It is a rare occurrence that a human resource employee will bring forth a complaint about their own employment, but when they do in most organizations, it is still the human resource department that investigates the allegation. Sheree explained this dynamic perfectly, when she said "as human resource professionals it is almost like the checkers checking the checkers...I cannot complain to somebody in human resource about somebody in human resource...how could we effectively investigate without an appearance of contentious?" Janice



rhetorically asked “who is really the complaint department for human resource that is going to do anything to satisfy human resource in a way that it should be done?”

For those reasons, in some situations participants were more inclined to use informal versus formal channels to report allegations of unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination. As an example, when Gena’s manager referred to her as a bitch, she advised a mentor. In Gena’s words, the mentor’s response was akin to “please do not go file something” and give her an opportunity to speak with the appropriate individuals to bring resolution. Another option to report concerns, besides informal channels, is through the organization’s anonymous complaint system, via the phone or computer. This is the route Gloria chose to take when she had a concern about her work environment. She explained the “reason [she] went anonymous in that situation was because it was internal to [her] department about a business partner and [she] did not feel comfortable going to that individual directly.” Gloria even said “it was a test for [her] to see if the anonymous process would really work.” In both Gena and Gloria’s situations, their allegations were investigated and resolved.

The majority of participants felt comfortable addressing concerns about their employment directly with the individuals they had or may have an issue with and/or that person’s manager, but expressed their decision to do so was not without contemplation:

Brenda: It is never an easy decision for anyone. You are scared about how it is going to come across if it gets out that you complained because everybody has their own aspirations and what they are trying to get to and do not want anything to get in the way from that for what seems like is not related to the work you are doing, but it affects the work you are doing. I think it is hard for people.

Gena: We say oh I am going to file a complaint but we also go through the reality that I have bills to pay just like everyone else. I need my job. Even for me it is not easy, but I

know it would bother me more if I do not say something. You take a risk every time you speak up for yourself and it does not matter who you are speaking up to.

Gloria: An African American female is comfortable coming to another African American female to try to understand what steps they should take to report it.

Halle: It is difficult for people to address issues because they feel if they bring up the race word then they are going to say “she is super sensitive” and now you have created an additional barrier...a hard barrier because no one wants that word race associated with them.

Kodiak: Well, there is that lovely he said/she said or she said/she said paradigm. Do I feel like I have evidence to back up or support what I am going to accuse a person of? The empathy, I do not want to throw anyone under the bus or I do not want to cause anyone to lose their job. But ultimately, I will be very frank with you and say I probably would just not report it...lack the courage to do it.

Optics: Particularly in human resource raising those concerns because of the nature of the work we do is particularly tough. The human resource community is large, but small and it is sometimes a risk and how much you are willing to push against the machine because we are more familiar with it than just about anybody in terms of what it takes to win a dispute and the time and the energy and whether it is working. Also, you could become tagged as litigious. Also, I do think there is a potential flag around how can you be objective on other claims that come forward without going “yeah I had my own case and I had to work through.”

In addition to the participants’ awareness of the challenges of reporting concerns within the human resource department, there were also discussions about the anomalous nature of a person in human resource even engaging in discriminatory behavior. For instance, Queen explained that:

Human resource is not a place where employment discrimination or unfair treatment comes into play because of the nature of the department you work in. It would be like why you would do something to someone who knows the policies and procedures. Who would have the balls to do that when I am fully aware of the Department of Labor and the EEOC and I know they take claims very seriously and will do an investigation. No company wants that type of publicity.

Unfortunately, as evidenced by this study’s participants, some human resource professionals engage in employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment.

Perhaps, Sheree's explanation offers insight into the dynamics of human resource's conduct:

I will say white folks are smart enough not to be that blatant because they are human resource professionals. We are the conscience of the organization so they are smart enough not to say "I may not want to hire her because she is black," but their behaviors do not support that. So they are smart enough to where somebody may not be able to pinpoint. And quite frankly I would say if they are not smart enough, then they should not be in human resource.

Relative to Sheree's viewpoint, Micah shared a situation that occurred early in her human resource career in which her manager used his savvy and position to assign a task:

There was almost a class action suit from people of color. My manager was a white male and I was the only person of color on his team at the time. He said "can you go and see what they are talking about" and wanted me to sit in on the discussions that the lawyers were having with employees about the class action suit. I was young in my career so I was not gonna say no. But if this had been later in my career I would have said no. I realize I never should have done it. Most of the employees did not know me because I was relatively new to the company so I just kind of sat there, listened, got up and left. I came back and reported what I heard to my manager. I do not think I was totally transparent with him about what they were talking about. I was like oh my God, I was a spy...what did I do. That could have been so detrimental, not just for me, but to my company because I was representing the company. I realized in the moment that it did not feel right. About four or five years later I got my Professional in Human Resource certification and understood laws and things like that and knew I should never have done that.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, POLICIES, AND PRACTICES

Participants' interviews revealed that most companies have well established policies that detail their philosophy and approach to maintain a diverse, discrimination free workplace. For example, participants cited code of conduct, diversity, equal employment opportunity, and non-retaliation policies. Additionally, those policies are reinforced by organizational practices that outline specific strategies to ensure non-discrimination workplaces such as recruiting/interviewing, performance/conduct,

compensation administration, and terminations. For example, Aspen discussed that recruiting and interviewing practices typically specify that they “interview based on the requirements of the job, ask consistent questions to each candidate, and train interviewers how to interview.” It is worth noting, as Janice pointed out, that “diversity policies are not always followed because if they were always followed why would a company need to create a college recruiting team to focus solely on historically black colleges and universities to generate a more diverse applicant pool.” Halle stated that non-retaliation policy components protect individuals that raise complaints from retribution because “human nature sometimes causes people to want to retaliate.” Overall, as one participant articulated, organizations make “good faith efforts to really prevent discriminatory practices or institutionalized practices that would impede diversity and inclusion.” Most participants were more likely to raise concerns about employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment, when organizations have established and documented policies and various avenues for employees to report complaints.

