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The Impact of Racism: Experience of Black Women Leaders in the Public Sector

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The Impact of Racism:

Experience of Black Women Leaders in the Public Sector

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You deserve ease and a healthy work environment where your full humanity is honored and valued. I want to thank my friend Sue, who is authentically incredible in all ways and has supported me through my professional and academic career. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Antonia Apolinario-Wilcoxon, Dr. David Everett, and Dr. Kris Norman, for all your support.

Dedication

I dedicate this to Black women.

Black women deserve, "To be honored as the CEOs of home, culture, and community that they are. Repositioning them as the people that make things work, not the people that just work, right?! We are going to continue to do what we do because that's in our DNA. Resolving that is making sure we have the resources, the time, the support, the value, and the coins that reward those efforts. If that is not right-sized, then our efforts are futile, which means we can't get

refueled enough to keep it going. And there can't be a day where we ain't going because the world will shut down." - Caroline Wanga, President and CEO, Essence

ABSTRACT

Despite the Civil Right Act and a myriad of DEI initiatives that claim to create an anti-discrimination and antiracism environment, Black women leaders still experience racism, discrimination, and disrespect in the workplace. Black women are less likely to be promoted than their White counterparts, and over 25% of Black women reported that their social identities led to a missed advancement opportunity (McKinsey & Lean In, 2022). Society is in the midst of a unique time in history where government institutions, willingly or forced, are having difficult conversations regarding institutional racism. The national movement that declares racism as a public health crisis has created a culture and appetite for government accountability as a social expectation.

Society has arrived at a point where we can no longer ignore the voices that represent the communities closest to the margins and the communities on the other end of issues such as police murders, environmental racism, infant mortality, and mass incarceration. Institutional racism is embedded in the foundation of government. Cox (1994) insists that cultural bias is baked into the culture and normalized within institutions, including those who outwardly endorse anti-racist practices. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study used a phenomenological approach to conduct semi-structured interviews with 12 Black women leaders who work in state government in midwestern, eastern, and southern regions of the United States.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the experience of Black women leaders in government, specifically understanding the impact of racism on their advancement in state government. Several themes surfaced under the five main categories:

1. Institutional racism

2. Interpersonal racism
3. Conscious and unconscious alignment and perpetuation of white supremacy culture
4. Strategies Black women use to navigate state government
5. Committed to improving the culture of government and invested in making an impact

Three new aspects of Black women's experiences surfaced from the research:

1. Black women are demoted from leadership positions
2. Black women resist role-flexing and show up authentically
3. Black women perpetuate anti-Blackness in state government

The research concludes with implications and recommendations for government and research:

1. DEI strategies intended to support Black women should be informed by Black women
2. State Government would benefit from partnering with an external culturally competent investigator to investigate patterns of discrimination complaints involving Black women leaders

3. State government should consider establishing and implementing a culturally specific peer mentor program to support the onboarding and ongoing success of Black women leaders.

Keywords: State Government, Black women, leaders, racism

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CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 2020, the world watched George Floyd, a Black man, beg for his life while being murdered by a White police officer. To make matters worse, three other officers stood by watching, ultimately failing to uphold their oath to protect and serve the public. A month after the killing of Floyd, the City of Minneapolis Police Department adopted a new oath that reads, "I shall intervene in protest, both verbally and physically, if I witness anyone violating another's rights" (City of Minneapolis, 2020). This blatant act of racism left many speechless and caused an international uproar. However, for many that have been on the receiving end of racism, it was just another example of how racism is alive and has been for every turn of America's existence.

On the surface, the George Floyd murder may seem like the action of one racist police officer. However, with a more in-depth look, there's evidence of a murder fueled by the institutional racism that permeates through every institution established for the public and maintained by the government. Olorunnipa and Witte (2020) recount Floyd's life and the ways in which his murder was the result of institutional racism, they write "During the 46 years in between, George Perry Floyd came of age as the strictures of Jim Crow discrimination in America gave way to an insidious form of systemic racism, one that continually undercut his ambitions" (para, 2). Olorunnipa and Witte (2020) identify housing, education, economy, law enforcement, health care, and mass incarceration as inequitable and unjust systems contributing to Floyd's murder.

According to Better (2002), "institutional racism denotes those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white racial/ethnic groups" (p.

11). Walter, Ruiz, et al., (2017). Describes institutional racism as the "manifestation of racism in social systems and institutions. It comprises the social, economic, educational, and political forces or policies that operate to foster discriminatory outcomes. It is the combination of policies, practices, or procedures embedded in a bureaucratic structure that systematically lead to unequal outcomes for groups of people" (p. 216). However, the harmful effect of racism and institutional racism has been understood for decades. Jones' (2002) *Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and Gardener's Tale* uses a metaphor that includes two flower boxes, one with rich soil and the other with poor soil, and a gardener.

The flower box with the rich soil represents the dominant group, and the flower box with the poor soil represents the non-white groups. As suspected, the flowers planted in the rich soil flourish while the flowers in the poor soil struggle. Jones (2000) infers that of the three levels of racism, institutional, personally mediated, and internalized racism, institutional is the most fundamental level (p.8). Jones (2000) goes on to discuss the gardener and poses the question of "who is the gardener" as the gardener is the one with the power to decide, power to act, and power to control resources. Jones (2000) states, "In the United States, the gardener is the government; there is a particular danger when the gardener is not concerned with equity (p. 8).

Almost immediately, legislatures were hard at work desperately seeking to develop and modify policies in response to institutional racism, now viewed as a public health crisis. Less than a year after the Floyd murder, congress passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021, designed to address a myriad of policing issues, including accountability, enhanced transparency, and training (Congress.Gov, 2021). According to what Bogel-Burroughs (2021) writes in The New York Times, at least 16 states have limited or banned neck restraints, 10 have

required or increased funding for body cameras. Several states now require officers to intervene when a fellow officer uses excessive force, and 6 states have banned "no knock" warrants.

Government agencies are responsible for setting the beat of America's drum but historically have expected the workforce to do as they say but not as they do. In other words, government agencies tend to focus on non-government agencies' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts working closely with marginalized communities. For instance, the government encourages government vendors and nonprofits to adopt DEI strategies without making any substantial progress toward their own DEI goals. More recently, government agencies have enhanced equity accountability by connecting funding, partnerships, and contracts to an organization's ability to demonstrate its commitment to DEI. It seems the government could benefit from adopting the adage, "Get your own house in order first." Undoubtedly, there's a continuous need to unpack the impact of institutional racism in the workplace.

Despite a sudden revitalized commitment to eradicate racism, many policymakers fail to realize that addressing racism is not simply a matter of passing a series of loophole policies, it involves changing an entire culture. Moreover, it's problematic that the people creating the solutions are the same people who created and upheld the racist system. Instead, addressing institutional racism requires inviting voices historically silenced, overlooked, and discounted.

Further, accounting for inequitable policies and practices that have overtly adversely impacted Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) is only a fraction of eradicating discriminatory policies. A significant part of the work involves detecting disguised policies that have perpetually led to the unfair treatment of marginalized groups, otherwise known as race-neutral policies as indicated by Delaney et al., (2021), "race-neutral or "colorblind" practices and policies designed to ensure that all persons are treated the same regardless of race. However,

colorblind policies are deeply misguided. They often affect individuals differently—to the detriment of Black Americans—because they fail to account for structural racism and the unequal social structure in which our health care system operates" (para, 1).

Race-neutral policies and practices have led to poor health outcomes for people of color. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the impact of racism on the nation's health has caused BIPOC communities to experience higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, asthma, and heart diseases compared to whites. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The life expectancy among Black/African Americans is four years lower than that of White Americans. (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019).

Over recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that increasing racial diversity is critical in addressing the nation's most challenging problems. Albeit, solely focusing on race without looking at the intersecting role of gender only allows for a bird's-eye view of deeply embedded challenges that Black women face.

In response to gender inequalities in the workforce, the Women's Bureau in the U.S. Department of Labor was established in 1920 to advance and promote the welfare of women in the workforce. The Bureau is responsible for "formulating standards and policies which shall promote the welfare of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment." (Women's Bureau, 2021). situation. In 1969 Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, the first African American woman, was appointed as the Director of the Women's Bureau. In Director Duncan Koontz's appointment, she expanded the Bureau's focus to understanding discrimination practices against minorities, recognizing the experiences of women of color different from their White counterparts. Over the Bureaus 100-year history, they have made several strides in their contributions to closing the

gender gap, which was 20% in 1920 and 47% in today's workforce, and improving the overall working conditions of women in the workforce (Women's Bureau, 2021).

According to the 2020 Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey, Black women earn 63 cents for every dollar White men earn, and Black women's unemployment rate is 5.8% percent, the highest out of unemployment rates for White women and women and men of any race (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Still, a 2022 publication from the Women's Bureau confirms that Black women remain furthest from equal opportunity in the workforce, which the pandemic has only exacerbated. Glynn and DeWolf (2022), in a Bureau of Labor Statistics publication, explain how "the intersection of racism and sexism means that Black women are experiencing a different, and more difficult, recovery not just because of the types of jobs they are likely to hold, but also because they are treated differently within those jobs (U.S Department of Labor Statics).

This brief intro demonstrates the need to increase racial and gender diversity and the need for robust involvement of Black women in government if we want to combat institutional racism not only in the workforce but in society as a whole. This study seeks to bring the voices and experiences of a pioneer group of Black women who lead in state government.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Much of the race and gender workforce research in the public sector has been focused more broadly on people of color, women, or non-gendered Black people. While studies have examined Black women in the workplace, upon review of the literature, there appear to be gaps in the literature that specifically focuses on Black women in the public sector, especially Black women in leadership positions in the public sector. This gap in research leaves much to understand about the specific experiences of Black women employed by the government, especially Black women leaders.

Black women are often lumped in with gender-based research or race-based research, forced to lead with one identity while silencing the other. Lack of research and understanding of the experience of Black women in government has resulted in government agencies inadequately set up to be responsive, inclusive, and supportive of Black women. We first need to lay the foundation by deeply understanding the experiences of Black women in leadership positions in government, which will help us understand what is most needed to support Black women.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will utilize a Critical Race Theory (CRT) interpretive framework. Critical Race Theory is best situated to capture the unique experiences of Black women leaders within a deeply patriarchal and racialized government. According to Delgado & Stefanic (2012), Critical Race Theory focuses theoretical attention on "studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power" (p. 3). Critical Race Theory has three main goals. Its first goal is to present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color. A second goal, Critical Race Theory argues for eradicating racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct. The third goal of Critical Race Theory addresses other areas of difference, such as gender, class, and any inequities experienced by individuals.

Moreso, Critical Race Theory seeks to explore intersectionality; the understanding here is that people of color face additional inequalities associated with other oppressed identities. Critical Race Theory will provide the framing needed to investigate the phenomena of Black women leaders that encounter racism in government and works well at assigning meaning to less subjective research subjects. It is critical to use a theory that allows each research participant to define their own experience as it relates to their race versus this being pre-defined. According to Parker and Lynn (2002), Critical Race Theory aims to present stories about discrimination from

the perspective of people of color. Dickens (2018) contends that "the dominant European culture historically has shaped and continues to shape the U.S. Black women's identities in particular contexts, such as the workplace" (4).

