
A qualitative phenomenological study investigated the challenges faced by African American women pursuing upper management positions in the field of Information Technology. The study detailed the subjects' experiences of achieving their goals of upper management, including their reflections and sentiments on pursuing their goals.

The research findings indicated a number of factors contributed to the advancement of the subjects, all African American women, as they moved into upper management. No distinct underlying factor guaranteed success; instead, the women used a number of elements that enabled them to advance. These factors included mentoring, education, and individual personality traits. The study also found a number of challenges that affected the subjects' progress into management, such as performance weariness, keeping their thoughts and ideas under restraint, and remaining compliant; nevertheless, the subjects reported they found ways to advance regardless of hostile workplace circumstances.

Headings:

Information technology - Management
PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY UPPER MANAGEMENT

by
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What is a phenomenon? The definition, as described by Webster, is “a rare or significant fact or event.” It is a phenomenal accomplishment for an African American woman to achieve an upper management position, particularly within Information Technology (IT). The U.S. Labor Force (2011) finds that women share a large population within the workforce, indicating that “women compose 46.6% of the labor force.” It also notes that women have made tremendous strides in the area of management, and “women comprised 51.4% of management, professional and related positions.” However, further investigation reveals huge disparities in the number of African American women in upper management roles. The U.S. Labor Force specifies that African American women comprise only 5.3% of the individuals employed in management, professional, and related occupations. Examining these statistics further indicates it is a rare occurrence for African American women to advance into upper level management positions. The goal of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate the challenges faced by African American women pursuing upper management positions in the field of Information Technology.
1.1 Background of Problem

As Thomas (2001) noted in the article *Truth about mentoring minorities*, “Despite corporations’ best intentions, however, many have failed to achieve a racial mix at the top levels of management” (p. 99). As noted, even with corporations’ best efforts, it is a rarity to see an African American woman in upper management positions. There are a number of organizations that specialize in researching and revealing the disparity among promotion and pay for women and minority ethnic groups. One of the most notable organizations is Catalyst, whose motto is “Changing workplaces, Changing lives.” Catalyst is a nonprofit organization and its mission is to expand opportunities for women in corporate settings (Catalyst, 2013). Catalyst’s primary function is to study women and men across job levels, functions, geographies and investigate women’s experiences in business, expose the barriers to their career advancement, and the individual and organizational strategies that lead to success (Catalyst, 2013). Based on Catalyst’s primary function and area of study, a number of findings are relevant to this master paper. Their studies are often cited in international media and by organizations for women around the globe (Catalyst, 2013).

As reported by a 2012 Catalyst census, women executives in Fortune 500 companies only accounted for 14.3% and men accounted for the remaining 85.7%. The growth into executive positions for women is growing but extremely sluggish, with 2006 accounting for 13.0% within executive positions, and 2008 noting 13.9%, 2011 noting 14.1% and 2012 only 14.3%. Moreover, compensation for women as top earning executives within an organization continues to decrease. In 2011, only 7.5% of women were in a top earning position (Catalyst, 2012). The percentages show a diminutive gain
for women, but they still fall well behind men in relation to earnings and executive level positions. Women have made progress in recent years, but the progress has been minimal. The situation is rather dismal for African American women. African American women only hold 5.4% of management and professional-related positions (Catalyst, 2013). As stated by a Catalyst report of Women on America’s Corporate Board, African American women hold only 131 of the 8,941 seats among 839 companies. Catalyst (2013) further reports the breakdown of other minority groups on the executive boards as follows:

- 30 seats are held by Hispanic Woman
- 15 seats are held by Asian American woman
- 2 seats are classified as others

These statistics lead to the question and the foundation of this paper, examining why the number of African American women are lower. This paper will shed some light on the obstacles that African American women face as they attempt to move to higher positions within corporate America. This research will focus primarily on African American women and their advancement into upper management positions along with the obstacles and challenges they had to overcome to move into upper management positions.

1.2 Statement of Problem

As documented by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), African American women will make up 16.5% of the labor force between 2006 and 2016 (Rice, 2010). Rice also pinpoints that African American women’s presence in the work force is projected to increase by 16.5% between 2006 and 2016. African American women in upper management positions should directly correspond to increases in African American
women in the workforce. But research is not available that indicates growth of African American women in management positions will be proportionate to projected growth in the work force.

Combating the corporate “glass ceiling” is critical to ensuring congruence between workforce numbers and upper management positions. As detailed by the *Fact-Finding Report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission of Washington, D.C.* by B. Reich, the term “glass ceiling” was first introduced when *The Wall Street Journal’s “Corporate Woman”* column identified a new phenomenon of an invisible but impenetrable barrier between women rising to executive levels within an organization. This impenetrable barrier remained regardless of the woman’s accomplishment and merits. This phrase also grew to include the advancement of minority men (Reich, 1995). Since the phrase was identified by the commission, they issued a report on the Glass Ceiling initiative in 1991, which further confirmed the existence of this invisible, artificial barrier that blocks women and minorities from advancing into management and executive level positions (Reich, 1995). The report further illustrates that there is a continuing existence of the glass ceiling that creates a barrier that is rarely penetrated by women (Reich, 1995). An example of this phenomenon is the makeup of the Fortune 1000 industry. This industry is made up of 97% senior managers with 95% to 97% composed of white males, only 5% of the senior managers are women, and they are not African American (Reich, 1995). The research further emphasizes that women and minorities experience an inequality in both advancement and compensation within upper management positions (Reich, 1995). This study also points to evidence that supports that the glass ceiling is not a temporary phenomenon. It states that critical career paths for senior management opportunities
require positions that will contribute to the corporation’s bottom line, and a number of minorities are not in those positions. Often times, minorities are found to be in staff positions like human resources, research or administration rather than positions that contribute to the bottom line such as marketing, sales or production (Reich, 1995). Because of this inequity it is even harder for minorities, especially African American women, to gain the experience and knowledge needed to move in to upper management positions.