## SUMMARY

Organizations have employment policies and practices to ensure anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunities for all employees. This chapter highlighted the unique circumstances that exist for African American women in human resource to raise concerns of employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment. As participants articulated, how individuals choose to speak up and whom they choose to speak with are determined by their individual comfort level, organizational culture, policies, and practices.

## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION

This chapter synthesizes the findings for the primary research questions related to understanding the experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination among African American/black women in the human resource profession. I also discuss the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study, and the recommendations for future research.

### SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on the protected classes (e.g., race) in all employment practices (e.g., hiring). One of the overarching themes of this study is that employment discrimination is an expected and inevitable consequence of participation in the workforce for African American women. One participant asserted that discriminatory treatment occurs on a daily basis in all organizations. Yet, a universal experience of employment discrimination for black women does not exist. This was evident in the participants' narratives of their own experiences and the experiences of others that do not work in the human resource profession. For example, participants proclaimed that African American women in all professions experience employment discrimination in hiring, promotion, compensation, training, performance, job assignments, job classifications, termination, and layoff, but the specific circumstances as to how it unfolds varies for each individual.

Findings in this study revealed that an employee's initial identification of employment discrimination is effusive and as expressed by participants they could "sense" and "feel," when they were treated unfavorably at work. Additionally, participants cognitively process the behavior and actions of others through multiple filters such as: (1) their professional expertise and knowledge of anti-discrimination laws; (2) prior exposure to the treatment of others in the workforce that are similarly situated to themselves; and (3) their personal values and beliefs. Since participants are human resource professionals, two of the initial questions they ponder, when an unfavorable situation happens is: (1) was the interaction, behavior, and/or conduct of the other person against the law and/or the organization's policies and practices; and (2) was the organization's policy and/or practice non-compliant with the law? Secondly, they consider whether others in the organization or individuals they know external to the company have been subjected to similar treatment. Lastly, based on their own insights, they decide how they will respond and the actions they will take. This is a process undertaken regardless of whether they are the subject or another employee is the subject of unfavorable treatment.

Generally, the majority of individuals in non-human resource roles do not have the same level of technical expertise so they are not likely to go through such an extensive process of analysis. This was illustrated by participants who spoke of their experiences counseling other employees. Instead, when employees in non-human resource roles believe they have been treated unfavorably the very next step typically is deciding whether they will report the incident to human resource to investigate. As an

example, Nicki reported discriminatory treatment in compensation that she experienced, while in a non-human resource role, to the human resource department and they conducted an investigation. Hence, the responsibilities of deciding the legality and/or violations of organizational policy are transferred to human resource.

Employment discrimination is a legal concept and cases presented in a court of law are subjected to a consistent analysis of the merits of the cases as compared to the tenets of anti-discrimination laws. Beyond the legal system, organizations have taken liberties to create employment policies and practices as they deem appropriate to investigate and assess employee allegations of employment discrimination. Hence, as participants in this study noted, depending on the organization's approach, employment discrimination may be distinct from unfair workplace treatment or considered synonymous. Interestingly, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 refers only to discrimination terminology and virtually all sections of the EEOC website do as well, *except* in one section of the EEOC website. Specifically, in the employees/job applicants' section and the employers/small business' section, the EEOC website states that anti-discrimination laws "protect [employees and job applicants] against *employment discrimination*, when it involves *unfair treatment* because of race, color, religion, sex...national origin..." (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2019). Essentially, the EEOC recognizes unfair treatment as a component of employment discrimination. Another way to consider the relationship is that unfair treatment includes the behaviors, conduct, and actions that determine employment discrimination. The EEOC's utilization of both terms, employment discrimination and unfair treatment, may

seem non-essential on the surface, but this study revealed that human resource professionals make differentiations in the definitions of the concepts. This is critical because work experiences are affected by the participants' perceptions of what is deemed employment discrimination versus unfair treatment.

Since most of the participants in this study are subject matter experts, it was important to understand how they define employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment. The depth of analysis and specification of the participants' responses in this study concerning the definition of employment discrimination reflected an advanced level of understanding that may not exist in studies that include layman participants. Hence, it is important to point out that the purpose of this course of inquiry was not to make an assessment of one truth, but rather to understand how anti-discrimination laws are interpreted by the human resource profession and applied in various U.S. organizations.