Critical Race Theory captures the intersectionality of what it means to be a Black woman, whether looking at each identity separately. While these participants will share a collective experience, they will also exist within other marginalized identities' context and lived experiences. Although race is a social construct, the discrimination and institutional racism experienced in the public sector adversely affects the livelihood of Black women in this socio-political reality.

In addition to Critical Race Theory, this research will use an intersectionality framework. Kimberlee Crenshaw coined intersectionality. Intersectionality provides a framework that looks at compounding identities of Blackness and womanhood. The intersection of being Black and woman often leads to the racism and sexism that Black women experience in the workplace (Crenshaw, 1991). This framework strengthens the research because it provides a unique perspective of the Black women's experience as a result of two intersecting identities. Intersectionality can be used as a theoretical framework to understand why the experience of Black women employed by the government differs from Black men and White women or other women of color.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Government agencies are required to collect gender and race data on recruitment, retention, and promotion. While some agencies may see data collection as a risk-averse strategy to protect them from affirmative action litigation, other government agencies may genuinely be interested in improving equity and inclusion outcomes for diverse populations. In either case,

numbers can only go so far. In other words, quantitative data has confirmed that Black women are being hired at a lesser rate than their White counterparts, Black women are being retained at a lesser rate than their White counterparts, and Black women are being promoted at a lesser rate than their White counterparts. However, quantitative data alone can't explain the disparities.

The qualitative research method allows for an in-depth understanding of the 'why' behind the numbers. Numbers do not reflect the human experience and only tell part of the story. Qualitative data allows us to understand the experiences and the meaning of those experiences for the people involved. The research question for this study is as follows:

1. What have Black women leaders experienced in state government, and what strategies have they used to navigate government?
2. How do those experiences affect Black women's decision to work in government?
3. What can those experiences tell us about the changes needed to promote robust involvement of Black women leaders in government as government agencies strive to eliminate institutional racism in society?

1.4 Research Design

This research was designed to understand the professional experience of Black women working in state government leadership positions through conducting in-depth interviews with 12 participants. Based on the literature, a structured interview protocol was developed. The interview protocol included various questions, including introductory questions, ground mapping questions, dimension mapping questions, perspective widening questions, comparative questions,

and exploratory and explanatory probes. Interview questions will be designed using a Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality Theory.

The essence of the in-depth interviews will explore the Black women's experience in state government. A recruitment email outlining the study's context and goals will be sent out to potential subjects, using established networks and targeted outreach. The email will include a scheduling link for interested participants. A follow-up email will be sent once an interview has been scheduled, providing additional information about the interview and interview logistics. In addition, the email will include an electronic consent form. All recruitment material and protocol will be reviewed and approved by the Hamline University Human Subjects Review Board before the start of recruitment.

1.5 Assumptions and Limitations

While the proposed study provides many implications that can be used in many ways, it is not without limitations and opportunities for future areas of research. While the issues reviewed in the literature are historical, there may be positive and negative shifts in recruitment, retention, and promotion that align with termed appointed leadership positions that set the overall leadership tone precisely as it pertains to DEI implementation. The proposed study plans to recruit participants from state government. The scope of the proposed study will not look at the specific inclusion or experience of Black men or White women or use these groups as a comparison, it may be beneficial to examine if there is a relationship between the career experience of Black women in relationship to Black men and White women as a future research question. Finally, it is worth noting that the research is limited by the lack of previous studies that better support a solid foundation and literature review.

1.6 Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study, key terms are defined as:

State Agency: State agency means any of the principal departments in the Executive Branch of the State Government and any division, board, bureau, office, commission or other instrumentality within or created by such department, the Legislature of the State and any office, board, bureau or commission within or created by the Legislative Branch, and any independent State authority, commission, instrumentality or agency. (Law Insider, N.D).

Black/African American: Defines as a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

Institutional Racism: Better (2002) defines institutional racism denotes those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white racial/ethnic groups (p. 11).

Race Discrimination: The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines race discrimination as treating someone (an applicant or employee) unfavorably because he/she is of a certain race or because of personal characteristics associated with race (such as hair texture, skin color, or certain facial features) (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d).

Racial Equity: According to the Aspen Institute, Racial equity refers to what a genuinely non-racist society would look like. In a racially equitable society, the distribution of society's benefits and burdens would not be skewed by race (Aspen, 2016).

Inclusion: The White House defines inclusion as the comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved,

marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our Government (White House, 2020.)

Retention: Defined as at least one year of employment as a director or above in state government.

Promotion: Defined as the upward career movement into a director's level position or above in state government.

Critical Race Theory: Delgado and Stefancic (2002) define Critical Race Theory as the "studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power" (p. 3)

Intersectionality: A theoretical framework that looks at the intersections of elements such as race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality in relation to social hierarchies that impact outcomes for individuals (Alexander-Floyd, 2012). Crenshaw (1991) defined intersectionality "as the multi-layered forms of discrimination experienced by women while being Black."

CHAPTER 2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Legal and Policy Attempts to Address Racism in the Workplace

Civil Rights 1964

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made the promise of putting an end to discriminatory practices in the workplace. According to the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), "Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in hiring, promotion, discharge, pay, fringe benefits, job training, classification, referral, and other aspects of employment, based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission enforces this law. The act was intended to order violating agencies to pay damages to the plaintiff, including loss of wages and future wages and punitive damages determined by the size of the agency. In addition, the court could order the agency to reinstate terminated employment, promote if not receiving a promotion was found to be a result of discrimination, and increase wages when appropriate (EEOC, 2014).

However, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has failed to hold agencies accountable for racist and discriminatory policies and practices as a result of its inherent flaws. A 2014 public document referred to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a "toothless tiger" because of the appearance of force but the inability to actually hold employers accountable for discrimination (EEOC, 2014). According to Brake and Grossman (2008), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act had three major inherent flaws groups, first Prompt Complaint Doctrines, which include unrealistic filing limitations, Brake and Grossman stated, "the law makes assumptions about discrimination victims: what they know, when they know it, and how they respond to the

information they are assumed to have" (p. 866). The second is the Realities of Perceiving and Claiming discrimination, which does not take into account the many factors and experiences of experiencing perceived discrimination and a decision to claim discrimination. The third flaw is the Failure to Protect Employees Who Assert Their Rights, which involves the inability to protect victims from retaliation due to the high burden of proof falling back on the victim to initiate once again and prove.

Civil Acts of 1991

The Civil Rights Act of 1991 was intended to leverage legal strategies to intensify employer accountability and decrease intentional and unintentional discrimination cases. The Civil Right Act of 1991 shifted the "burden of proof" to the employer rather than the employee. After a series of vetoes to amend the Civil Right Act of 1964 to efforts to strengthen its protection, an amendment was passed in 1991. First, the amendment adds the right to a jury trial and the right to recover compensatory and punitive damages. Secondly, the amendment allows plaintiffs to file disparate impact complaints, practices, and policies that lead to unintentional unfair treatment of protected classes (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)

For example, they were upholding a seemingly neutral policy or practice that is known to have a disparate impact on protected groups. While the amendment extended a renewed sense of protection for most employees, the Civil Rights Act of 1991 provides the least protection for government employees as government agencies are exempt from paying punitive damages, leaving less incentive for government agencies to take claims of discrimination seriously. According to Trianam et al. (2015), the shift in the burden of proof from the employee to the employer resulted in a slew of diversity management practices, including standing-up

recruitment, retention, and promotion of anti-discrimination policies. A study conducted by Triana et al. (2015) on perceived workplace racial discrimination post-1991 "signaled a heightened societal concern for fair treatment" (p. 502). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data indicated a total of 61,331 charges of discrimination filed in 2021, of which 20,908 or 34.1% were on the basis of race and 18,762 or 30.6% were based on sex/gender (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022).

Executive Order 2021

The need to create a diverse workforce in America's largest employer, the federal government, is so critical that President Biden signed Executive Order 13985 (Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government) on January 20, 2021, the first day of his presidency. The order acknowledges that achieving equitable outcomes starts with the government taking an honest look at its practices, policies, and procedures (The White House, 2021). Roughly six months later, on June 25, 2021, President Biden signed an Executive Order to Increase Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce (The White House, 2021).

The executive order spells out the tone and expectations for how the federal government will advance equity through developing a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plan to recruit, hire, develop, promote and retain diverse talent. In addition, the executive orders include required data collection efforts, such as what staff should be hired and by whom, what training and development are to be conducted, and what specific populations need to be represented in the workforce (The White House, 2021).

Civil Rights Protections have not eliminated disparities

A Women in the Workplace 2021 report found that all women experience microaggressions more than men. However, women of color are more likely to experience microaggression than White women and Black women are the most likely to experience microaggression (McKenzie and Company, 2021). A 2019 study on the prevalence of workplace discrimination and mistreatment that included 40 million U.S. workers found that Black people reported a 60% higher prevalence of discrimination compared to Whites, and women reported a 53% higher prevalence than men. The study found that Black people are 60% times more likely to experience workplace discrimination and Black women are 32% more likely to experience sex discrimination compared to white women (Fekedulegn et al., 2019). A 2008 study of 500 professionals discovered that people of color leave their jobs at higher rates than their White counterparts (Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2008).

Compliance versus commitment

For over half of a century, the Civil Rights Act protections have turned up the heat on workplace discrimination for government agencies. However, many protections came in the form of boilerplate initiatives, policies, and practices that would satisfy the public-facing call for an anti-discriminatory workplace. These protections attempt to enforce compliance but doesn't guarantee commitment. Maternity Leave, civil rights grievance policies, anti-discrimination policies, and dependent care assistance are policies that agencies quickly borrow and adopt without proper training, implementation, or enforcement (Edleman, 1992, Ingram & Simons, 1995).

When the motivation for an anti-discrimination workplace is compliance and not justice, the goal becomes focused on the appearance of and not the experience of disadvantaged Black women. Organizations have become more hyper focused on public visibility and new shiny policies in pursuit of compliance, and little resources are often pulled away to measure the effectiveness and impact of such policies.

The Civil Right Act was intended to provide protection and equal opportunity to people based on protected identities. However, civil right protection often falls to those in need of protection to champion and advance protections for themselves. According to Dobbin and Kalev (2021), "generally, White women show more support for affirmative action than White men, and Blacks and Hispanics show more support than Whites" (p.287). Outsourcing DEI initiatives to Black women perpetuates the concept that equity is an issue for some and not all. Further, the nature of DEI workplaces Black women on the receiving end of that resistance that comes along with the job, making her even more of a target. Black people who are tasked with diversity work often fail to establish diversity programs because of the marginality they face as people of color (Collins, 1997).

2.2 Shifting Unaware Bias and Stereotypes

While there is general agreement that gender and racial discrimination still operate within government agencies, there is limited empirical data regarding the impact of subtle forms of gendered racism experienced by Black women in interpersonal interactions. Black people experience the workforce environment differently than White people, both economically and psychologically (Emerson and Murphy, 2014). Black women are hypervigilant in work environments for survival. Emerson and Murphy (2014) explain this heightened vigilance using

the social identity threat theory, which suggests that "different social groups can experience exactly the same physical setting in psychologically distinct ways because of the social, cultural, and historical legacies tied to these groups" (p. 508).