The opportunity for advancement for minorities, specifically women in IT, is not as promising as some may hope. This fact-finding report shows that cooperate hierarchy does not adequately represent modern American demographics. In 2012, the U.S. Labor force was made up of 46.9% women, but only 5.1% of African American women worked in management and professional related positions (Catalyst, 2013).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of African American women and their expansion into Information Technology upper management. This study explored particular factors that were required for advancement into management for a purposeful sample of African American women. This study detailed each woman’s experience and allowed a glimpse through their eyes in achieving this goal. In addition this paper documented the approach for this accomplishment. As noted above, African American women are often underrepresented in the area of upper management. This research further explored that phenomena and attempted to explain the reason for advancement for the participants interviewed. All participants were asked the same questions and a thick, rich narrative of each participant’s responses marked the
cornerstone of this case study. Using this type of questioning allowed for openness, a
different perspective from each participant, and a better understanding of this
phenomenon. These narratives highlighted the challenges faced by each woman and
allowed the researcher to discern which, if any, challenges are present for African
American women who aspire to advance into IT upper management positions. This study
is vital to upcoming generations to ensure they understand and are in a better position to
overcome the difficulties that are experienced by African American women.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The method that was most appropriate for this study is the empirical phenomenological
research method (Moustakas, 1994). The method is imperative for the study of human
experiences and will focus on the experiences of the participants rather than external
objects or conclusions. The data is collected by informal conversation and a semi-
structured interview. The interviews are important to understand the different
perspectives of women in IT upper management (Moustakas, 1994). For these interviews
a purposive sample population consisting of five women was chosen. These women are
employed in the field of Information Technology and their titles include Information
Technology Directors, Information Technology Managers; Subsidized Early Education
for Kids (SEEK) Information Technology Coordinator and Manager, and Divisional
Chief Information Officer. The open ended interview questions allowed in-depth
reflection and exposure to the experience of African American women as they moved
into upper management. Five African American women were recruited for interviews.
These participants were obtained through networking opportunities and referrals. Also,
participants were recruited from the researcher’s exposure to African American managers within the field of Information Technology.

The subjects consisted of African American women between the ages of 35-75, who worked in IT management or executive positions in either public arena.

1.5 Data Collection

The collection of data from each participant included such items as whether they were mentored, their educational level, the number of years in their career, and the number of years they have held their present position. The completed interviews were transcribed and the transcripts compared for both similarities and differences. The confidentiality and privacy of participants is of the utmost importance for this research. All participants were informed of the legal right of privacy and anonymity. All information obtained for this study is detailed and recorded by assigning a random numeric code to each participant, ranging from P01 to P20. This research gathered data to answer the primary areas of interest:

- Does a higher educational level lead to a promotion for all ethnic groups?
- Do advanced degrees held by African American women aid in their promotion to upper management? If so, what degrees proved most beneficial?
- Compared to African American women, do other ethnic groups advance to same level of advancement in more or less time?
- What challenges do African American women face as they move into upper management?
- To what degree does the individual’s professional life impact her personal life?
1.6 Definition of Terms

**Information Technology (IT)** – Technology involving the department, maintenance, and use of Computer systems, software, and networks for the processing and distribution of data. (Merriam-Webster)

**African American/Black** – Also known as Afro-Anglo Americans, Black Americans, are citizens or residents of the United States who have total or partial ancestry from any of the native population of Sub-Saharan Africa (Wikipedia)

**Upper Management** – This includes all senior level positions including Information Technology (IT) Manager, Chief Information Officer (CIO), and Chief Technology Officer (CTO) and include women that manage over 5 employees.

**Public and Private Arenas** – Public companies have shareholders and these shareholders make company decisions. A private company does not disclose financial information and they do not have shareholders to make company decisions.

**Glass ceiling** – “An invisible - but impenetrable - barrier between women and the executive suite, preventing them from reaching the highest levels of the business world regardless of their accomplishments and merits” (Fact Finding Report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission of Washington, DC, 2005)
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As documented in extensive findings, including a finding by Federal Glass Ceiling Commission of Washington, D.C. by B. Reich, minorities, especially women, are underrepresented in upper management and corporate executive positions. The Fact-Finding study, from the U.S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) in Washington, D.C. detailed the disproportion of African American women advancement into upper management. Nevertheless, the rise of African American women moving into upper management positions is dismal. Research also shows that women who are fortunate enough to reach upper management positions continually experience inequality in compensation. This literature review will highlight possible reasons why underrepresentation for minorities in upper management positions still exists. This review will highlight significant challenges that African American women face as they aspire to advance. This review is broken down into the various challenges and obstacles for these African American women.

2.1 Dual Bias

African American women face a dual bias. This dual bias exists due to bias against women and against African Americans. African American women believe this is a hindrance to their advancement into management and often presents challenges in
management level positions. Lewis (1977) pinpointed this dual bias as a reason for non-
advancement. “In addition, black women see racism as a more powerful cause of their 
subordinate position than sexism and view the women's liberation movement with 
considerable mistrust” (p. 339).

An additional challenge is the ideology of working in a male dominated field. In the 
article “Double Jeopardy to be Black and female” (2008), Beal makes very strong 
arguments about the images that are ingrained into society by advertisement and media. 
Beal believes that “America has defined “manhood” in terms of its own interest and 
“femininity” likewise” (p. 167). She continues this thought with the example that an 
“individual who has a good job, makes a lot of money and drives a Cadillac is a real 
‘man.’ The image that is projected for woman is often “spending idle hours primping and 
preening, obsessed with conspicuous consumption” (p. 167). With the example Beal 
further reiterates this strong bias that exists in sexism for women.