The majority of participants believed employment discrimination is distinct from unfair treatment. The most common differentiation is that employment discrimination protection is applicable only to those individuals that fit the protected class characteristics of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (i.e., race, color, religion, sex, and national origin) whereas unfair treatment applies to all employees for all employment practices. Also, some participants believed employment discrimination requires a higher threshold/burden of proof than unfair treatment. As such, individuals may be more likely to identify unfavorable experiences as unfair treatment than employment discrimination or not make any distinction. Conversely, some participants consider the two concepts to



be “one in the same” or unfair workplace treatment to be a “precursor” to employment discrimination. Therefore, I could argue that the majority of participants in this study employ a strict interpretation of the language in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as compared to the EEOC’s communication and rely more on discrimination being legally distinct from unfair treatment.

To delve deeper into this phenomenon, I posed questions to participants about their own experiences in hiring, promotion, compensation, training, performance evaluation, job classification, and job assignment that included both terms: employment discrimination and unfair treatment. In my analysis of the participants’ narratives of affirmative responses, I paid particular attention to how they described experiences, noting their use of employment discrimination and unfair treatment descriptors. The majority of participants explained their experiences without using the terms of employment discrimination and unfair treatment. Furthermore, when descriptors were used, discrimination was cited marginally more than unfair treatment. Hence, reliance on the EEOC’s definition of employment discrimination, which includes unfair treatment terminology, allows for a reasonable inference that all affirmative responses can be classified as participants’ experiences of employment discrimination. In essence, in my analysis of the data, differentiation between employment discrimination and unfair treatment is insignificant.

The discussion of employment discrimination and unfair treatment descriptors illustrates how the collective elements of organizations’ employees, culture, policies, practices, and compliance strategies impact the experiences and perceptions of African

American women in human resource. Additionally, it highlights the importance of looking beyond the specific terminology used by employees to describe their experiences and focusing on the legal tenets of anti-discrimination laws, specifically disparate treatment and disparate impact. Equally important, is that participants reported that employment discrimination based on race and gender may be difficult to substantiate legally because behaviors and conduct may be “nuanced,” “subtle,” and/or “veiled” within the organization’s policies and practices, thereby creating micro-inequities versus macro-inequities. For instance, participants provided examples that aligned with job segregation, exclusionary treatment, lack of recognition and empowerment, stifled creativity, and minimal organizational support.

Another theme of this study is that the reporting of employment discrimination for African American women in human resource as compared to employees that do not work in the profession is more unique. To illustrate, participants in this study that experienced discrimination addressed their concerns: (1) directly with the human resource professional that engaged in the conduct or (2) utilized the organizations’ anonymous reporting system. It should be noted that anonymous reporting allows the employee to remain nameless, but the system is still typically monitored by the human resource department. So if an investigation commenced it would be under the direction of human resource. There are some organizations that have anonymous reporting systems that are managed by external companies, but those companies do not operate completely independent of human resource. Which leads me to the question: When human resource departments are the investigative arms of organizations, where are the checks and

balances to ensure they do not have too much power and control when their own staff brings forth allegations of discrimination and unfair workplace treatment?

While the decision to report allegations of inappropriate behavior and conduct is never easy, a distinction about participants in this study is that the majority chose to address concerns directly with their managers. Those decisions reflected their professional expertise and comfort in their abilities to mitigate their own allegations. In comparison, employees external to human resource may not have the same confidence in their skills and the courage to articulate their concerns. Therefore, it is important for human resource and managers to proactively engage with employees to keep abreast of any situations that may compromise the organization's discrimination-free environment.

Also, participants in this study were able to substantiate their allegations because they fully understood the organization's policies and practices and had access to employment data (e.g., salary). For instance, Gena shared her experience of unfair treatment in which she preempted a white male from being promoted to her level with a higher salary than hers by speaking up to her manager. Gena knew of the promotion because she worked in the compensation department and had access to the system. While the white male still received the promotional pay increase, Gena was able to get a pay adjustment too. Also, Janice spoke of her ability to view her peers' job classification and salaries within the human resource information system so she knew her compensation was not aligned with her peers. In a similar fashion, Halle's awareness, during her performance review, that her manager's statement that she was not "bubbly" did not fit into her job description and/or performance goals. As such, Halle indicated that she wrote

a statement in the review expressing her concerns because she wanted to be “on the record,” which essentially meant she wanted to make sure that anyone else that looked at the performance review would need to assess whether the manager’s comments were with merit and job-related. In addition, Aspen decided not to sign her performance review until she and her manager reached an agreement about a goal rating, but as Aspen stated, “we know in the human resource world that just because you do not sign the performance review it does not mean it is not on your record.”

Ultimately, most employees that do not work in human resource are not advantaged in the same way as participants in this study were to proactively address their own situation, use adequate terminology/language, and have documentation to substantiate allegations...especially with allegations that involve compensation and job classifications because employees would not have access to employment data beyond their own. Therefore, participants in this study are disadvantaged relative to employment discrimination due to their race and gender, but in some ways are advantaged, when mitigating allegations because of their profession.

The majority of participants in this study reported employment discrimination or unfair workplace treatment in hiring, promotion, compensation, training, performance evaluation, job classification, and/or job assignment. None of the participants provided affirmative responses to discrimination in termination and layoff. This data represents one of the most interesting findings as it demonstrates that well-educated, highly credentialed, mid-level to senior-level African American women in the human resource

profession also experience employment discrimination. As such, it could be argued that race and gender are salient features as compared to education and career level.