Some of these legacies for Black people are segregation and discrimination based on a false narrative of intellectual and moral inferiority (Emerson and Murphy, 2014). This stigma of intellectual and moral inferiority has plagued Black women's experiences in the workplace. Heightened vigilance has been a tool Black people use to assess if the space is safe. Emerson and Murphy (2014) describe vigilance to situational cues as "cues that signal threat by providing evidence that one's identity may be a liability or source of stigma, devolution, or mistreatment" (p. 509). This heightened awareness of one's body and existence in proximity to whiteness has increased stress and anxiety. According to Menakem (2017), racialized trauma is the ongoing violation of Black bodies (p.129).

2.3 Competing Priorities Trumps DEI Initiatives

Since the catalytic murder of George Floyd in 2020, the call to promote antiracism in the government is becoming louder. However, this call ebbs and flows with competing demands of the government. Competing priorities can lead to a disconnection between what Frank (2022) calls the three levels of organizational culture "the claim, the policy, and the norm." (p. 31). Frank (2022) explains that the claim is whom agencies believe they are, the policy is an attempt to uphold the belief, and the norm is how employers experience government agencies. For example, an agency may say they value racial diversity in leadership and implement a policy that requires diverse hiring panels; however, the norm may be to hire and promote non-racially diverse applicants.

The inconsistent importance placed on holding up an antiracist agenda can confuse and frustrate Black women and other marginalized groups, especially Black women, who are often the spokespeople for equity initiatives. Moreover, inconsistent practices send mixed messages to employees that competing priorities take precedence over sustaining an antiracist agenda. Frank (2022) suggests that assessing organization readiness by conducting a cultural assessment is the first step in aligning the claim, the policy, and the norm (p. 34).

2.4 Shifting Organizational Culture

Changing organizational culture requires effort at all levels. According to Pearce and Sowa (2019), cultures are "implicit, complex, and composed of interdependent, mutually reinforcing parts" (p.182). Moreover, it is nearly impossible to make shifts in organizational culture for better outcomes for Black women without understanding and accounting for all the parts of the organization. Government agencies have some of the most complex systems, hence leading to more parts that must be considered when working toward organizational change. In addition, to complex government systems, the constant rotating administration cycles only allow for incremental culture shifts as a result of working in a termed government that sets the expectation and urgency for short-term gains.

Even government agencies with well-intended DEI strategies may fail due to trying to implement a strategy without first changing the culture and appetite for change. On the other hand, the government may attempt to change the culture without changing the voices and perspectives. For too long, the inherent flaw has been that the dominant group that is working to create a culture that supports strategies that affirms the identities of Black women is the same

group that has developed and perpetuated a culture that threatens the identities of Black women. In other words, the thinking that created the culture cannot be the same thinking that dismantles the culture.

2.5 Measuring Cultural Change, Retention, and Tokenism

Black women who present as model minorities are more likely to be candidates for tokenism. Frank (2002) states that white people tend to gravitate to what she calls the "model minority" or "the Black leaders almost every white person feels comfortable around" (p. 79). According to Crenshaw (1991), "tokenistic, objectifying, voyeuristic inclusion is at least as disempowering as complete exclusion (p.1261). Tokenism creates the appearance of inclusion by allowing a protected class member to meet the DEI efforts (Emerson and Murphy, 2004). Tokenism has been used as a diversionary strategy, yet it has never been a sustainable practice for Black women or employers. Employees of color experience pressure to leave positions previously held by whites and are less accepted, leading to lower job satisfaction (Feagan and McKinney, 2004).

Nivet and Berlin (2014) suggest that it is evident that we cannot accelerate our pace of change without diversifying racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, or otherwise culturally monolithic learning environments. Hughey (2007) attests that antiracist work is led by color consciousness. Racially diverse environments cannot be sustained or regenerated unless the issue of institutional racism is accounted for; the absence of accountability will only lead to more of the same. Equity can be embedded in the system by having the voices of people with some of the highest disparities making decisions that influence policy. Historically, the policymakers have been

White and male. As a result, the decision and policies are influenced through a white patriarchal lens.

2.6 DEI Leadership Falls on Black Women with Little Support

Black women often hold Racial equity-focused leadership positions, which becomes burdensome and often leads to backlash and lack of support. Further, Black women leaders tend to be overburdened with performing stakeholder/community engagement and cultural broker duties with communities that have untrusting relationships with state agencies. They are more willing to partner when directly working with a leader that represents their community. Roberts and Mayo (2019) stated it well, "across industries, sectors, and functions, they [Black professionals] also experience the 'diversity fatigue that arises from constantly engaging in task forces, training, and conversations about race as they are tapped to represent their demographic" (p. 16).

The responsibility of fair and equal treatment of Black women employed by government agencies is the responsibility of the entire agency; however, successful equity strategies are owned by senior leadership and human resources departments, and other key departments are charged with tracking recruitment, retention, and promotion goals and practices (Triana et al., 2015). While the topic of career advancement in state government for Black women is not extensively researched, the unfair and discriminatory treatment of Black women in the workplace across the board is well documented. According to Triana et al. (2015), when it comes to groups most subjected to employment discrimination, Black people have the strongest racial identifiers, followed by Hispanics, then Asian Americans, and then White (p.496).

2.7 The Challenges Women Have Faced in the Workplace

For nearly 150 years, women have been in the workforce, and in 2019, 57.4% of women were in the workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). To this day, women still experience a wage gap. In 2020, women over 35 earned 78% to 81% of what men make, women between 24-34 make 90% of what men make, and women 16-23 earn 95% of what men in the same age bracket earn. (U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). According to Park and Funk (2017), 42% of women and 22% of men experience gender discrimination. Gender discrimination against women exists in a number of ways. A 2022 Women in the Workplace Study found that 87 women out of 100 men are promoted to manager positions. For every woman who is promoted to a director-level position, two women leave their company (McKinsey, 2022).

2.8 The Challenges that Black people have Experienced in the Workplace

Black people represent 8% of the professional workforce, and 3.2 percent of Black professionals are in executive or senior leadership roles (Roepe, 2021). The workforce has made progress with hiring Black professionals into the workforce and into senior leadership roles; however, Black people continue to experience discrimination at higher rates than their White counterparts. Fifty-eight percent of Black professionals encounter prejudice at work compared to 15% of White professionals (Being Black in Corporate America, Coqual, 2019). However, the unfair treatment of Black people goes beyond the Black professional. Roberts and Mayo (2019) argue that African Americans — from laboring in factories and on shop floors to setting C-suite strategy — still face obstacles to advancement that non-Black people do not have to experience.

They are less likely than their White peers to be hired, developed, and promoted, and their work experience is demonstrably worse than that of other people of color (para, 5). A Study that represented over 40 million U.S workers on workplace discrimination and mistreatment

found that Black employees reported a 60% higher rate of discrimination compared to White people, and the prevalence of racial discrimination was seven times higher for Black people than for white people and ten times higher for Black women than white women (Fekedulegn et al., 2019).

2.9 Intersecting Systems of Oppression; Black and Woman

An established body of research critically analyzes the intersection of race and gender as it relates to Black women in society; however, Black women's experiences in the workplace, especially in government, have been understudied and under-resourced. Further, much of the research on leadership in the public sector has failed to address the intersectionality of gender and race and instead has looked at the two identifiers as independent of each other. Black women have a unique experience different from their White counterparts and Black men who follow them through every door.

Shorter-Gooden (2004) calls these intersecting identities "double jeopardy." Double jeopardy is the negative consequences that come along with being black and being a woman. Double jeopardy impacts the recruitment and retention of Black women (Brown, 2014). Research has repeatedly found racism and sexism as key drivers of negative workplace outcomes for Black women. Dickens (2018) states, "A combination of educational and professional obstacles, including racism and sexism, all exact psychological tolls on Black women" (p. 760). Lewis et al. (2016) state, "feminist and critical race theorists have conceptualized the term intersectionality as an analysis of the systems of oppression and social constructions of race, class, and gender" (p. 44). Crenshaw (1991) defines intersectionality as the multi-layered forms of discrimination Black women experience.

The experience of racism and sexism has also been labeled as double-marginalization or gendered racism (Crenshaw, 1991). Gendered racism refers to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism (Hooks, 1981). Regardless of the terminology, the concept is consistent throughout the research; Black women experience gendered and classed forms of racism rooted in societal stereotypes and controlling images that marginalize and objectify Black women based on racist and sexist perceptions of womanhood (Collins, 1990; Essed, 1991). For example, Black women have been stereotyped as hardworking and caretaking (e.g., Mammy stereotype), domineering and angry (e.g., Sapphire or Angry Black Woman stereotype), and sexually promiscuous and seductive (e.g., Jezebel stereotype) (Collins, 1990).

To disassociate from these deeply rooted stereotypes and to be accepted by White America, Black women may develop a complex Shorter-Gooden (2003) called the "sisterella complex." The sisterella complex occurs as a result of Black women internalizing negative stereotypes, often leading to symptoms of depression. Shorter-Gooden (2003) explains in a 2014 interview, "Sisterella Complex is the role of internalized racism and/or sexism on the African American woman's psyche and functioning" (para. 5).

Some Black women resort to silencing to fit in and to be viewed as politically correct (Brown, 2014, Lewis et al., 2016). Even when Black women exit organizations, they are hesitant to speak up about their experience of injustice because they are careful not to burn bridges or risk damaging their reputation and the reputation of the next Black woman (Frank, 2022).

A recent McKinsey & Lean In report titled *Women in the Workplace*: Intersectional Experiences surveyed over 65,000 people and found that Black women are less likely to be promoted than their White counterparts, and over 25% of Black women reported that their social identities led to a missed advancement opportunity (McKinsey & Lean In, 2022). The same

report found that Black women are three times as likely to experience microaggression compared to White women. (McKinsey and Lean In, 2022). According to Sue (2007), "racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p.72)

A study conducted by Lewis et al. (2016) to understand how Black women experience racial microaggressions found that Black women experience microaggression based on stereotypes. Moreover, the frequency of observable microaggressions and biases contributes to the perpetuation and unacceptable treatment of Black women. In a qualitative research study conducted with 8 Black public leaders, research participants discussed the "tapes" that play when it comes to Black women. One woman stated, "The minute we walk through the door, there are those tapes that start to go off in people's minds about who we are, and that makes it difficult" (Brown, 2014, p. 580).

Black women who remain in state government, despite experiencing perpetual microaggressions, and discrimination, may choose to remain silent instead of speaking out because they fear being perceived as whiny or weak (Brown, 2014). A 2012 study on Black women's stress in the workplace and how they cope found five themes that Black women experience related to racism and sexism- being hired and promoted, developing relationships and mentors, dealing with racism and discrimination, being isolated and/or excluded and shifting or code-switching to overcome the barriers to employment (Hall et, al, 2012).

2.10 Strategies Black Women Use to Counter the Racism/Sexism

A qualitative study conducted by Shorter-Gooder (2004) on the resistance strategies Black women use to cope with racism and sexism found that out of 333 women, 89.7% said they experienced racial discrimination, and 68% of participants said they experienced gender discrimination. The onus to provide Black women protection from discrimination often falls to Black women to protect themselves and is not appropriately placed in the hands of employers where it belongs. As a form of protection, Black women have developed numerous coping strategies to lessen discrimination's harm.