African American women experience the double stereotype of being both black and a 
woman (Combs, 2003). There are perceptions that being an African American woman is 
“bonus standing.” Some believe that the dual minority status provides a competitive 
advantage for both hiring and promotions (Combs, 2003). Nonetheless, this is not the 
interpretation of an African American female who wishes to advance into upper 
management. African American women contend that this perceived advantage, of being 
black and female, often has a negative effect on career advancement (Combs, 2003). 
African American women often face circumstances in work environments that hinder 
their career advancement and achievements (Combs, 2003). African American women 
with comparable, and in some situations, more education than white males or females
rarely obtain similar rewards (Combs, 2003). African American women often feel that, due to dual biases, they must transform themselves to be accepted and acknowledged in the work environment (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). These women explain that they experience performance exhaustion both in verbal and nonverbal exchange with white colleagues (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). Because of the cultural and gender bias, these obstacles can prove almost insurmountable without the aid of mentoring, guidance or assistance in changing the mindset of decision makers.

2.2 Limited Opportunities

Another limitation and challenge in reaching this phenomenon is the limited opportunities and mentorships available for African American women. This limitation is detailed in an article on the Diversity Inc. website entitled “Do Blacks need to relax their natural hair to be promoted.” This website was created by Luke Visconti, founder and CEO of Diversity, Inc, who is a nationally recognized leader in diversity management. Visconti writes a column entitled “Ask the White guy” In his column Visconti states that individuals tend to train and mentor people that look like themselves, he further states that psychological tests show that people most trust individuals who look like them. “Since white men run most corporations in this country, straightened hair and/or lighter skin are going to be an advantage” (Visconti, 2012). He further states that companies that move past bias and hire, mentor and promote equitably have better talent. Diversity, Inc. has created a list of top corporations that embrace diversity. The results are generated by completed corporate survey submissions. In 2011, 533 companies participated in this survey. The companies were measured on the CEO’s commitment to diversity management, workforce diversity and human capital, mentoring, resource groups, and
supplier diversity (DiversityInc, 2013). The top companies included PricewaterhouseCoopers rated 1st, Johnson & Johnson rated 11th and IBM rated 17th. It is promising that such large, global organizations rank high on this list. This article and the Diversity, Inc’s website attempts to answer tough questions about race/culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation and other topics that are addressed to improve diversity and equality in the workplace. These efforts provide more positive than negative results, and the research enables business and prospective employees to understand how diversity and equality are addressed.

The implementation of Affirmative Action laws were designed to assist minorities including African American women obtain executive positions, and based on research there was a short burst in opportunities within government agencies. African American employment opportunities increased during the 1960s and 1970s due to the government enacting “anti-discrimination laws, increasing educational levels, and growth in government” (Page, 1994). This was further confirmed by Krislov in 1967: the growth within government, public industry, was an effective medium for African American advancement (Page, 1994). In retrospect Affirmative Action was instrumental in both employment and increased earnings for minorities (Page, 1994). Unfortunately, this growth was only seasonal, as “Post-Reagan era research concluded that African Americans have seen their public and private sector employment advances stall” (Nkomo and Cox, 1990; Page, 1994). During the Post-Reagan era, African Americans made a lot less progress in advancement in upper management positions (Page, 1994). This decrease in growth for minorities was also confirmed by Watson and Smith (1987). Additionally, African Americans earned substantially less than white counterparts,
regardless of the identical years of education and job description (Page, 1994). The non-enforcement of Affirmative Action laws and mandates had a detrimental impact on African American growth in upper management. Rubye Fields, president of Blacks in Government, included in his testimony before Congress in 1987,

“Affirmative action was in trouble well before 1980 when the Reagan Administration came into power. However, it may have been dealt a fatal blow over the past 6 years. We believe that affirmative action programs have come to a standstill in many agencies. Many managers no longer feel that they need to comply with EEO guidelines, and this is reflected in their personnel decisions.” (As found in Page, 1994 p. 314)

With Affirmative Action laws not being reinforced, this further hinders the progress of African American women’s growth in both career opportunities and financial advancement. Equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws reported in 1980 by a congressional hearing detailed that white women, with identical qualifications as African American women, are provided with higher grade levels and salaries upon entering the federal government (Page, 1994; US House of Representatives, 1980). To further reiterate how removing Affirmative Action laws hindered advancement, a 1985 Congressional report, *The State of Affirmative Action in the Federal Government*, found that gains made by minorities and women in senior management grades were “non-existent” from 1979 to 1983 (Page, 1994 p. 315).

The removal of Affirmative Action mandates has officially hurt and still hinders the growth of African American women in upper management. Government entities, like the Department of Commerce, Energy, Interior and Transportation, which are paid for by the citizens’ taxes of the United States, are cited as having the worst EEO record. (Page, 1994)
2.3 Difference in Values and Identity

Research indicates that race, culture and identity play an important role in career growth for minority professionals in any organization (Alfred, 2001). Regarding career development, these factors are simply documented but women are not taught how to intertwine the factors of race, culture and identity to gain acceptance within the workplace. However, this is hard for women because as demonstrated by Merriam and Clark (1991), work is a major force that defines a woman’s life and assists in forming a woman’s identity. African American women often experience turmoil when their values and ethnic cultural orientation are not seen as significant, and when they are forced to deny their culture and adopt the majority culture (Alfred, 2001). Since work plays such a dominant force in a woman’s life, not only her career, but it helps creates a women’s identity. Efforts should be made to educate employees about group identity and unit cohesion throughout career progression. Cox (1993) defined group identity as a “person affiliation with other people with whom one shares certain things in common.” It is imperative that each group identity is accepted in the workplace to further give “individuals a sense of place within varying social groups” (43). Cox (1993) suggests the following reasons that group identities should be studied and implemented in corporate organizations:

- Group identities are important components of the self-concept for most people
- For some individuals, the recognition and preservation of their group identities is a matter of personal pride and self-esteem.
- These facts influence how others interact with us.
As previously stated, understanding a group’s identity is of the upmost importance because it allows a foundation for observing and understanding behavior in the workplace (Alfred, 2001).