Relative to hiring, the most dominant theme for discriminatory practices is that African American women are denied job opportunities at the initial stage of recruiting, which is the review of the resume, due to racial/ethnic bias against applicant names, home addresses, and college attendance. Participants explained that applicants with more ethnic names, more urban home addresses, and who attended historically black colleges or universities are often excluded from consideration. The underlying assumption is that applicants' racial/ethnic identity can be determined by their name, address, and college attendance. Several participants described their exposure to this type of exclusionary treatment such as when Queen said she was directed by a Caucasian manager to eliminate applicants with names like "Bumqueesha" and "LaQueesha."

Furthermore, even when African American women applicants make it beyond the resume screen stage, some managers engage in subtle behaviors to discriminate and reject an applicant for consideration. Janice described an interview experience in which the interviewer's expression, when he greeted her was one of disdain and subsequently would not share any details about the job duties and responsibilities with her in the interview so she was unable to speak to how she would be qualified for the job. In Micah's situation, when she was denied a job, she was advised that she was declined because individuals did not "personally" know her instead of providing her with a job-related reason such as performance for the declination. The experiences Janice and Micah described highlight how unconscious bias reveals itself in the interview process.

With regard to promotions, while some participants in this study reached senior level positions in human resource, their progression was slower and more linear than their non-minority male and female counterparts. As one participant noted, the majority of African American women in the profession began in entry-level human resource positions and were promoted multiple times to senior levels, while quite a few Caucasian females and males transitioned from other departments into human resource at middle and/or senior levels. Participants also reported inequitable treatment in compensation administration, such as the experience of Gloria, when she was “significantly underpaid” as compared to her peers that had similar roles and responsibilities. Another example was provided by Gena, when the organization was going to promote someone that was at a lower level than her to the same level and pay the other person more than Gena, even though she had more work-related experience. Findings from participants’ experiences with performance, training, job assignments, and job classifications indicated that African American women in human resource are: (1) held to higher performance expectations and standards than their white peers; (2) their work product is scrutinized more which results in more punitive consequences; and (3) there are less opportunities and exposure to training/development activities and strategic job assignments.

Participants in this study reported that employment discrimination was attributed to their race and gender. However, determining whether discrimination occurred because of race, gender, or the intersectionality of race and gender was often difficult as stated by Optics and Sheree. Generally, in this study, the intersectionality of race and gender most often affected the women, but there were experiences shared in which race was more

pronounced than gender and vice-versa. One participant asserted that human resource is a profession primarily occupied by women, thereby allowing race to be more salient, but some of the other participants primarily worked with Caucasian men so for them race and gender were important. Also, participants did not believe national origin and religion had any bearing on their experiences.

Participants provided a comprehensive inventory of stereotypes and generalizations about African American women as well as assumptions about black women in the human resource profession. As noted, the most common adjectives reported by participants were aggressive and angry. By comparison, participants saw themselves more positively and were assertive, not aggressive and at times passionate, not angry. A noteworthy opinion about work that participants made is that negative stereotypes and generalizations of black women fuel a perception of them as employees that persist regardless of their achievements, contributions, and positive performance. A few participants attributed this problem to the existence of unconscious bias within organizations. Because participants in this study are exposed to the performance of all employees in the organizations they work for and are involved in other employment practices such as recruiting, compensation, and disciplinary action, their viewpoints about the experiences of African American women are more than anecdotal comments. As one participant pointed out, they are involved in “performance calibration sessions” where managers discuss and rank their employees performance. So, they have first-hand knowledge of the comments made by managers about African American women. Kodiak believed that stereotyping of African American women would not cease until there is

“more representation of minorities in positions of power” to be able to alter historical perceptions.

Many participants felt a personal obligation and commitment to directly contest stereotypes about African American women not just for their own benefit, but also for the advancement of all black women. There were numerous examples presented in the narratives of participants advocating for the equitable treatment of black female applicants and employees. As Halle stated, “on more than one occasion, [she] had to say to a manager I am not clear why you have not included this person for an [interview or development opportunity] because based on the factual information about their experience, knowledge, skills, and abilities I do not see why they are not qualified.” Within the context of their own experiences, some participants modified their typical approach and communication to combat stereotypes. Specifically, participants spoke of behaving in a manner that exhibits calmness, adaptability, agility, and cooperativeness. Other participants highlighted their education, credentials, and experience to gain credibility at work.

Also, race and gender were significant determinants in the human resource profession of the pace and frequency with which individuals climb the career ladder, the variability in career opportunities, and the range of job assignments and projects. Participants believed that being in a majority population, with respect to race and gender, provides opportunities for faster career progression to senior level positions, increases chances to work in multiple disciplines within and outside of human resource, enables participation in more high-profile and strategic job assignments and projects, and offers



higher compensation. Several participants described how they would have been able to “excel farther and faster in their careers” and “earn more” if they were not African American women and were “white males” or “white females.” Metaphorically, the difference in career progression of African American women in human resource can be described as an *escalator* approach, while that of other race/ethnicity and genders is an *elevator*. They both may still reach the same destination on the career ladder, but the rate at which they get there and the method in which they get there are different. African American women have a linear path that is slow, consistent, and restrictive. However, other race/ethnicity and genders have a non-linear path that allows them to get off the elevator temporarily at certain floors, delve into other professions or positions, then get back on the elevator to rapidly go to the top levels of the human resource career ladder.