For many Black women, obtaining such leadership positions requires identity shifting or role flexing (Jackson, 2010, Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that Black women role flex as a coping strategy. Role flexing is the process of assimilation to fit in. Despite not having the ability to disguise gender or race, Black women will often change their dress, speech, and mannerisms to fit in with the dominant group. Role flexing can occur with one or both identities. The Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion found that 79% of Black employees and 66% of women downplay their identities as a result of not wanting to draw undesired attention or make their coworkers uneasy due to their differences (Clark & Smith, 2014).

For example, a Black woman may only need to role flex based on race when around a majority of White women but need to role flex with race and gender when in an environment where White men are the majority. Similarly, Jackson (2010) explained the process of assimilation as identity shifting, also known as identity negotiation, which is the alteration of one's actions, speech, and appearance to adjust to cultural norms within a given environment (p. 760). Black women who master the concept of role flexing and identity shifting are often chosen

for equity roles and are in better positions to climb the career ladder than those Black women who cope by speaking up against discrimination.

A study conducted by Dickens (2014) investigates the benefits of identity shifting; specifically, the study found that there are some benefits to identity shifting, but along with the benefits comes a psychological toll on the psyche as a result of the stressful process of identity shifting (p.772). The drawback of identity shifting is that it perpetuates the status quo and puts the onus on Black women to change instead of forcing government agencies to develop culturally responsive inclusive practices. In other words, agencies may recruit Black women into government leadership to satisfy the social expectation to embody a racial and ethnic diverse government but are unwilling to include them in the current infrastructure, leaving the undesirable options of identity shifting, suffering in silence, or leaving the agency.

This activation of assimilation is the road many Black women travel up the career ladder. Unfortunately, this road comes with a double edge. On the one hand, assimilation may lead to better recruitment, retention, and promotion opportunities and will likely expand the potential mentorship pool. On the other hand, Black women who chose to assimilate are often viewed as "sellouts" and, in turn, accused of not being authentic or representing the culture well. When one Black woman role-flexes to achieve feelings of belonging and inclusion, it raises the bar, expecting the next Black woman to do the same. Dickens (2018) calls this a "phenomenon to a pre-established bar" that every other Black person must maintain in the workspace and in academic environments" (p. 769).

Any hope of moving to a workplace free of discrimination and racism will require the government to do more than check-the-box efforts. The Government must see Black women as

equal and valuable and commit to leveraging their voices. Winters (2020) explained, "Upwardly mobile Black and Brown people find themselves as the only one or one of a few who have risen to their status in the organization" (p. 75). Sadly, either path results in a significant psychological toll and robs them of the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The system rewards White leaders who verbalize commitment to antiracist government and see them as equity champions. When Black women express the need for fair and equitable treatment, they are seen as advocating for their self-interest and viewed as threatening. Similarly, taking on anti-racist-focused projects becomes a platform for career advancement for key staff and public relations campaigns.

2.11 Conclusion

This literature review has provided information and background on the legal and policy enforced to address discrimination in the workforce and whether those attempts have successfully combat and eliminate racism. In addition, it provides a look at the various strategies and methods organizations have attempted to stand up as a result of the call for action and accountability. The literature falls short of providing concrete research on the experience of Black women working in government; however, it lays a framework for what we might expect Black women leaders in government settings to experience, but we do not know for sure. By qualitatively documenting the experiences of some Black women leaders in government and looking at how those experiences affect their decisions to remain in the government sector, this study will help shed light on a central challenge for eliminating institutional racism in government—what it will take to help keep Black women in government leadership positions.

Having more Black female voices in government will be one step toward dismantling institutional racism in society as a whole.

CHAPTER 3

3. METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will discuss the methods used to answer the research question outlined in Chapter 1 (1. What have Black women leaders' experiences in state government, and what strategies have they used to navigate government? 2. How do those experiences affect Black women's decision to work in government? 3. What can those experiences tell us about the changes needed to promote robust involvement of Black women leaders in government, as government agencies strive to eliminate institutional racism in society?). This chapter also provides an overview of the research design, the rationale for utilizing qualitative research methods, sampling, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis and representation, design rigor, ethical considerations, and the research design's strength and limitations.

3.1 Research Design

Although there is an established body of research that explores the impact of the intersectionality of Black women and a growing body of research that investigates Black women in the workplace, the relationship between Black women in the public sector is not well understood. Despite the critical contributions Black women make in state government, they often experience many challenges related to their race and sex. Research has found that Black women historically in the workplace often experience disrespect, isolation, and invisibility. Over recent years, there has been a shift toward diverse workplaces across all sectors, including at the leadership level. However, Black women are still recruited, retained, and promoted at a lesser rate than their White counterparts.

In a recent study by McKenzie and Company, Black women reported experiencing microaggressions more than any other women of color (McKenzie and Company, 2021). With interest in investing in building antiracist work cultures, organizations have adopted DEI frameworks intended to reduce workplace discrimination, yet Black women still lead in workplace disparities. As stated earlier, the phenomenon of Black women's experience in the workplace is known; however, understanding the experience of Black women leaders in state government is absent from the literature. Understanding the phenomenon of Black women's experience with retention, recruitment, and promotion and the impact of institutional racism in the public sector from interviewing Black women is needed to adopt DEI strategies to advance antiracism policies and practices.

3.2 Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods

The Civil Rights Act and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) require government agencies to comply with the collection and reporting of demographic workforce data by race/ethnicity, sex, and job categories. EEOC is intended to monitor the progress and effectiveness of advancing diversity and equity in the workplace. However, quantitative data alone only exposes half the story; numbers are not a reflection of the human experience. Quantitative data tells us that Black women are being hired at a lesser rate than their White counterparts. Black women are being retained at a lesser rate than their White counterparts. Black women are being promoted at a lesser rate than their White counterparts (Roberts and Mayo, 2019). Statistics on Black women in the workforce are not new information. Going beyond the 'what' is needed to use data as a tool in planning and decision-making. Qualitative research methods can be used to uncover strategies or actions that can be taken to address root causes. In this research, the benefits of phenomenological research outweigh the

limitations. A limitation of phenomenological research is that it is not generalizable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intent of this research is not to generalize but rather to listen and synthesize the lived experiences of Black women in the public sector. Another limitation of phenomenological research is researchers' implicit and explicit bias and how it can affect the research.

3.3 Rationale for Interview Method

The goal is to create an environment that promotes psychological safety with vulnerable participants and assists in mitigating potential concerns related to a breach of anonymity, retaliation, or termination. To best answer the research questions, in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews provided a platform for Black women to verbally share their experience in a manner that promotes safety and confidentiality and likely led to participants being more comfortable with sharing sensitive information. The interview questions were designed to be semi-structured in an effort to allow Black women to own their story experience and share the parts of their story that they deem vulnerable and important to share. According to Peoples (2021), a semi-structured interview ensured the research question was addressed, yet it provided an opportunity for the conversation to develop more naturally.

The interview method aligns well with storytelling, a historic oral tradition in Black culture. Gates (1989) argued that using stories to ask and answer epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices has played a critical role in the survival of African Americans (p .412). Finally, phenomenology emphasizes the need to understand the phenomena from the individual perspective as opposed to another person's perspective. Phenomenology assumes that reality cannot be found in objectivity; in other words, seeking an understanding of the experience

of Black women in the public sector can only be gleaned from a Black women leader in state government (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

While the interview method provides several benefits, it also provides some challenges. Given that each interview is unique, and no two interviews will be the same, the method of interviewing cannot provide the level of consistency and reliability as other methods. The goal is to capture the essence of the collective experience through individual experience, and therefore identifying key themes instead of achieving consistency is the more critical intention. A second unavoidable challenge is the presence of the researcher. The researcher's presence could influence the participation and response of the participants. To mitigate this challenge, the researcher will use reflexivity to address personal bias proactively and remain fully aware of issues if their own ideologies, influence, or values influence the interview experience (Hennink et al., 2011).

3.4 Sampling

The target population for this research is Black women leaders currently employed in state government who experience institutional racism. Requirements for participation will include the following: 1) Currently employed in a director's level or above position in state government, 2) Self-identify as a Black or African American Woman, 3) Employed in state government for at least three consecutive years, and 4) Ability/comfortability with using Zoom as a virtual interview platform.

3.5 Data Collection

A virtual flier (Appendix A) containing details about the researchers, the research topic, participant requirements, and responsibilities were posted on LinkedIn and distributed to professional networks across the United States. Once a potential participant expressed interest, an email containing a short screening questionnaire was emailed to them (Appendix B) to assess the appropriateness and to ensure the participant requirements were met. Once it was determined that a participant met the research participant's requirements, an email containing a secure electronic informed consent form (Appendix C) and an appointment scheduling link was sent. A follow-up email was sent to participants confirming the interview date and time.

Approximately one week before the interview, the participant was sent a copy of the interview questions for review. The Hamline University Institutional Review Board approved the study methodology, and participation in the study was voluntary. Prior to the start of each interview, the interviewer reviewed the informed consent with the participant and requested a second consent which was given verbally. Each interview was recorded using Zoom so that the interviews could be coded later. Interviews were approximately 90 minutes in length and were conducted using Zoom, a video conferencing platform. Participants gave consent to record the interview.

3.6 Instrumentation

A consent form was developed to introduce the researcher and to provide background information on the research. In addition, the consent form contained information on the participation criteria, 1) including committing to 1.5 hours of time to review the research project, gain consent, and conduct a personal interview, 2) agreeing to a Zoom recorded interview, and 3) agreeing to assist the researcher later in the research process to help clarify ideas or items that

may be unclear during the transcription process. Finally, the consent form outlines potential risks and benefits, compensation information, and the researcher's contact information for follow-up questions or concerns.

A participant questionnaire form was developed to identify appropriate participants. The questionnaire included questions that included information inquiring about current employment with the state agency, current position level, years of employment, cultural identity, experience with racism, and ability to access Zoom.

The survey was divided into four main parts: introduction, participants' experience with the four elements of institutional racism (patterns, procedures, practices, and policies), the interpersonal relationships that play a role in institutional racism, and visions for the future in state government (Appendix D). A survey protocol was developed to guide the interviews. Each participant was asked a series of questions, including introductory, open-ended, and closed-ended questions. Interview questions were designed using a critical race theory lens. According to Parker and Lunn (2002), critical race theory aims to present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color.

Critical Race Theory supports the elimination of racial subjugation while also acknowledging that race is socially constructed. Finally, Critical Race Theory seeks to explore intersectionality; the understanding here is that people of color face additional inequalities associated with other oppressed identities. All recruitment material and protocols were reviewed and approved by the Hamline University Human Subjects Review Board before the start of recruitment.

3.7 Data Analysis and Management

The screening questionnaire was administered once participants expressed interest in participating in the research. Eligible participants were sent an electronic consent form for review and signature and a link to schedule a 60–75-minute virtual Zoom interview. Each interview began with reviewing the purpose of the study, reviewing the consent form, and obtaining verbal consent and written consent from participants who did not sign the consent form prior to the start of the interview. Consent forms were protected in a password-protected DocuSign account, which only the student researcher has access to. Participants were reminded that they could stop the interview or skip any questions at any time. In addition, permission to record the interview was obtained. Once permitted to record, the recording began.

The interview was structured in four parts. The first part of the interview was intended to gather background on the participant, the second part of the interview homed in on the patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that perpetuate institutional racism for Black women, the third part focused on interpersonal relationships and the fourth part was intended to learn about the participant's motivation to work in government. The interviews ranged from 39 to 74 minutes, averaging 58 minutes. Once the interview was complete, the participant was thanked, and the recording ended.