2.4 Stereotypes

African American women often experience stereotypes that hinder advancement into management positions. Johnson-Baily and Tisdell (1998) suggested that “stereotypical images of women of color complicate their career endeavors” (p. 85). These negative images of minorities also influence others in denying their privilege of advancement (Johnson-Baily and Tisdell, 1998). African American women are often associated with negative stereotypes of being lazy, dishonest or angry, and middle-class Caucasian woman are seen to be completely opposite (Alfred, 2001). Since negative stereotypes are often associated with African American women any indication of these characteristic or behaviors “privileges the dominant group while it disadvantages the minority group” (Alfred, 2001). This action promotes the notion that the majority group is supreme in diverse work organizations’ cultures (Alfred, 2001).

African American women often face a dilemma of double consciousness in their struggle to survive in two diverse racial cultures, one White and one Black (Alfred, 2001; Dubois, 1903). This double consciousness has been described by a number of African American scholars including WEB Dubois, detailing the impact of this psychological problem:

Double consciousness refers to the interplay between the external world and the intra-psychic dynamics that result from living in an oppressive and racist society, a society whose ideological creed boasts equal opportunity for all, yet where Black people are systematically denied full access to opportunities solely because of the color of their skin. They are perceived as second-class citizens—a subordinate group—by White America, the dominant group.
Based on this dilemma, there are two worlds that exist, that exhibit inequality in education, promotion, compensation, and political powers (Alfred, 2001). As a result of this inequality it is imperative that African American women implement tactics to combat and successfully overcome an oppressive dominate culture (Alfred, 2001). First Lady Michelle Obama, the first African American woman in the White House, has empowered minority women to become more aggressive in seeking career progression and advancement; however, she is also unable to escapes the stereotypes. She has been associated with the prejudgment of being unpatriotic, angry, too aggressive, and pushy and a dangerous black woman (Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Blitt, 2008). The stereotype of being angry and aggressive often accompanies many African American women (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). African American women are also alleged as being domineering, vociferous and curt (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). The First Lady’s challenges are very familiar to African American professional women. These women often experience continued struggles as they attempt to transform others prejudgments, so they can experience acceptance and promotion (Durr & Wingfield, 2011).

Because men were the first employees within the work force, they set the tone of what was considered professional in both dress and behaviors (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). This tone, set by men, still has a profound impact for woman that became employed in organizations, but specifically African America women, who didn’t fit within the “endeared or radicalized norms of these environment” (Durr & Wingfield, 2011:558). African American women often explain when entering into these organizations they change their behavior, outward appearance, their conversation and personal style to find acceptance and promotion within corporate organization (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). The
article entitled “Keep your ‘N’ in check” by Durr, Marlese and Wingfield, Adia, also
details the African America women’s plight of “performance weariness” after verbal and
nonverbal communication with white colleagues. Often times, advice is given to African
American women by others within the same ethnic group to “keep your Negro in check!
Don’t let it jump up and show anger, disapproval or difference of opinion. They have to
like you and think you are as close to them as possible in thought, ideas, dress, and
behavior” (p. 558). These women often discuss how tired they are of being “on” for
colleagues of a different ethnic group, they feel that others are monitoring and watching
their behavior (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). Even with this realization of performance
weariness, keeping their thoughts and ideas in check and remaining compliant, African
American women have found ways to continue to advance regardless of hostile
circumstances.

2.5 Lack of Mentorship

A lack of professional mentorship is another barrier that must be overcome by African
American women. An in-depth research study shows that minorities should be mentored
differently from other ethnic groups (Thomas, 2001). The mentor of a minority must have
an awareness of the challenges and obstacles that his protégé faces, and how the mentor
can effectively assist in building a network to help pave the way for the protégé’s career
advancement (Thomas, 2001). One component that is beneficial for African American
women advancing into upper management is a strong network of mentors and corporate
sponsors (Thomas, 2001). Mentorship plays a significant part in advancement by
exposing the mentee to additional responsibilities and job functions necessary to move
into upper management, as well as being a strong advocate for the mentee. Often times
the right mentor can lead and guide a minority into an upper management position. Alston (1999) and Thomas (2001) also state that mentorship is an important component of advancement. The result of the mentor relationship with the protégé is an important relationship and the job of a mentor is to “begin and end with their one-one-one relationship with their protégés” (Thomas, 2001 p. 104). Since mentorship and opportunities are rare for African American women, minorities often experience discouragement and miss the opportunity to be fast-tracked early in their careers. One common thread that keeps African American women motived is their relationship with their mentors (Thomas, 2001).

The result of fewer mentorship opportunities for African American women will result in a lower number of minorities advancing into IT upper management positions. As more African American women are kept out of executive and corporate level positions, there will be a shortage of mentors (Smith, 2010 and Tonidandel et al., 2007). Alston (1999) reiterates “The unavailability of role models and support systems has the effect of perpetuating an unjust situation.”
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

This phenomenological study evaluated the experiences that African American women faced moving into upper management positions. As stated in Chapter 2, a phenomenological research design was most appropriate for this study, and interviews provided a thorough evaluation of each participant’s experiences (Moustakes, 2004). As research studies have shown, the presence of African American women in Information Technology upper management is rare. The results of this study documented the challenges and accomplishments of these African American females. The data collected was divided into five distinct categories: Leadership Experiences, Generational and Current Educational Background, Current Leadership, Representing a minority in the field of Information Technology, and Advice for other African American females. The research questions gathered data to answer the primary areas of research interest:

- Does a higher educational level lead to a promotion for all ethnic groups?
- Do advanced degrees held by African American woman aid in their promotion to upper management? If so, what degrees proved most beneficial?
- As compared to African American women, do other ethnic groups advance to same level of advancement in more or less time?
- What challenges do African American women face as they move into upper management?
• To what degree does the individual’s professional life impact her personal life?