Race and gender also influenced participants’ interpersonal relationships and communication at work. Participants like Aspen demonstrated how the racial and gender makeup of an organization affects African American women’s ability to make and sustain meaningful professional relationships. Micah provided a poignant perspective from a white male leader that said he related most to white men and least to African American women. Attitudes of this nature can have detrimental impacts on the total work experience for African American women. Especially, for participants in this study that are generally at middle and upper career levels in organizations where there is less diversity in the employee population.

On the other hand, several participants articulated success in building relationships and have sponsors and mentors who are white men, white women, and

African American men. Interestingly, African American women as sponsors and mentors were largely absent from the dialogue. This is more a result of the participants' career status, than a reflection that other African American women are not supportive. Again, the majority of middle and senior level leaders in organizations are men or Caucasian women or men. For example, Gloria, Halle, Optics, and Queen specifically talked about how they have been the only African American woman at various organizations at their career level, or in the human resource department, or at their office location.

Also, it is important to note that some participants learned about their first job opportunities in human resource from African American women. For example, prior to entering the profession, Gena was approached by an African American female human resource director who heard about Gena "through word of mouth" because they did not personally know each other. That particular director was not part of the interview process and she merely introduced the opportunity to Gena. Also, Brenda learned of her first internship in a legal department from an African American woman and a Caucasian male.

Another aspect of employment where race and gender affect the experiences of African American women in human resource is communication with their customers. The profession of human resource is unique in that they give counsel, guidance, and sometimes directives to employees and leaders that they do not have any direct authority over. When human resource professionals work with business leaders, they exert influential power, not positional power. As an example, some participants in this study support senior leadership teams that are technically at higher levels in organizations than themselves (e.g., chief executive officers, chief operations officer, etc.). Taking that into

account, the challenges for African American women are not only the inherent influential nature of the profession, but also the challenge of confronting racial and gender societal norms. Several participants described scenarios where others attempted to silence their voices in meetings and discussions or they had to modify their communication to ensure that they were not perceived as angry.

This study also revealed that participants had a collective consciousness around expectations that they consistently perform at higher levels than non-minority peers and embody behaviors and conduct that are near perfection. Participants commented that because they were African American women they were not extended “grace” to make mistakes and given the “benefit of the doubt” at work. One participant said she “should not have to do all of these things and [she] was just as good as another person, but realized that banging her fist on the desk and saying this is not right was never going to get [her] anywhere.” In essence, participants did not agree with the unrealistic demands placed on them at work, but accepted that others will always expect more of them because of their race and gender.

There was acknowledgement from participants that employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment can have detrimental effects on emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In this study, more participants reported physical rather than emotional concerns. For instance, it was challenging for participants to consistently practice healthy eating habits, to exercise, and get enough sleep. Regardless of how participants felt (emotionally and physically), the majority indicated that their work performance and relationships were not impacted. The reason why their work life

continued seamlessly is because of their great work ethic and a desire to not allow others to think they were less engaged and/or not performing at optimum levels. As one participant said there was “still a job to be done.” Embedded in this type of perspective is the notion that human resource professionals are tasked with servicing the needs of the entire organization and their own individual circumstances are often secondary. As Clare Bowen (2015) said in a Facebook blog, a person may “look relatively normal on the outside, but on the inside, [they are] still the same stitched back together little creature, in a world where people are judged so harshly.”

Participants conveyed how they employ a variety of self-care techniques such as spending time with family, friends, and other professionals. Also, participants used meditative, spiritual, and religious practices to ground themselves and relax. Additionally, participants attributed career success to: (1) an intrinsic motivation and drive that developed in their childhood and early adulthood years; (2) parental influences and values that were implicit such as the parents’ own career paths and explicit communication about work values including the importance of self-motivation, education, and great performance; (3) communities, institutions, and majority populations’ social and cultural norms and expectations of African Americans and African American females; (4) interaction with diverse social groups; and (5) experiences of being the only minority either by race, gender, or a combination of race and gender in social and professional settings. Hence, the totality of life experiences shaped how participants, in this study, experienced the workplace. In her book, Michelle Obama, captured the totality of an African American woman’s life perfectly when she said, “we

grow up with messages that tell us that there is only one way to be American – that if our skin is dark...if we speak [differently]...then we do not belong...that is, until someone dares to start telling that story differently” (Obama 2018:415).

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

There have been a few studies of African American human resource professionals and the primary focus was not employment discrimination. Therefore, this study expands the research on the profession. Also, there has been only one study, completed by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) that analyzed consent decrees of race-based employment discrimination cases to highlight proactive steps employers should take to eliminate bias and discrimination (Hegewishch, Deitch, and Murphy 2011). The IWPR study concluded that the key to eliminating employment discrimination is consistent monitoring of the work environment by business managers and human resource professionals as well as employers taking corrective action, when misconduct occurred (Hegewishch et al. 2011). These recommendations address employee populations as a whole, but do not speak to the experiences of human resource professionals. As such, this study contributes to the research by adding specificity to the unique challenges human resource professionals face.