Each recorded interview was stored in a password-protected Zoom account. Interviews were then uploaded to a password-protected artificial intelligence transcription service named Otter.ai. All transcripts were de-identified by assigning the last initials of the participant's first and last name. For example, Monica Jones would be assigned A.S.

Once an interview was uploaded into Otter.ai, a thorough member check was completed to ensure the accuracy of the data. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), member checks

reduce researcher bias and promote rigorous research (p.3). To further protect the research participants, the state employment is referred to as West, Midwest, Northeast, or South Region, and the government agencies are referred to as agencies.

3.8 Design Rigor

Guba and Lincoln's (1989) trustworthiness in qualitative research strengthened the analytical stance and promoted the highest quality and rigor. First, to ensure credibility, the researcher will spend a minimum of 60 minutes with each participant, allowing for a more in-depth understanding as opposed to using a brief interview format that does not allow for in-depth responses. In addition, to the length of time of the interviews, the interview protocol uses open-ended questions to provide an opportunity for research participants to provide unrestrained responses. Due to the design of the study, the researcher lacked the ability to have prolonged engagement time with research participants.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe prolonged engagement as observing and seeing actual behaviors to minimize possible misinterpretations and false judgments of the researchers. However, given that the researcher and the research participants share some of the same cultural identities and likely cultural norms and socialization, which may lead to a deeper cultural understanding during the interview and while analyzing the data. Once the data is analyzed, the researcher will check with the participant to verify the results, giving each participant an opportunity to respond to misinterpretations.

Second, the researcher will use thick descriptions in the analysis to ensure transferability. Thick descriptions include using voices, feelings, actions, and meaning. To obtain the necessary data to use thick descriptions, the interview instrument was written to encourage descriptive responses. For example- use questions that include phrases like, "Describe a time when," "How

did it feel when," and "Tell me about." In addition, all interviews will be recorded, and variations in voice tone, pitch, and volume will be noted during the analysis. Third, Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis was strictly followed to ensure dependability. In addition, the coding framework is grounded in the research question and literature, and the researcher consulted with colleagues and committee members throughout the process to provide feedback and identify potential personal bias or alternative interpretations. Finally, to ensure confirmability, the researcher will implement measures to remain objective.

The principal researcher identifies as a Black woman and has prior experience working in state government in a leadership position. The researcher's cultural identity and professional experience call for a greater need to minimize bias. The researcher used a reflexivity journal during the data collection process and post-data collection to capture their own experiences and reflections as Black women and former leaders in state government. Reflexivity can create methodological openness for researchers to reflect on how the data were made, including the actions that may have influenced the data collection (Hennink et al., 2011).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Potential ethical dilemmas were monitored throughout all phases of the research. The highest priority of the research was not to cause harm, to respect the rights, and to uphold the participants' confidentiality. Several safeguards were put in place to address potential ethical issues. Informed consent was emailed to each participant prior to the start of the interview, and both written and verbal consent was obtained. Interview questions were sent to participants prior to the start of the interviews in order to familiarize participants with the questions. This is in an effort to minimize the likelihood of participants becoming uncomfortable or having an

involuntary trauma response. To maintain objectivity, the researcher closely monitored instances of bias and influence.

This can be accomplished by identifying personal feelings that surface during the interview and by acknowledging perspectives that might bias the researcher (Chenail, 2011). Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) state that one way to avoid siding with participants is to report multiple perspectives as well as contradictory findings. Audio recordings were deleted once fully transcribed, and all identifiable information was redacted on the interview transcripts. A structural description was created in the next step in the data analysis process to explain how the phenomenon was experienced.

3.10 Strengths & Limitations

Phenomenology thrives to understand the collective experience of a group. Conducting individual interviews allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the experience of Black women, a detailed account of their experience that may not have been gleaned from another method such as observation or survey. The ability to conduct virtual interviews allowed for a national representation which can have national implications for practice and future research. Another strength of conducting interviews is that it allowed the researcher to observe and take note of nonverbal cues that assisted with thick descriptions. Virtual interviews provide limited non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and hand and head gestures. Non-verbal communication can provide cues for further probing and/or clarification. Finally, using a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to embrace flexibility and organic dialogue initiated by participants. For example-one participant may spend 5 minutes responding to a question, and another participant may spend 12 minutes responding to the same question.

While there is research conducted on Black women leaders in non-government settings, such as the private sector and academia, no previous studies looked specifically at Black women's leadership in the public sector. A limitation of the methodology chosen is the lack of previous studies on Black women leaders' experience in government may negatively impact the credibility and validity of the study. Another limitation could be the study's sample size; although the sample represents several regions of the United States, it is still not representative. Lastly, the qualitative nature may impact the generalizability of the study. However, the themes captured across the interviews can lead to future research.

CHAPTER 4

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As stated in Chapter 1, government agencies have struggled to provide an inclusive environment for Black women to work and thrive, despite the government being one of the largest employers for Black women. The impact of institutional racism on the retention of Black women leaders in government is not well understood, however, it is well known that racism is baked into the fabric of government. This chapter provides a description of the study sample and describes how the data was analyzed using a simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to narrative analysis. In addition, this chapter discusses the categories and themes that surfaced throughout the analysis. The findings were guided and steeped in the research questions.

4.1 Description of Study Sample

A total of 12 participants were interviewed. All 12 participants worked in state government agencies in the midwestern, eastern, and southern regions of the United States. However, two participants had prior experience working in the federal government in the Administration of Children and Family Services and the Department of Justice. Participants held various leadership positions, ranging from Assistant Director, Director, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Deputy Chief, Assistant Superintendent, Executive Director, Division Chief, Senior Director, and Assistant Chief.

All but one participant had direct reports, many with multiple layers of direct and indirect reports under their scope of responsibility. One hundred percent of the participants identified as Black and female. The length of state and federal government service in leadership and non-

leadership positions ranged from 1-30 years in government, with the average length of service being 13.5 years and a cumulative 163 years in state and federal government. Two participants were under the 3-year criteria eligibility but given their history in county government and experience in adjacent government agencies, were granted participation. A total of nine participants were promoted into leadership roles, and three started in leadership roles.

The length of service in government leadership positions ranged from 1-24 years, with an average government leadership role of 9 years and cumulative 108 years of leadership experience. The majority of the participants led in human service and education agencies, and one participant worked in financial services. The service areas included child support, childcare assistance, refugee resettlement, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), child welfare, mental health, substance use services, early childhood services, early childhood education, employment services, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and financial services.

The following describes the steps taken to prepare and analyze the data and illustrates examples of how themes emerged and were arrived at. A process called bracketing was used in between the interpretation of each interview to give the researcher the opportunity to reflect on personal expression and to minimize potential judgment.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the same researcher that conducted the interviews. Each transcript was read several times. Otter.ai, a web-based artificial intelligence transcription service, was used to transcribe the recorded interviews. This provided an opportunity to listen to the stories twice which resulted in a greater understanding of each participant's experience and the ability to incorporate variations in voice tone, pitch, and volume into the analysis.

For example, one participant made a statement. After an extended pause, she lowered her voice. She said, “There are processes for White staff working under Black leadership, but there is no process when it's [Black] leaders being attacked by White staff, and I said to the Commissioner, ‘until you get a handle on this, this is going to continue, and you're going to always wonder why people of color are leaving this agency.’ It's not that we don't want to do the work. It's not that we're not invested.” The same participant used a high pitch voice to share what she recently said to her staff, “I said, I've been here almost 10 years, and I'm trying to figure out in those 10 years, every time I ask folks something, every time I'm delegating stuff to y'all, every time I'm giving you direction received from the Commissioner or from the Assistant Commissioner, there's always a reason I'm not trustworthy, I'm angry, you're scared of me, all these things to describe me. I was trying to figure out where that came from for a long time. Is that organizational culture? Or are these just individuals? And I said, after 10 years, it's a combination of all of that.”

Moustakas (1994) recommends developing a list of significant statements, also known as horizontalization of the data. Moustakas (1994) states that in order to conduct this step, the researcher needs to be receptive to every statement of the co-researcher’s experience, granting each comment equal value (p. 122). These significant statements were marked, color-coded and extracted, and similar significant statements were notated and identified as repeating ideas. A list of non-repeating ideas was developed using significant statements from each participant. Figure 1.1 shows examples of horizons extracted from interviews and three sets of similar statements and can be identified as repeating ideas.

Figure 1.1 Horizontalization

First set of repeating ideas

"I had to figure out what works for me and be aware of how I'm perceived, being black and being a woman, and the stereotypes that come with that impact. In every communication that I have with white people, I'm always conscious of that. I'm not always successful; some people still believe I can come off a little strong. But I try to make sure I'm chill, diplomatic, and have a smile on my face when I say things and not to be seen as threatening because that is how people get shut down, and I'm trying to make an impact; I'm trying to be heard. So, it's almost like trying to find the secret sauce."

"I had to pause because I always have to check my white woman meter."

Second set of repeating ideas

"As a Black and brown person, as a woman of color in this role in this position, you don't know what to do with that. And when that shows up, it shows up as racism; it shows up as I'm undeserving, that I don't know what I'm talking about, that I don't know how to lead, that I'm untrustworthy."

"The most harmful is that the value we bring is our unique perspective, our unique flavor, our difference, and that oftentimes has to be suppressed in many ways. I remember this happens often in a meeting. You're trying to explain. I'm trying to explain the information in the way that I speak right, but almost need a white woman to interpret the same thing that I'm saying, but through her saying it in ways that the leadership can then receive."

Third set of repeating ideas

"I don't eff up because I'm Black and can't afford it. I follow the rules. I've never been fired or reprimanded or anything like that. And still, push my ideology, but I do it carefully and thoughtfully."

"I've had to jump through a lot more hoops than my white counterpart who used to be in this job; her behavior, I think people tolerated it and if I acted a third of the way she did, I would have long been fired, like staff would be in an uproar, like, for the things she did or said, like, would have never been tolerated."

Once horizons have been identified and reviewed, significant statements were grouped into broader units to initiate a process of creating meaning and to eliminate duplication, known as meaning units. Two questions were used as a guide when identifying statements, 1) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient constituents for

understanding it? 2) Is it possible to abstract and label it? (Moustakas, p. 121). Figure 1.2 uses the identified ideas used in Figure 1.1 to illustrate this step in the data analysis process to demonstrate how each step is built on and interconnected.

Figure 1.2 Meaning Units

- Black women are forced to exist in ways that make white people feel comfortable.
- Black women are not received as trustworthy and competent.
- Black women don't have the same privilege to fail forward as their white counterparts.

Next, a step of the data analysis process was to draft a description of the collective experience of the participants. This was done by carefully examining the individual experiences of each participant and synthesizing them to represent them as a whole. Figure 1.3 illustrates an example of the first meaning unit shown in Figure 1.2: Black women are forced to exist in ways that make white people feel comfortable. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this is "what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon" (p. 201).

Figure 1.3 Textural Description

Many Black women leaders reported their need to adapt how or what they say to prevent showing up unacceptably or being perceived as collegial by their white counterparts. They feared that not making the adjustments would result in not getting their message across, moving their work forward, or being seen as angry or confrontational. Some Black women reported the need to constantly be on high alert around white supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Black women leaders were frequently reported to the departments' Human Resources (HR) or Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) office by white subordinates under the accusation of being hostile, threatening, or disrespectful.