Each participant was asked open-ended questions which addressed the concerns of this research study. The questions were constructed to start with earlier childhood leadership experiences and buildup to the present events for each participant. A purposeful sampling was used to create a population for this research study. Each participant was asked in-depth questions, which gauged their level of experience and their rise to their current position. The interview consisted of five African American women. Invitations were sent to another ethnic group to participate in this study, but no replies were received. This did not allow the researcher to compare and contrast answers; however, each study participant gave in-depth answers to questions that enabled evaluation for this research study.

3.1 Background of Participants

Each participant held an executive or upper management position within government Information Technology. When a potential interviewee was identified, either by their position title or manager recommendation, they were recruited using in person script (Appendix A). If they confirmed they were interested, they receive an email that contained a consent form to participate in this research study (Appendix B). In order for a participant to authorize an interview, they submitted an email detailing the date, time and place they would like to be interviewed. The researcher prepared for each interview by printing the questions (Appendix C) and a copy of the consent form for each participant. The interviews were held in person, if local, or a conference call.

The title for each participant included SEEK Business Coordinator/ IT Manager, IT Director, Chief Information Officer and Chief Technology officer. Out of the five
participants, four held a public service position and one served in a University setting. All participants held bachelor’s degrees, with the majority (4 out of 5) receiving advance degrees. Four participants received their education from a large public university. One participant, who currently works at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), also received her undergraduate degree from an HBCU. To ensure confidentiality each participant was given an anonymous code for identification. The following codes were used to identify each participant: P07, P15, P10, P18, and P05. Below is a detailed background for each participant:

1. Participant P07 was a first generation college student within her immediate family. Even though she was a first generation college student, her family held education as a top priority in her early years. Her sibling also received higher education but passed away before entering their career field. This participant was not strong in leadership activity during her young adult years. Her only exposure to leadership during adolescence was Future Farmers of America (FFA). What she remembers most about her young adult years was an annual trip to Charlotte. Participant P07 graduated from a public university in the south with a bachelor’s degree in Sociology with a minor in Political Science. She also received a certification of Certified Public Manager (CPM); this certification was paid for by the state in which she worked, in support of her current position. She has held her current position for three years and has been in management for six years. All of her positions have been in the public sector.

2. Participant P15 was also a first generation college student. Higher education was promoted intensely in her home growing up. She was one out of six children, and of the six, four of her siblings pursued higher education. This participant was involved in
limited activities during her young adult years. The few activities that she participated in were church, girl scouts and the 4-H club. She describes herself as more of an “introvert outside of work.” Participant P15 graduated from a public university with a bachelor’s of science degree in Elementary Education. She received a certification in computer science. She has been in her current position of IT Director for 10 years, and has been in management for a total of 13 years. She has held positions in both public and private arenas.

3. Participant P10 was a second generation college student. Her mother and father attended a Historical Black College or University. Participant P10’s mother received a bachelor’s degree in home economics, and her father received a Master’s degree in Education. Participant P10 attended a large public university to receive her undergraduate degree and received a graduate degree in Master of Business Administration. During her young adult years the participant was involved in church and school activities, 4-H and a leader in church conferences. She has been in her present position for three years and in upper management positions for over twenty years. Participant P10 has held positions in both public and private arenas.

4. Participant P18 was a first generation college student. Even though her parents did not attend college, they often reiterated that education was the way to advance in life. One of her most memorable moments was teaching her father how to calculate fractions; in turn he was able to provide a decent income for the family and that further reinforced that education was the way to advance. She has a number of degrees including Bachelor of Science and Masters in Applied Mathematics and Statistics and a Doctorate of Education. She also holds a Master of Divinity. Participant P18 holds a certification for
Chief Information Officer from a large public university. During her young adult years she was a leader in church and school, even being voted Vice President of her high school class. She has been in her present position for four years and has been in upper management positions for over twelve years. She has held positions in both public and private arenas.

5. Participant P05 was a first generation college student. Her parents didn’t push education and out of eight siblings she was the only one to receive a higher education. During her adolescent years she was very involved in church and exhibited leadership in the choir, usher board and was always “out in front.” She received her undergraduate degree from a small private university and holds a Master’s degree. She is a Certified Public Manager, Certified Novell Administrator and also Cisco Certified. Participant P05 has held Information Technology management positions for fifteen years and has been in her present position for twelve years. She has held positions in both private and public arenas.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The interview questions allowed further in-depth conversation with each participant. Because the same questions were asked of each participant, this allowed the opportunity to note commonalities and differences among each interviewee. One of the limitations of this study is my own internal bias; I am an African American female seeking to advance into upper management. I acted as an observer and analyzer of this phenomenon and not as an active participant. One of the challenges when conducting a qualitative study is the issue of reactivity. The problem of reactivity is that the participant’s answer may differ as a result of being studied. In order to decrease the likelihood of my questions leading
them to answer in a dishonest or different manner than normal, I was mindful of my tone and how the questions were asked. It was imperative that I remain objective throughout this study and not allow my personal experience or internal bias to impact the validity of this study. Another limitation was the sample size of the population, which meant that I cannot generalize outside of this sample population.

3.3 Presentation of Findings

The findings are grouped by the five distinct categories described earlier: Leadership Experiences, Generation and Educational Background, Current Leadership, Representing a minority in the field of Information Technology, and Advice.

Research Category I: Leadership Experiences – This section detailed each participant’s young adult leadership opportunities. Based on the answers to the questions, the most common themes were:

1. All participants had church and religious activities as their first exposure to leadership.

2. Personal motivators included self-motivation; participants often challenged themselves, and were challenged by people around them. Their immediate family had a huge impact on their motivation and goals in life. One participant mentioned that her personal motivation was joy. She also emphasized that her motivation was a happy home; she feels uncomfortable if her home is in disarray. For this participant, having harmony in her home and in life was a far bigger motivator than money.