Previous qualitative and quantitative studies of employment discrimination have not often focused on participants’ perceptions of their experiences in relation to anti-discrimination law tenets. Thus, this study furthers scholarship in that area. Also, few studies explored how anti-discrimination laws are interpreted and incorporated in organizational policies and practices. By undertaking that analysis in this study,

participants' narratives revealed that policies and practices of organizations vary and some companies treat employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment as separate concepts, while others believe the alignment is more closely related. Hence, anti-discrimination laws provide protections to employees in all organizations, but the findings of this study illustrate that everyday experiences of employees are largely determined by organizational policies and practices. Additionally, quite a few past studies lacked a discussion of the significance of how employees in different departments, professions, and/or sectors of organizations possess different understandings of anti-discrimination laws and corresponding organizational policies and practices. In addition, how employees cognitively process employment discrimination and unfair treatment through filters (e.g., professional expertise) has not been extensively explored in prior studies. As such, the utilization of human resource professionals as participants in this study provided an opportunity to better understand employees' rights consciousness and how it impacts their reporting of discriminatory and unfair treatment and mitigating their allegations.

With respect to employees reporting employment discrimination, this study focused on internal company investigations and resolutions. None of the participants filed complaints with external agencies, such as the EEOC, which enforces compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Therefore, it was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate employees' experiences with external reporting. To my knowledge, there has not been any study to investigate if employees are more inclined to resolve matters within their organization prior to filing complaints with the EEOC or report concerns directly to

the EEOC. Yet, it is important to note that in 1992, the EEOC began tracking statistics for complaints received and year over year race and sex discrimination were reported more frequently than any other protected class (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2017). In addition, the majority of complaints were determined to be without reasonable cause by the EEOC. Why does the EEOC find that the majority of charges are without merit? There are multiple possibilities, but this study provides some insight that employees without the technical expertise as participants in this study possess may not completely understand the legal tenets of employment discrimination and what behaviors and conduct violate anti-discrimination laws. Thus, allegations that employees report to the EEOC could be unfair treatment, but may not rise to the level of a violation of the law. Relating this back to complaints reported internally to organizations, companies might find it beneficial to provide more management training about the macro-inequities and micro-inequities of employment discrimination. As evidenced in this study, both drive perceptions of employment discrimination.

Past studies found that minorities were disadvantaged in legal court case outcomes of employment discrimination because they lacked financial resources and access to legal counsel. While this study's inquiry was not legal court cases and instead dealt with non-litigated experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment, it is worth noting that some participants in this study were not necessarily disadvantaged relative to legal counsel. For instance, Brenda is an attorney and Nicki's mother and husband are attorneys. Also, as shared by Kodiak, her friend that returned from leave and found a noose on her desk, had a husband that was an attorney. In addition, the majority of

participants investigated employment discrimination allegations on behalf of their organizations as part of their job responsibilities. Therefore, Saperstein's (2006) view that "some workers are better equipped than others to initiate discrimination claims" was evident in this study (p. 150).

The findings of this study are consistent with past research that race, gender, and the intersectionality of race and gender affect perceptions of employment discrimination. While the majority of participants that experienced employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment believed it was due to the intersectionality of their race and gender, there were instances when participants found it challenging to determine if it was intersectionality or solely race or gender. Furthermore, past studies found age and religion to influence perceptions, but those elements were not significant determinants in this study. Also, class was cited as a factor in past studies, but it was not prominent in this study because participants experienced employment discrimination and unfair treatment regardless of their higher education, credentials, and career level.

Findings support past research that negative stereotypes and generalizations of African American women affect their experiences at work. Past research also focused on the impact of black archetypes, such as the *superwoman*. While there was some evidence of the influence of black archetypes, the findings did not overwhelmingly support participants' identification with them. For example, participants described the pressures they felt to exhibit performance near perfection and have excellent human resource technical knowledge, but those attributes did not overtake their willingness to seek help to resolve their concerns of employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment.



There was also evidence that participants engaged in shifting, which aligned with Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) research that black women shift at work to adapt and do so sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously. But contrary to past studies conducted by Mays et al. (1996), African American women in this study sustained performance at high levels, after experiencing discriminatory and unfair treatment. In addition, participants engaged in similar self-care techniques as described in past studies, such as the usage of spirituality and religion to cope with employment discrimination and unfair workplace treatment.

Similar to past studies, participants reported discriminatory treatment in hiring, most often during resume review. According to Derous, Ryan, and Serlie (2015), "resume screening may be highly susceptible to cognitive bias" (p. 659). Participants also experienced challenges in career advancement, but not necessarily in the same way that past scholarship suggested. Specifically, past research asserted that African American women's career progression is akin to a concrete ceiling because there are levels that are impermeable. Many of the participants in this study were able to break through career barriers and reach middle to senior level positions in human resource, but did so at a slower linear pace, than their white and male counterparts. For this reason, I likened the experiences of African American women in human resource to that of an escalator, which is not a metaphor that has been previously used in studies. Findings in this study demonstrated how mentors and sponsors are critical to career success, which is consistent with past studies. In addition, prior research found that race and gender were impediments to the development of effective mentorships and sponsorships for African

Americans. In this study, while some participants reported challenges in forming mentorships and sponsorships, other participants leveraged relationships with mentors and sponsors of other races and genders to advance their professional development and careers.