Following a textural description, a structural description was created to explain how the phenomenon was experienced. In this case, all participants worked for the state government in a

director-level or higher position. In addition to the level of government of the phenomenon, the context of the phenomenon was identified. Figure 1.4 demonstrates this process.

Figure 1.4 Structural Description

Most participants reported the need to adapt how or what they say or how they appear to their white counterparts in the context of their role as state government leader. However, participants discussed feeling more pressure to monitor their behavior, demeanor, and communication in a meeting with their peers or supervisors and one-on-one interaction with subordinates. Participants did report that Covid allowed for increased safety in meetings, stating that they could sometimes turn their cameras off to prevent their colleagues from judging their responses. Many participants supervise white employees and have experienced frequent and unexpected complaints that are ultimately unsubstantiated but still have negative psychological impacts.

The last step completed in the data analysis process was to combine the textural and structural descriptions related to each theme to write a composite description in order to capture the true essence of the study, both the "what" and the "how" of the participant's experience.

RESULTS

The themes were organized and sorted into five categories. The first and second categories describe how racism plays out in state government at the institutional level and interpersonal level, the third category describes the conscious and unconscious alignment with white supremacy, the fourth category shares data on strategies Black women use to navigate state government and the fifth category describes what factors drive and motivate Black women to remain in state government. Each of the categories contains between two to seven themes. Findings are reported in a way that protects the confidentiality of the subjects that participated in the study.

The findings and themes support the literature as well as highlight unexpected findings. Participant data suggests that Black women have to constantly do more, show up differently, and remain among the least understood in state government. A participant who spent half of a decade in state government shared that she keeps a quote her mom taught her at the forefront, *"I remember, my mom told me, you know, you have two strikes against you three strikes, you're out. You're female, and you're African American. The third strike, you're out. So, I always felt like I had to do and prove myself more."*

4.2 Institutional Racism

Participants provided ample data that demonstrated their experience with institutional racism in state government. Better (2002) defines institutional racism denotes those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploited individuals who are members of non-White racial/ethnic groups (p. 11). Participants' examples of institutional racism were sorted into 7 themes, 1) Despite progress made, Black women are still underrepresented in state government leadership, 2) Superficial Commitment to Equity, 3) State agencies are often politically motivated to recruit diverse leadership but don't support Black women's success, 4) The system takes advantage of Black women feeling responsible for hiring supporting and promoting Black staff, 5) Black women are being demoted from leadership positions, 6) Formal Human Resources processes and protections often do not work for Black women, 7) Lack of awareness of the problem can prevent the advancement of Black women.

4.2a Despite progress made, Black women are still underrepresented in state government leadership.

A little less than half of the participants recounted stories of being the only Black woman in a leadership position in their organization or being among the very few who held such a position. One state official from the southern area, with more than three decades of experience in state administration, expressed their experiences.,

> *For the longest, I would say, I probably could look across our agency of 800 plus employees easily, and not use one hand to count the number of African American directors. When you think the next level up from directors, so Associate Commissioner and, we have tons of Associate Commissioners, I can say there's probably two Hispanics, one African American, maybe one Asian, and then leadership across the very top reporting directly to the commissioner, one Hispanic male, everyone else is white, and his cabinet is about eight to nine people.*

It's possible that the lack of representation of Black women in senior-level leadership roles is due to the fact that Black employees aren't kept on the job for long enough to have the chance to advance in their careers. For example, one participant expressed her worries about the amount of newly hired Black employees whom she saw leave the agency as a result of being recruited under the illusion of inclusion only to experience the reverse.

> *It has hurt my heart so to see very talented, young African American folks go. They would say 'I'm out, I just can't you know, and I appreciate what you're saying. But this is ridiculous, and I don't have it in me, and I don't think I have to wait for change. You know, I was told one thing when I came in and it's another, I'm gone.' So, I think it's those things to those of us who are a little bit older and tenured, and then the younger talent that's coming in now you try to be there and mentor and partner, you know, and try to be a source of encouragement. And we try to help each other out because we need diversity in leadership.*

The following are some further instances of participants who shared their worries regarding the low number of Black women in leadership roles and the low number of Black employees that were retained.

> *There were four total senior executive directors, I was one, the only Black. So made three women, one man, the other three individuals were all White.*
>
> *I was the only person of color in the group of about 15 or 17. As I said, I believe my boss was racist and misogynistic.*
>
> *You can count on one hand, the number of directors or chiefs or assistant chiefs who are Black in a 650-employee agency, on one hand.*
>
> *The first person who I've met was the clerk…he was so excited to see me because he was there for 25 years at the time. He's like, I was the second person of color that ever walked in this office. He knew the first one and told me her name and I looked her up, I mean, this was a year later…and I realized I was not going to get mentorship, I was not going to grow here with these kinds of stagnant people.*
>
> *There's always the gesture* [to hire Black staff] *... But then when you turn the follow through into but what's happening at this agency…for a while, it felt like the revolving door of a lot of young, African American talent in particular, who were hired up, we were doing great with numbers at the Agency for a while. And then they left as quickly as they were hired and trained.*

4.2b Superficial Commitment to Equity.

All twelve participants described anti-racism practices that revealed a superficial commitment to equity in state government. Despite calling out equity as a commitment and priority, their state agencies failed to demonstrate a sustained commitment to making agencies more equitable for Black women and other staff of color. Several participants described equity efforts and attempts to discuss racism in a flavor-of-the-week fashion, in that equity-related initiatives were often in response to a recent societal event and would fade in and out in the same fashion as current events or when discussing equity became uncomfortable for some.

For example, one southern region participant shared her agency's response to the George Floyd murder. She stated, *"There was an invitation to all the African American employees and individuals of color he* [senior leader] *didn't just single us out but wanted to make sure he wants to have a conversation and just check on individuals of color and express his, you know, concern*

supporting X, Y & Z. So, we did have a meeting there. I appreciated the gesture. But you know, it was one of those things where it was the hot topic for a little while, and then things faded back out. So, I would say that's still sort of where our agency is." Another Eastern region participant talked about how a similar invitation was extended, followed by a string of killings of Black men at the hands of law enforcement.

Not only were these brown bag efforts not helpful, they actually brought up painful feelings that were not addressed in the meeting. *"There was a lot of stuff happening, a lot of Black men were being killed and I feel like every single month, we were always talking about Black men being killed…During that time, for me, it was very sensitive, because I just had a Black boy at that time, and I'm like, this is rough. So, I just remember, I don't know if it was really even helpful, more than triggering."* This exemplifies superficial equity practices that have the potential of causing *more* trauma to Black women.

Other participants expressed that their state agencies were committed to equity outwardly to manage public relations but inwardly have made it difficult to advance and in some cases have gone against staff who attempt to implement practices that can lead to a more just work experience for Black women. One state leader assigned to lead her agency DEI strategy states, *"There hasn't been a lot of movement since I got this position because my current boss isn't, and I'm not blaming, I'm just telling you the facts, has not really allowed me to do much."* Participants also revealed that equity champions who demonstrate commitment through action are more likely to be terminated or leave the agency rather than receiving support to make difficult changes in the agency; this pattern seems to be true even for White equity champions. Participants also revealed that the majority of equity champions are White. This demonstrates that the importance of equity in the workplace cannot be overstated. Participants have expressed

concern and a desire to proceed with caution when it comes to pushing equity beyond an agency's threshold of tolerance on many occasions. One participant shared that her agency has identified equity as a priority but when staff begin to feel uncomfortable with the direction the agency is moving the topic becomes less important, *"the conversation got warm and then people wanted to sort of backpedal and back off of it."* This sentiment remained unchanged even after participants were hired to implement equity initiatives and even after agencies publicly announced action steps they intend to take in order to advance equity as an agency. The following are some comments that make just a passing reference to equity in their wording or tone.

> *The George Floyd situation got everybody more aware, I would say in the agency about culture, diversity, how you're treating people…there was a lot of talk about diversity and equity and making sure we're aware. And then as time went on, it's like, everything got pulled back. That's not something we can't really talk about.*

> *There were a lot of initiatives to move the federal government towards becoming more equitable. There are affinity groups, all different types of things. And so, there's a lot of ethos of diversity, equity inclusion work. Does that always translate into policy? And systems? No. And so, there's a lot of momentum and a lot of conversation and a lot of discussion. But there are some issues there.*

4.2c State agencies are often politically motivated to recruit diverse leadership but don't support Black women's success.

At least one-quarter of the participants had a similar experience, which was that they did not get help from their supervisor. In some cases, participants felt like their superiors didn't like them. Often, leaders were under pressure to hire leadership that aligns with the administrations or agencies' diversity agenda. This sometimes resulted in recruiting a Black leader who may have had the necessary experience but is unfamiliar with the inner workings and nuances of government. And they were promoted within government but didn't have the knowledge to navigate government in a leadership role.

A midwestern leader described her attempts to receive support from her direct supervisor who was also the assistant commissioner in a state agency that severely lacks racial diversity, she stated *"I think in the last year and four months, I've actually spent about an hour and a half with her* [White superior] *in person and then for a long time she didn't meet at all. But then I had asked for weekly check-ins because she's kind of the type where she's like, 'make it so' and then she like, doesn't pay any attention."* The statements below speak to the lack of supervision and support Black women leaders receive.

> *I was one, the only Black. So made three women, one man, the other three individuals were all white and the other three individuals had worked at the department. The one had been there 14 years. One had been there 16 years and one had been there 17 years. I came in straight from K through 12, education, knowing nothing about government work, and was at the highest level…I knew I was not one of his* [White supervisor] *favorites. Now, he had to give the okay to hire me three years early, but I knew I was not on his favorite list…I wanted to talk to the exiting superintendent, find out what was the deal, why he never embraced me, and tried to help me with this massive, the most influential center in the department.*
>
> *I hate to say this…promoting* [Black leaders] *because they know they need Blacks and then when they're not good at their job, then they just look ineffective and so right now, I look like I'm ineffective, because I can't push because that might cause trouble for this new superintendent or get me fired.*
>
> *So really, zero support. So, I've really had to find my way. And there's no onboarding, especially at the director level. Not a bit of it and in fact…*[in response to] *my suggestions around onboarding, actually, they created about six months ago, their first onboarding document that just really is linked, you know, to different department web pages, or that have a general description.*
>
> *She* [my supervisor] *tasked my staff with onboarding up, you know, how they say managing up, not managing up, but onboarding up and that's not right.*
>
> *I can keep track of funds. That's not the hardest part. But the hardest part really is working with finance, working with the legislator when we get a grant that's like you can use this much of the grant. Like, why can't I use all of it? It was given to us, you know, all of those little, tiny, like, you know, the contract process. It was just overwhelming, and then nobody held your hand.*

> *I've asked directly in so many different ways, like, 'Hey, can you mentor me a little here? Can you give me some general understanding of how our legislature works.' I am new to this as well.*

4.2d The system takes advantage of Black women feeling responsible for hiring, supporting and promoting Black staff.