This research question was included because understanding a participant’s background can aid in evaluating a person’s frame of mind and reference points. The question prompted the participants to define their motivation to continue to push forward
through adversity. It is interesting that each participant had a Christian or church background. The participants with a Christian background would often relate their experience or exposures back to their beliefs and convictions.

Research Category II: Generation and Current Education Background – These questions evaluated the participants’ parents’ education level and value system, and the influence these factors had on the participant’s life, if any. Also contained in this section is each participant’s area of education and certifications that they received.

1. Of the five participants, four of them were first-generation college students.

2. Every participant had at least an undergraduate degree, with four of the five receiving a master’s degree or beyond.

3. The participant who was a second-generation college student went to the same school that her mother and father attended, an HBCU. She is also employed at this university.

The responses to this research question showed that the immediate family and surroundings had an impact on continued education and direction in life. The majority of the participants were first-generation college students, even though they grew up in households where education was a priority. Participant P15 explained how her father would encourage college and higher education, even though he only completed 8th grade. She said, “My father was very good at math and for fun he would throw math questions at us to answer.” She further explained that her father had very strong work ethics, informing her that “Whatever I say or do, it represents me.” P15 shared that her father was her inspiration to go to college. With these participants, the old adage was true: your parents want better for you then they had for themselves.
Along the same lines, Participant P18 remembered with great detail and emotion when she taught fractions to her father, who didn’t graduate high school. Her father was attempting to pass a test to get a job working on the railroad. She remembered the book he brought home to study for the test and recalled how he felt dejected because he did not understand the math within the book. She picked up the book and said to her father, “Oh Dad, this is fractions; I can teach you how to do this.” She commented, “This is the first time that I saw how education could change your life.” This participant had the highest educational level of the study participants.

Research Category III: Current Leadership – These questions prompted the participants to discuss their years of leadership, their career paths, and the challenges that they faced.

1. The participants’ years of Information Technology management experience ranged from nine to 25 years.

2. Each participant had worked in both public and private arenas.

3. The career path in progressing into IT upper management varied among each participant, with two participants “working their way up.” These participants started out in lower positions, such as officer manager and policy planner, and then received promotions that ultimately lead to IT management. One participant worked in the field of Information Technology and said she received a job in IT management “because of my personality; they needed someone who could come in and get along with others, and that was me.” The most interesting move into IT upper management was participant P18; she felt she “had a divine intervention.” She held a professor position in the training and development department at a large public university. She received a call from a
Caucasian male who offered her a job as Vice President and Chief Information Officer of a state agency. She was later informed that this individual was in the audience of one of her lectures; he contacted a colleague to obtain her contact information so that he could offer her the job. This participant’s rise to upper management caused an anomaly in the research findings—“divine intervention” is not mentioned in the literature (or even among the researcher's assumptions) as a factor for moving into upper management. “Being in the right place at the right time” has to be considered among other factors for advancing into IT upper management.

4. The answers varied as to what was most beneficial in receiving an IT upper management position: networking (2 participants), personality (1), hard work (1), and mentorship (1). All participants found that mentorship was fundamental and one participant had an unofficial mentor. Participant P05 said she admired another male colleague and started to mimic everything he did. Participant P05 stated that “I was able to mimic my supervisor so well, that ultimately I was able to get a management position and make more than he did. That didn’t go over well.” So even though she did not have an official mentor to coach or sponsor her, she was able to unofficially be mentored and advance.

5. Each participant detailed the challenges that they encountered entering into an IT upper management position. Some of the common themes included the feeling that they often had to establish credibility with colleagues and staff. Participant P10 said that trust had to be established in her decision making and she often had to prove her competence. Participant P10 often felt that “I had to establish credibility to get the attention I deserved.” Her solution in overcoming this challenge was to be her own
advocate; her goals were to ensure that her team and manager knew her contributions and that she would not become “defensive, hostile or angry.” Participant P18 emphasized her decision-making skills and over-explained when her decisions were questioned. At a certain point, she realized that she must look at her colleagues’ and managers’ actions on a deeper level; they did not question her decisions because she was a minority, but “because they are unsure of the process and didn’t understand what must be done.” P18 overcame this challenge by spending more time educating others before she informed them of her final decisions. She realized that when they understood the process, they would barrage her with fewer questions. Participant P15 felt her biggest challenge was dealing with different personalities. She realized that some members of her team were receptive to her and others were not. She overcame this by continuing to do her best, while putting in place procedures and standards that she expected others to follow. Other participants noted that they experienced gender and race discrimination. They also noted that the racism is not blatant but more on an underlying level. They overcame this by demonstrating their competence and making their accomplishments known to others.

6. Participants reported that they felt they could work well across all ethnic and gender groups, but with some small adjustments. Participant P07 noted that she did not trust other races: “They have an ulterior motive. They don’t share all information in hopes to guide you in the decision that want you to make.” The way that P07 overcomes or handles the mistrust issue is by asking lots of questions; from them, she can gauge others’ responses and analyze information that was not shared initially. Participant P15 said that she finds working with males more challenging because “they will try me a little more”; as a result, she said that she must stay on top of everything. She gave an example
of a white male subordinate who was reported by others of leaving before the end of a scheduled workday. P15 decided to leave work, only to return 15 minutes later, at which time she witnessed this subordinate leave. She confronted him about leaving before the end of workday and that he must use vacation time if he does so.

7. Some participants often found working with their own race presented more of a challenge. Participant P10 felt that colleagues of her own race, African American, were too “collegial and community based.” She felt that members of her own race needed to maintain an individualistic and competitive view. Participant P15 expressed that working with her own race presented a challenge because they “expect for her to show them favor.” She said that she wanted them to understand that as a minority race, “they always had to do more and I expected more from them.” Participant P07 felt that working with her own race was challenging because they took every action as “a racist statement, they always felt they were discriminated against and it was part of their mentality.” P07 also found that members of her own race felt threatened, which made work situations difficult for her.