The findings in this study provide practical strategies for employers to develop policies and practices that encompass the experiences of all employees to eliminate discrimination in employment. As a starting point, organizations should not only train employees on organizational policies, but also incorporate simulations and actionable experiences for employment practices (e.g., hiring) so employees become more aware of how conscious and unconscious bias impact decisions and thereby can create discriminatory treatment. In addition, consideration should be given to establishing separate practices and procedures for reporting and investigating allegations raised by employees that work in human resource departments. Also, organizations should implement an annual process to reexamine all employment policies and practices to uncover potential situations that may create disparate impact and/or disparate treatment. Lastly, this study brings to light the importance of consistency in how anti-discrimination laws are explained across multi-media government platforms because nuances in language and terms affect interpretations not only among subject-matter experts (e.g. human resource), but also for the majority of the U.S. workforce, which is not versed in anti-discrimination laws. Subsequently, nomenclature of civil rights legislation determines employees' rights consciousness and whether they decide to report discriminatory treatment in the workplace.

## LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on African American women living and working in the United States in a specific profession. Therefore, a possible limitation is that the generalization of findings about perceptions of employment discrimination to other genders, racial/ethnic groups, and professions is limited. Additionally, the study explored the work experiences of participants and may not adequately represent the perceptions of other employees in human resource working in the same organizations and/or industries as this study's participants. While this study included a national sample of African American women in the human resource profession, the majority of the participants currently reside in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area of Texas. Hence, participants' work experiences and perceptions of employment discrimination may represent more of a regionalized phenomenon. Another potential limitation of the study is the utilization of snowball sampling as respondents may have been more likely to refer others with similar educational and professional achievements as well as analogous beliefs and values about work experiences and employment discrimination. For example, the majority of participants in this study achieved post-baccalaureate degrees, were credentialed, and occupied mid-level to senior level human resource positions.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In terms of future research, my recommendations are to extend the research conducted in this study on human resource professionals to include women and men from other minority populations. This suggestion is based on participants' comments that they knew of Hispanic women and African American men within and outside of the human

resource profession that had similar work experiences to participants. Another recommendation for future research is to explore the work experiences of biracial/multiracial employees because most employment discrimination research is focused on mono-racial/ethnic populations. The U.S. Census projects that by 2020 only 36 percent of children under 18 years of age will be mono-racial/ethnic (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 2011). Granted, it will take several years for the U.S. labor market impact to be felt, but it is still important to devote greater efforts to this segment of the workforce to understand their challenges.

Most of the participants in this study are currently middle to senior level human resource professionals. Therefore, I recommend future research include participants at all career levels (entry to senior level) to assess whether employment discrimination experiences are distinct for each group. Likewise, it would be beneficial to compare the experiences of African American women that work in other professions (e.g., engineering) to human resource professionals. Lastly, my recommendation is to use a mixed methods research approach to data collection such as surveys, which would allow for the collection of a considerable amount of data about organizational policies and practices from larger groups and multiple employers.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction: The purpose of this interview is to understand the experiences of employment discrimination among African American women in the human resource profession in the United States. You were asked to participate in this study because your experiences and knowledge are essential to understanding the work experiences of African American women. I will ask you questions about your work experiences and employment discrimination. The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. You may choose to discontinue answering questions at any time during the interview.

### I. Demographic/Background Questions

- What is your race/ethnicity? Gender? Age? National origin? Religious affiliation?
- Tell me about your educational background and professional designations.
- Describe your career progression in human resource (e.g., years of experience, positions, industries, job responsibilities, states resided in/worked in, etc.).

### II. Overarching Questions

- Why did you choose human resource as a career?
- What stereotypes and generalizations are there of African American women?
- Are there additional stereotypes and generalizations that specifically relate to African American women that work in the human resource profession?
- Based on the stereotypes and generalizations you described about African American women and those that work in the human resource profession, do they reflect how you view yourself?
- How have stereotypes and generalizations affected you in your employment?
- What are some attributes you possess as a human resource professional?
- What does the term employment discrimination mean to you?
- What does unfair workplace treatment mean to you?
- Do you think unfair workplace treatment and employment discrimination terminology/concepts are the same or are they different?
- Can you describe any laws that specifically relate to employment discrimination?
- Can you describe any policies and practices that your current or previous employers have regarding unfair workplace treatment and/or employment discrimination?
- As a human resource professional, have you ever had responsibilities for investigating employment discrimination allegations? Have you been involved

in allegations reported internally and externally (e.g., EEOC, state agencies)? Please explain.

- What knowledge and insights have you gained about the work experiences of African American women that work in human resource and other professions?
- In your work experience, have you ever been discriminated against or treated unfairly, when applying for jobs, transfers, promotions, pay increases, training opportunities, performance evaluations, job assignments, job classifications, terminations, or layoffs? Please explain.
- Do you believe you were discriminated against and/or treated unfairly because of your race, color, sex, national origin, religion, or for another reason? Please explain.
- How did your experiences of employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment affect your work performance? Relationships with co-workers? Relationships with supervisors/managers? Interactions with customers?
- How have your experiences of employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment affected your physical and/or emotional health? What coping techniques do you use?
- When you experienced employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment, did you report your concerns to anyone at your employer? Why or why not?
- When you experienced employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment, did you report your concerns to anyone outside of your organization (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission)? Why or why not?
- Upon reporting employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment, what actions did your employer take to address your concerns? Do you believe your employer's actions/responses were an effective resolution/remedy?
- Would your work experiences be different if you were of a different ethnicity/race? Different gender? Different age group? Different national origin? Different religion?
- When you left previous companies, did you receive exit interviews? If so, how were those exit interviews conducted and how was the feedback addressed? Were you asked about experiences of employment discrimination and/or unfair treatment?