Because of practices of cosmetic equality like those stated above, as well as the fact that many organizations do not support the Black leaders they do recruit, the onus of supporting Black women typically falls on the shoulders of Black women who hold leadership positions. When it comes to employing, promoting, and supporting Black women, state governments often fall short, leaving it up to Black women in leadership positions to pick up the slack. A number of the participants spoke about their common experience of being given the extra responsibility of being accountable for supporting equality programs, which included mentoring and assisting not just Black women but also Black males.

Although several participants mentioned that they felt a personal and cultural obligation to speak up for others and bring others along, they felt that they were expected to play a role that their male counterparts and White counterparts were not expected to play. In addition, they felt that they were expected to play a role that was different from the role that their counterparts were expected to play.

One participant nearing retirement, expressed her concerns about being responsible for ensuring she created pathways for other Black women in state government. "*Those of us who are still here, I think we all feel like we have a responsibility to try to use our voice, use our position, speak up, you know, try to make a difference, and also try to carve some sort of pathway for other people because I'm not going to be there for forever. And the thing is that I still want to try to leave the place better than it was when I came in. But there aren't a lot of African American*

folks around here, in terms of, you know, leadership and role models and those things." Below are statements shared by other participants who shared a similar sentiment as the leader above.

> *I'm here for the people that are coming after me. I'm here for the people that are currently in the agencies to know that these things are happening and it's not by circumstance.*
>
> *I really want to bring along more Black women in government and so that was a part of my commitment. So, my staff in my last role, where I got to build the staff from the ground up, was almost all Black women. I got them, I was looking for them.*
>
> *...We need diversity and role models, each one of us each time that next generation should be trying to and should have an easier time as hard as we work to try to get into these positions to model for the sustainability and the tool of tenure to make it through.*

4.2e Black women are being demoted from leadership positions.

State agencies have become accustomed to setting quotas and goals for diversity, often motivated by political expectations. Participants shared several examples of Black women leaders being hired in at a higher-level position and later demoted to a lower-level leadership or non-leadership position. In one instance, a participant was hired in a senior-level leadership role, and responsible for the work of over 500 staff across the state. At the time, the agency was under pressure to diversify their leadership team and while she was qualified for the position, it was common knowledge that she was recruited largely to satisfy the agency's desire to reflect racial diversity.

A few years after receiving very little support in the position she was blindsided by the news that she was being demoted to a line position with no budget and no staff. She would be tasked with leading the department's equity initiatives. She stated, "*I get a call to meet with the deputy chief and, and the superintendent and the superintendent said I want somebody to take on this diversity, equity and inclusion role…he said, I'm choosing you, I felt like it was maybe a*

little bit of a setup like he's done this so I can fail…So I took on this role. Many people saw it as a promotion because I was moving to the executive level floor, but I'll tell you…it was a demotion because I was not a senior executive director and there was a pay cut."

After she was demoted, the position was backfilled by a White woman whom she had employed only one year prior . In other cases, participants revealed occasions in which they were demoted, but the move was masked as a restructuring or portrayed as a promotion, while in reality, it gave them less power and influence than before. One participant shared that they moved her and another colleague from leadership positions responsible for shaping and implementing policy to a newly developed team of two responsible for community outreach and education. "*I also watched what they did to my friend who was the Chief, we're just gonna put you over here, keep you quiet, give you this to do…we won't touch your money and the person who wants her position, we can slide her in. So, they moved me and they moved her."*

This recurring experience of the Black woman raises the issue of whether or not the women are demoted because of poor performance or a lack of supervision or mentoring. Participants have indicated that they were not given any criticism on their performance, opportunities for professional growth, or assistance prior to being demoted because this topic is an example of institutional racism. This suggests that there is not a strong commitment to maintaining Black women in leadership positions. The participants experiences with the practice of recruiting Black women in higher positions and then demoting them at a later time are reflected in the following remarks.

> *We've had situations more recently, the persons of color, they pretty much were demoted, changed titles, like people of color, who, from all outside perspective, they're doing a pretty decent job…. one woman, she had been Chief of Staff, she got demoted to Assistant Commissioner of legal affairs.*

4.2f Formal Human Resources processes and protections often do not work for Black women.

Several participants shared their experience of feeling like their agencies' human resource department or the agency's executive leadership were inadequately equipped to protect them as Black women leaders. As a result of the lack of protection, participants had to find ways to protect themselves from racism, discrimination, and unjust treatment. After a chronic pattern of unfair treatment from direct and indirect reports and the state agency failing to take action, one midwestern region participant with nearly ten years of government experience explains,

> *When there are situations where I have to go in and talk to my team about how they have traumatized me in a racialized way, I should be able to call somebody HR and be like, today I'm having a racialized trauma day I need for this team to come in and get my people together. Like you have to protect yourself… But like I told a lot of people, I don't have anything to lose at this point. And the worst that could happen is I get fired, but what they're not going to continue to do is traumatize me, and act like they haven't done anything to me when they have.*

Participants also felt like they were the target of complaints. They did not experience the same level of protection afforded to their subordinates and, in some cases, the same subordinates who were targeting them. *An eastern region leader with nearly 25 years of government experience says, " You must always be on alert because many of us supervise white people…all of a sudden, you're getting a letter in the mail saying, oh, there's been a EEO* [Equal Employee Opportunity] *complaint. And you'll be interviewed on such a day. And you start to wonder* [is the complaint racially motivated]*."*

Even in situations in which leadership has acknowledged that Black leaders have been subjected to racially charged incidents, there appears to be a lack of protection for Black leaders. This lack of protection appears to be the result of not having policies in place that provide

protection to Black leaders. In some cases, the Human Resource staff or leadership that should be protecting Black women are also Black.

> *I had one direct report* [White woman] *that reported to me for years* [while serving as deputy director] *before I became director, and we were in the middle of a personnel crises, and I gave this person direction. A week or so later, she's telling another leader of color on my team that when I give her direction, she feels like she goes back into her past lives of being a Black slave, and me being the slave master, giving her direction. And, you know, every time I asked her something, it's like whipping her into submission and things like that…I ended up having to tell HR, they, in turn, advise me to go and talk to equal opportunity at the agency, I tell that individual who's also a person of color, and he basically was like, well, what do you want me to do with this? And I'm like, well, what do you mean? And so, he ends up saying, well, I don't know what to say. So, I go back to my boss at the time, who was also a person of color, but also struggling with her identity as a woman of color. And she was like, well, let it sit for a minute, and then go back and have a conversation with the oppressor. And I was like, wait a minute, like, why do I have to do this?*

One participant expressed her frustration and need to organize a staff meeting to address the racially toned backlash she received from staff after they were provided instructions from her on a business-related matter. She decided to take matters into her own hands after several failed attempts from leadership to address the racism she experienced from the staff she supervised.

> *I spent the two days in the office working to get the meeting together…I had enough of the institutional racism that even gave you the right to question me in that moment…I got the agenda together. I told the Assistant Commissioner, you will be present at this meeting. I had our equity director there. I had an EAP* [Employee Assistance Program staff] *there who happened to be one white man and one woman of color… I had a meeting with the Commissioner, I said, I'm letting you know, first and foremost, that this meeting is going to happen. And in case you get any concerns or conversations back from what I'm going to say, they're going to hear about this and in case you hear about it, the conversation is going to be around systemic racism and how it shows up for Black women in this agency.*

Other examples of inadequate protection are below.

> *The commissioner was like… if next year this happens again. You can talk to the General Counsel, but why do I, why can't y'all take the initiative to handle this instead of it being about me, going to tell on her.*

There are processes for when there's White staff working under people of color, like leadership. But there is no process when Black leaders are being attacked by White staff. I said, 'until you get your handle on this, this is going to continue. And you're going to always wonder why people of color are leaving this agency and it's not that we don't want to do the work. It's not that we're not invested.'

I shouldn't have to always be intentional about the things that I need as a leader, right. So it [shouldn't be me] *seeking the trauma team and bringing that idea forward. It shouldn't be me being the one telling HR and the group about the current leadership performance review process and how racism will show up in those spaces. Those are the things when I don't feel so supported and if it weren't for me taking the initiative to do these things, then they maybe wouldn't necessarily get done.*

This staff person called me in front of the Union saying that I was creating a disrespectful workplace. So, I actually had to go to a union meeting and her complaints were that I did not stick to the agenda at meetings and that I would contact her last minute. [As a result of this complaint this leader was required to give 18-hour notice before contacting her own direct report].

You do get harassed like people, you know, EEO complaints, and sometimes it's not even what you did… [HR] *said I can't give them that accommodation, I'd say no* [to staff] *and then you get a complaint filed and HR acts like 'well, that was her decision.' Hello, you told me the policy was this and now you over here doing all kinds of other stuff. So that's HR, you can't even trust that* [HR], *you're on your own.*

This person [White staff reporting to Black leader] *had the nerve to go to HR and say, 'will you will you talk to* [Black women leader] *about taking that letter out of my personnel file' and I told HR, I said, 'it's not a coincidence, she's trying to coerce me by saying, if you take this letter out* [discipline letter] *out my file, I will stop with these false claims against you and stop trying to attack your character, as a Black leader in this agency. I told HR, I'm not taking it out and as a matter of fact, y'all should be dealing with the fact that she's trying to coerce me into getting rid of this file.*

There is an expectation that people of color, specifically that are in leadership or directors, that if there is an HR issue that is involving race, that somehow we are supposed to show up in a different way and be responsible for that in ways that no one would ask me about if there was a similar issue with like, contracts or an audit or a community, let's say in a rural area, that is all white. If it's the issue that is with a community of color, or it's an HR issue that is specific to peoples of color, where it's involving race or something like that, all of a sudden how I respond becomes heightened and I take on a level of responsibility that is imbalanced compared to what the white manager has to take on.

> *Two White colleagues, when they were acting in other positions, they got paid the salary differential. I didn't, and when I went to HR, they were like, 'well at this after a couple months pass, I didn't get any money. I talked to HR, they were like, well, the Commissioner didn't sign the paperwork for you and at this point, you can only get paid going forward we're not going to get paid. So, I sat in a position for a whole year. So, for a whole year I sat in a position that never got paid but like I said two of my colleagues got paid for doing basically out of title work. They got money and they got money from almost day one.*

> *Y'all reputation might bounce back, but minds won't let me get up here with some foolishness. I won't have a job, or I'll be sitting in the corner somewhere, because they'll be like, well, we can't fire her because the governor's thing is about diversity. But we'll just go sit you in a corner somewhere because that has happened too, our director of HR got in trouble. Not that I'm saying she was not wrong for getting in trouble. But the White woman who she worked with still got her job, the Black woman got demoted…she's off doing facilities, so the* [former] *director of HR* [Black women leader] *now goes around to help buy new furniture and hang pictures on the wall.*

4.2g Lack of awareness of the problem can prevent the advancement of Black women.

Many participants shared examples of ways that state agency leaders inaccurately measure and understand equity in the workplace, showing a lack of awareness of the actual experience of Black women. Hence, the true experiences of Black women in state government are unknown and therefore minimized or silenced. The quotes below support the experience of participants not being well understood by leadership.