8. All participants found a huge disparity in promotion of genders and ethnic groups. Their answers were consistent with the perception that white males or white females were most likely to be promoted than an African America woman. One participant, P18, is convinced that she will never see this change in her lifetime. She said that she believes this behavior will not change because “We, African American women, don’t help each other enough; we don’t support each other enough.” To assist with promoting African American women, she has used her position to promote three African American females. The participants’ views on this issue correspond to statistics that
African American females fall behind other ethnic groups in promotions and advancements.

Research Category IV: The premise of these questions was to gauge the participants’ feelings representing a minority in IT. Each participant gave very insightful answers.

P18 is convinced that African American women will never be treated fairly. As of a result of her mindset, she said that whenever she has a meeting or enters the workplace she “goes in ready to fight, I am always armed for battle, I study beforehand and will not go in without knowing or having another person with me that has the knowledge.”

Participant P15 feels that IT upper management is not a career that African American women prefer; they either think the field is too difficult or they are not aware of opportunities in the field. Participant P07 said that in order for African American women to move into IT upper management that have to “continue to push; we can’t get any gains if we sit back on our lolls and do nothing.”

2. All participants reported experiencing some form of stereotyping.

3. All participants have experienced lifestyle changes; the majority reported that the changes consisted of workload increase and the view that they have to work harder and prove more to others. P15 said she has become a “workaholic”; she said she feels that the higher she advances, the more pressure she puts on herself, and the more she must validate and document her achievements. Participants reported how working more hours led to sacrificing family time and being unavailable to watch their children participate in activities. Participants also reported that they now have fewer friends; as a
result, they do not have a group of people where they can let down their guard and “wear their feelings on their sleeves.”

3.4 Discussion

One of the surprising outcomes of this qualitative study was the challenge that the African American women participants experienced when working with both men and women of their own race. This outcome was not detailed or noted in any of the reviewed literature. Participant P10 felt that her own race, African American, were too “collegial and community based”; she felt her own race needs to maintain an individualistic and competitive view. This participant’s view directly opposed previous findings of African Americans having to change to fit into a dominant culture that is not theirs (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). P10 instead wanted African Americans to display a dominant culture trait of maintaining an individualistic viewpoint.

Another interesting research finding was that participants reported feelings that African Americans exhibited discrimination and stereotypical racial attitudes about their own race. This was not a finding within my literature review; the possibility of experiencing challenges among your own culture can contribute to the factors that inhibit advancement.

The commonality among the first-generation college graduates was that, although their parents did not receive a higher education, education was a prominent topic and esteemed highly within their households. The value placed on education within their families was reiterated by all participants and was a driving force for each one receiving higher education.
The study uncovered unique paths into upper management positions that did not depend on the expected factors of mentoring or education. One participant said she felt that her friendly disposition opened the door for her advancement into upper management; this was not a factor that the researcher considered as critical for moving into upper management. Another factor that was not given high consideration at the start of the study was the idea of “Divine intervention.” One participant emphasized that it was the work of God that allowed her to be in the “right place at the right time.” Based on that specific moment in time, it allowed her to move from being a professor to a Chief Information Officer of a state agency.

My initial research findings assumed official mentoring, in which a mentor would work directly with a protégé; however, those assumptions did not take into account “unofficial” mentoring. As one participant pointed out, she was able to mimic her manager’s behaviors and she felt this ultimately enabled her to move into an IT upper management position. The mentoring concept must now be expanded to include mimicking a successful person.

Given these findings, is there a definite answer to the question of whether advanced degrees held by African American women aid in their promotion to upper management? The answer is not a simple YES or NO; instead, it is situational. None of the participants said that their education hindered them; however, they also attributed their success to other things, such as their unique personality or divine intervention.

The research finding that was consistent in terms of both the literature review and participants’ interviews was that higher education assists African American women in promotions to upper management. The participants often felt that an advanced degree
would aid in their career advancement and therefore received higher education. One participate stated, “a degree will get you in the door, but it is knowledge that will keep you there.”

The following question was to be used for comparing and contrasting with other ethnic groups: As compared to African American women, do other ethnic groups achieve the same level of advancement in more or less time? Unfortunately, because of the lack of interview responses from members of other ethnic groups this question could not be answered.

Another facet of this research was the question: What challenges do African American women face as they move into upper management? The answer is comprised of a number of factors that include racism, sexism, and the glass ceiling. Participants also addressed the price they paid for success, which they unanimously agreed was sacrificed family time, including possibly memorable moments with their children. The promotion to upper management went hand–in-hand with working longer hours and having to prove themselves to others.

3.5 Conclusion

The initial problem is that African American women, who make up over 50% of the workforce in 2012, do not occupy 10% of upper management positions (Catalyst, 2013). Even with the U.S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission’s (1995) findings that prove the existence of the glass ceiling, African American women still fall behind white males and white females in promotions to management.
This study's objective was to investigate the factors that contribute to African American women’s advancement to IT upper management. This study used interviews with African American women within IT upper management to collect information on their challenges and the factors that contributed to their promotions. This study found that mentoring and higher education contributed to the participants’ advancement in IT upper management. But the key word is "contribute." This study found that there are a number of other factors that also contribute to acquiring upper management positions. These factors included an individual’s personality, being at the right place at the right time ("divine intervention"), and networking. This study's findings do not indicate that only mentoring and higher education would lead to success in IT upper management; rather, advancing into IT upper management consists of many factors that are unplanned and unpredictable.