#### I. Probing Questions

- Can you give more details about the person(s) and the specific situation/incident(s) in which you were discriminated against and/or treated unfairly?
- What was your reaction? What did you say or do?
- How did that situation/incident differ from how others were treated that are different than you?
- Is there anything else about the person(s) or situation/incident(s) that is important for me to know?



## APPENDIX B

### Consent Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Employment Discrimination: Experiences of African American Women in the Human Resource Profession

Investigator: Chrystal Hicks.....chrhic@twu.edu  
817/680-2653  
Advisor: Philip Yang, PhD.....pyang@twu.edu  
940/898-2054

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a student research study for Chrystal Hicks' dissertation at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of employment discrimination among African American women in the human resource profession in the United States. You are being asked to participate in this study because of your role as a human resource professional and your work experiences are significant to this study.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend between one-two hours of your time in a face-to-face or virtual interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask you questions about employment discrimination and your work experiences in the human resource profession. You and the researcher will decide on a code name for you to use during the interview. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. In order to be a participant in this study, you must be an African American woman, at least 18 years of age or older, and currently work or have previously worked as a human resource professional.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you questions about employment discrimination and your work experiences in the human resource profession. A possible risk in this study is discomfort with the questions you are asked. If you become tired or upset you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your discomfort, the researcher has provided you with a list of resources.

Another risk in this study is loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will be held at a private location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. A code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name. The interview audio recordings and transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's

home office. Only the researcher, her advisor, and the person who transcribes the interview will hear the audio recordings or read the interview transcriptions. The interview audio recordings and transcriptions will be discarded within 10 years after the study is finished. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings and internet transactions.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

#### Participation and Benefits

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like to know the results of this study we will mail them to you.\*

#### Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at [IRB@twu.edu](mailto:IRB@twu.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Or

Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619  
940-898-3378  
email: [IRB@twu.edu](mailto:IRB@twu.edu)  
<https://www.twu.edu/institutional-review-board-irb/>

DATE: December 7, 2018

TO: Ms. Chrystal Hicks  
Sociology & Social Work

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: *Approval for Employment Discrimination: Experiences of African American Women in the Human Resource Profession (Protocol #: 20321)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Denton IRB (operating under FWA00000178) on 12/4/2018 using an expedited review procedure. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 12/4/2019. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Celia Lo, Sociology & Social Work  
Dr. Philip Yang, Sociology & Social Work  
Graduate School

APPENDIX D

Curriculum Vitae

Chrystal Hicks

Texas Woman's University  
PO Box 425887  
Denton, TX 76204  
chrhic@twu.edu

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## **EDUCATION**

Ph.D., Candidate, Sociology, Texas Woman's University

M.B.A., Business Administration, Texas Woman's University, 2004

B.A., Psychology, University of North Texas, 1995

## **AREAS OF INTEREST**

Stratification, Race and Ethnicity

## **PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT**

September 2012 – June 2015	Employee Relations Assistant Vice President, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, Dallas, Texas
December 2006 – August 2012	Human Resources Assistant Vice President, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, Dallas, Texas
May 2006 – November 2006	Human Resources Practice Leader, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, Dallas, Texas
February 1998 – May 2006	Central Region Human Resources Representative, Safeco Insurance Companies of America, Richardson, Texas
March 1997 – February 1998	Casualty Claims Adjuster, Safeco Insurance Companies of America, Richardson, Texas

## **TEACHING/TRAINING EXPERIENCE**

*Training Taught at Chubb and Safeco*

Civil Treatment - Harassment & Discrimination Training

Color of Fear - Race/Ethnicity Training

GenderSpeak - Gender Relations Training

**PRESENTATIONS**

Chrystal Hicks and Philip Yang. 2018. "Effects of Race and Gender on Perceived Employment Discrimination." Presented at the 113<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA.

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

University of North Texas Professional Women's Council. 2019. "Importance of Self-Care." Denton, TX.

**PROFESSIONAL DESIGNATIONS & CERTIFICATIONS**

2017 – Present	Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Diversity
2015 – Present	Society of Human Resource Management Senior Certified Professional
2010 – Present	Human Resource Certification Institute Senior Professional in Human Resources
2001 – Present	American Institute for C.P.C.U. Insurance Associate in Management
2001 – 2010	Human Resource Certification Institute Professional in Human Resources

**PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

2018 – Present	Professional Women's Council Mentor - University of North Texas
2017 – Present	National Society of Leadership and Success – Texas Woman's University Chapter
2016 – Present	Texas Woman's University Core Assessment Academy

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**



2018	American Sociological Association Annual Meeting
2018	Dialogues on Race and Social Inequality – Texas Woman’s University
2018	Women of Color in Leadership Panel Discussion – Texas Woman’s University
2017	Career Connections Center LinkedIn Profile Workshop – Texas Woman’s University
2017	National Society of Leadership and Success Thought Leader Series – Texas Woman’s University
2016	Cultural Connections Leadership Conference – Texas Woman’s University
2016	TEDx Event Series – Texas Woman’s University
2015	Cultural Connections Leadership Conference – Texas Woman’s University
2015	Federation Workshop on Publishing – Texas Woman’s University