It is my hope that the individuals who will benefit most from this phenomenological study will be other African American women who aspire to advance into upper management positions. I am hopeful that individuals from other ethnic groups will take the time to think of these important issues. When any manager is given the opportunity to promote an African American woman, the managers will not allow their internal bias to make any decisions for them but they look at the equality of each individual applying for the position. Now that this research is complete, I hope the information from both the literature and participants will enlighten scholars, managers, and organizational leaders. It is without doubt that this is an area that should continue to be studied and will contribute to future generations aspiring to achieve the upper management positions within Information Technology. By investigating such a sensitive and yet emotional subject, we
can find and implement solutions that have allowed African American women to advance in management. Once diversity is understood, encouraged, and accepted, we will grow and change the color and gender of managers.
Bibliography


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APPENDIX A
In-Person Script

Recruitment for Master Paper entitled: Phenomenological Investigation of African American Women in Information Technology Upper Management

Leondra (PI) to Potential Interviewee:

I am a graduate student at The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill pursuing a Master’s Degree in Information Science. I am conducting a research study entitled - Phenomenological Investigation of African American Women in Information Technology Upper Management.

Since you are currently in an Information Technology Upper Management position, I think you can contribute a great deal to this study.

Can I email you a consent form which details more about the study and also ask for your permission to conduct an interview? Once you receive the email, and if you are interested, will you send me 3 times that will fit within your schedule and I will confirm one of them with you.

Thank You for considering participating in this study.
APPENDIX B
Participants Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Leondra Edwards and I am a graduate student at The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill pursuing a Master’s Degree in Information Science. I am conducting a research study entitled "Phenomenological Investigation of African American Women in Information Technology Upper Management." The purpose of this study is to investigate this phenomenon and the challenges that African American women face in pursuing and obtaining upper management position. As part of this investigation, interviews will be conducted with both African American women and women of other ethnicities to explore work experience, education, mentoring and accomplishments. All participants will be asked the same questions and a thick, rich; narrative of each participant’s responses will mark the cornerstone of this research study.

Your participation will include audio-recording of the interview which will consist of answering in-depth, semi-structured open-ended questions. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Once the interview is concluded you may review the hand written transcript, and listen to the recording. Please remember your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not participate or withdraw at any time. The confidentiality and privacy of participants is of the utmost importance for this research. All participants legally have a right to privacy and anonymity. All information obtained for this study will be detailed and recorded by assigning random numeric codes to each participant, ranging from P01 to P20. Your legal name will never be associated with this research and only your random number assignment between P01 – P20 will distinguish responses. Rest assured your identity will remain confidential and your name will never be disclosed to any outside party.
Although this research topic may not directly benefit you, this study and your assessment will undoubtedly add to the body of knowledge on factors existing for the underrepresentation of minorities within Information Technology upper management.

If you have any concerns or questions please feel free to call me at (919) 272-8388. All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu. By signing this form you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study, and that your identity will be kept confidential. Your signature on this form indicates that you give your permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described.

Signature of the interviewee _____________________________ Date _____________
Signature of the researcher ______________________________ Date _____________

UNC Institutional Review Board, Study #13-1463
APPENDIX C
Participants Questionnaire

Interview Questions

I. Leadership Experiences:
  • In your adolescent years or young adult years where you involved in leadership opportunities? If so what do you remember the most?
  • What are your personal motivators?

II. Generations and Educational Background
  • Where you 1st/2nd/3rd Generational college student?
  • What is your level of education?
  • Did you receive any certifications like PMP?
  • Highest Education of Mother and Father? Occupation of Mother/Father?
  • Any other sibling attends College or Higher Education?

III. Current Leadership
  • How long have you been in your current position?
    o How long have you worked in upper management positions?
    o Have you held private/public positions?
  • What were your career steps to this position?
    o Did you start from a lower position and work your way up?
    o Where you in the right place at the right time?
    o Did you see yourself at your current position during your current age?
    o Did you use networking opportunities to achieve this position?
  • Who or What was most beneficial to you reaching your position?
    o Was networking of great benefit to you?
    o Do you think your Degrees helped you the most?
    o Were you mentored by anyone? If so who?
      ▪ And what did this mentoring involve?
  • What was your biggest challenge you face moving into IT upper management?
    o How did you overcome this challenge?
    o Do you find your working relationship to be the same across all ethnic and gender groups?
      ▪ Do you find working with males present other challenges?
        • If so what? How do you overcome them?
• Do you find working with other races present challenges?
  • If so what? How do you overcome them?
• Do you find working with your race present a challenge?
  o How do you feel about competing with other ethnic/gender groups for senior level positions?
• Do you find a huge disparity in the promotion of other genders and ethnic groups?
  o Do you feel that white males or white females are more likely to be promoted?

IV. Representing a minority in the field of IT.
• Why do you think there are so few African American Women in Information Technology Upper Management Positions?
  o What do you think we can do to change this?
• Have you ever experience stereotypes during your career and even in your present position?
  o How was this handled? Did you address the issue?
  o Did you have to take further internal or external action?
  o Can you give me a small overview of the end result?
• Do you believe that others respond to you differently because you are a minority in this field?
  o Why or Why not?
  o How do you handle it?
  o Can you give me an example and your response?
  o Do you have to work “differently” because of your ethnic background?
• What is your leadership style?
  o How do you determine which style to use?
  o Do you need to change style based on your employees?
  o How do you deal with a difficult employee? Where they are either not performing well? Others are having a hard time working with them? Or they are just not meeting your expectations
• Have you had to endure lifestyle changes based on obtaining a senior-level position?
  o If so, What?
  o How have you adjusted to this lifestyle change?
  o Do you have outside support to help with the demands of a senior level position?
  o Do you talk with other co-workers or only outside individuals about your everyday challenges?

V. Advice
If you could offer advice to a young AAW to achieve the same success that you have acquired, what would that advice be?

Are there things you would tell her to avoid? Things to tell her that she must do to succeed?

What career path would you recommend for this AAW to gain acceptance and employment within IT upper management?

Can you detail in major steps in your career that if you hadn’t taken you may not be where you are today?

Do you offer mentorship?

If so, what are your steps in identifying a great mentee? What do you do during this mentorship process?