> *The commissioner's White, so when you're trying to trickle down from the top, and see what's a focus, and what's a priority, that population of folks, and each time you would push everything from what are our performance metrics, and, you know, diversity training and crucial conversations, our agency gets extremely sensitive. When you push the topic of, you know, diversity and making sure we're being equitable and talking to people all, you know, the same way the right way. We get super sensitive and defensive. So, it's hard to make headway when the leadership doesn't believe there's a problem sometimes.*

> *She* [commissioner] *wanted to say for a long time, oh, you know, our Black and Brown people are staying, I said, we're staying you know and why people aren't falling out the hat is because we're at home, and we continue to work from home. And if someone is being ignorant on the Zoom call, guess what, I can turn my camera off, get up, go to the bathroom, ignore it, calm myself down and bring myself back into the space. But when*

> *you have that direct confrontation in the office, and people are being stupid and ignorant and racist in your face, that's a different kind of level.*
>
> *Right about the time the employee engagement survey comes out, you're looking at the composition of the agency, most of the time, most folks will then try to go well, it's not as bad, when you compare the number to all state agencies, and those of us immediately in* [southern state agency] *will go but we're not worried about all the other state agencies, we're talking about the environment in this agency and what is it that we can try to do.*

4.3 Interpersonal Racism

Eleven of 12 participants reported many instances of implicit and implicit interpersonal racism. The one participant who did not explicitly report experiences of interpersonal racism acknowledged the uniqueness of her experience in state government, *"I know that I have worked in a perfect storm for 11 years. And not everybody gets that. And how do you leave the perfect storm?"* The participant continued by saying that despite the fact that she had not been the victim of any acts of interpersonal racism, she did not feel that her organization was interested in making genuine change other than for the sake of preserving an image. She explains, *"I literally I don't go to any of it like, it* [DEI initiatives] *just irritates me. The topic irritates me…because it just seems like something that people were trying to do, like, let's have the seminars and things so we can make the employee survey better."* Participants' examples of interpersonal racism were sorted into 2 themes, 1) Black and white women in state government are held to different interpretive frameworks and 2) Black women leaders' expertise and experience isn't respected in state government.

4.3a Black and White women in state government are held to different interpretive frameworks.

Participants discussed at length ways they believe they are treated differently than their White counterparts because of their race. While institutional racism acts as the container of

racism, acts of interpersonal racism are the contents that fill the container. *"We [Black women] recognize when you get there, you got to show up every day, and you got to move it, you got to pull it across the line. I don't care how many crazy people are on your staff; whoever they give you, you gotta make it work. Because you know, it's going to reflect very differently on you, and you're not gonna get a second chance."* voiced one participant as she described the difference in how she navigates and is perceived in comparison to her White counterparts.

While Black women know their behavior will be interpreted differently from their white counterparts, some interviewees pointed out that even white counterparts acknowledge this.

> *I once had someone who was at the tippy top of government in an agency I was working with. He was an older White man. I've gotten into a disagreement in a meeting with our chief legal counsel and these are all White men sitting around the table, got into a disagreement with him. After this other gentleman pulled me into his office, and he said, Look, I don't think you handled that right. And I said, 'How would you have handled that? I did exactly what you would have done. I said exactly what you would have said.' He said, 'yeah, but you're not me. I'm an old White man…he's like, they're not going to hear you the same way. And I was like, floored by that, like, almost mad at him for saying it. But knowing it, which he was almost grateful to listen to, he said it out loud.*

The quotes below are examples of how Black women's behavior is interpreted differently than their White colleagues in state government.

> *The nature of unclassified work makes it difficult for Black women. Here's why. There are certain people in our population who walk around earth who get rewarded for their potential. People see potential in them and they're gonna give them a shot. The rest of us we only get rewarded for our results… it's harder for people to see, people in power to see, who maybe have a lot of implicit bias against Black people against women. To really see potential in the same way.*

> *They're more sensitive to the mistakes of Black people and the mistakes of Black women; I have seen that over and over; you could have two people make similar mistakes or not perform in a similar way, and folks seem more sensitive to the Black person's mistakes. It's like so and so* [Black women], *I don't know what it is, she just doesn't seem like… and I'm like, I know what it is. Let me tell you what it is; it's your biases showing. So, I think, you know, when you have a concentration of people in power, who are all the same, and it's not Black women, that automatically makes it harder for Black women to be recognized for their potential. And so, being able to elevate Black women and bring them*

> *along and grow them, it's like you will have to work hard and demonstrate first before you get the opportunity for leadership development; you have to perform. And we don't really ask that of young white men.*
>
> *I'm talking about being able to express ideas in a way where they can receive it, where it's sometimes your external appearance as Black women, and just the tone of your voice, they can't, they can't get around it to just be able to receive basic information, and so the words have to shift and change and often have to come from a white woman to be respected as something that is credible for being able to be something that can move forward.*
>
> *I've had to go jump a lot more hoops, than my White counterpart who used to be in this job, her behavior, I think people tolerated it, and if I acted a third of the way she did, I would long been fired, like staff would be in an uproar, like, for the things she did or said, like, would have never been tolerated.*

4.3b Black women leaders' expertise and experience isn't respected in state government.

Participants shared overwhelmingly about not being heard, seen, or respected. Further, many participants reported feeling they were often tolerated and received pacifying gestures from their White peers and superiors. In some instances, they were not given the appropriate credit for their contributions. One participant who had dedicated over two decades to state government stated, "*A lot of days, I feel like I'm standing on the ground, and everybody's on the rooftop, and I'm yelling up to them, what we need to be doing… and they can determine to listen or not because they can pretend like they don't hear me. They don't see me until they have to. So, I think that is problematic for me because it becomes frustrating. After all, when things go wrong, then you are the face of that."*

One of the leaders of the Midwestern area revealed that after having spent over a decade in a management position, she still feels that she is not heard or competent in her capacity, and as a consequence, she finds herself repeatedly repeating herself.

> *The levels of unresponsiveness, the levels of having to repeat your stories before you're believed.*

The participant above was far from alone in her lack of feeling heard, seen, and respected.

> *If it is a middle aged White woman, who maybe she didn't even have that impressive of a career, but she's just a policy expert in the field. She's an advocate, her voice is kind of an advocate type of voice. If I spin the same change through her, all of a sudden, people want to show up, listen, oh, we need to get we need to get that on the calendar… Let's bring it to the governor's office. Let's talk about this more.*

> *I sit in a position and it took a minute to get here. The uphill battle as a Black woman in this role, for folks to take me seriously about ensuring that the policy that the state implements.*

> *My boss, the chief, nominated* [my team] *for awards. But myself and my colleague… he never put our names up. I felt that it was because of me. Because it had been two White people, I think he would have thrown our names in. I don't think he wanted me to get the award. Black women don't receive credit.*

> *I started listening more where a friend of mine* [Black women] *would make a statement, and then another colleague [White woman] would say a statement, and they're like,* [White woman] *yes, yeah. And I'm, like,* [Black woman] *just said that five minutes ago.*

> *There are times when I will speak up professionally, raise a concern or those things, she is one of those folks that I believe says, Yes, I'm on board and I want you to tell me and give me your feedback. But then when you give it suddenly, I'm not kind, I'm angry. You know, it's in the stereotypes of* [interview participant] *is the angry Black woman, I'm not the angry Black woman, I'm telling you the truth about the situation and what's going on. That should be no different from my other White colleagues who tell you the truth, but you don't have the same reaction there.*

> *Then sometimes, if there's an escalation about a situation, or someone does not believe perhaps that I don't know what I'm talking about, or they don't want to take it from me, because I'm me.*

4.4 The Conscious and Unconscious Alignment and Perpetuation of White Supremacy Culture

As supported by the literature about the stereotypes of Black women, participants shared examples of how they have knowingly and unknowingly taken on and or internalized the

narratives of the dominant group. White supremacy culture socializes Black women to internalize and perpetuate attitudes and behaviors that are deeply rooted in state government. Therefore, Black women in state government often question whether they have what it takes to measure up to their non-Black counterparts. In addition to measuring up, Black women are expected and responsible for representing other Black women. Finally, Black women find themselves despairing as they enter, navigate and think about their future in state government. Participants' examples of conscious and unconscious alignment and perpetuation of white supremacy culture were sorted into 4 themes, 1) Black women experience self-doubt in state government, 2) Black women don't have the privilege of being individuals, 3) Black women face discouragement and despair, 4) Black women leaders perpetuate anti-Blackness in state government.

4.4a Black women experience self-doubt in state government.

Several participants shared their experiences with self-doubt as a leader in the public sector. In many ways, these feelings of self-doubt derived from the historical devaluing of Black people and women in the workplace and the unjust treatment they experience in their role from their white counterparts. One participant conveyed the psychological toll her self-doubt caused for her:

> *I think part of that is my own internalized vocational, ah, and that means where you are so grateful to be let into that whitespace, that profession, that organization, that you will demean yourself, you will make yourself sick. You will stay there because just feel you know, I get a little like verklempt about it because it pisses me off so much. You know self-doubting, like I have every right to be in this profession. I've proven myself*

> *over and over and over again. I've innovated where my colleagues haven't. I've done a great job when I've been here, but I still have that little nugget of like, who I'm so lucky to be here.*

Below are other examples of leaders who experienced self-doubt in their leadership roles.

> *Beyond how you're perceived, beyond the fact that you're not really valued for your potential, or your accomplishments aren't as visible as they would be for others. And on top of the communication barrier. It's our own internal stuff that I've seen with every Black woman colleague that I have, who's successful we all struggle with, am I good enough to do this.*

> *I was concerned about being a Black woman, being a young Black Woman in this position and you know, would people be willing to follow me. And would I be able to get them to buy into the vision that I had.*

> *I've really soul searched on, you know, whether or not I should have or could have done something, you know, based upon never was on an improvement plan. Never told, hey, you're not cutting the mustard, you need to do something so you can improve, we aren't seeing the results… but to give me that last punch.* [Black woman was demoted without warning]

4.4b Black women don't have the privilege of being individuals.

Participants discussed carrying around a belief of representing more than themselves. The government, much like society at large, often has a singular view of Black women, which results in added demands on Black women to represent and advocate for themselves as well as for all other Black women. As a result, Black women have a tendency to place a higher value on themselves because they are aware that their behaviors and actions will be interpreted as the actions and behaviors of all Black women and, in some instances, will have an effect on the experiences of Black women who come after them. The statements below highlight the examples of not being seen as individuals.

One state participant discusses this sentiment by describing a situation where she believed that an underperforming Black woman commissioner's reputation would become the reason other Black women would not be considered for commissioner. Further, she shared a statement from her white colleague that qualifies this belief.

> *Our current Commissioner, she's a woman of color. And I don't know if she's under pressure, under the microscope, or is just who she is. But everybody keeps saying we ain't gonna never see another Black woman in charge at the Department of Ed for a very, very long time. And it's sad to say because let me tell you, we done had a string of White men who was so incompetent [but] if there's another person [that] rolls in here in the next few years, we will all be shocked… we'd be surprised if in the next decade, there's a Black person that gets to be in charge…I even had a white woman say something. She said, 'I know this is gonna sound really ignorant because I'm White. But she said to us, I heard the governor picked her because she was Black. And this is the best he could do. Y'all should be embarrassed.'*
>
> *We have an obligation as Black people to not to just be kind to one another. But to be kind and because now anybody who comes through that drive thru who doesn't know Black people doesn't have relationships with Black people in their life, she's Black people.*
>
> *There's this feeling that any space we're in, we're representing, and I don't think that means we have to act white; I just think it means I feel I have to hold myself to a higher standard on how I treat others, how I complete my tasks, how I communicate because I do have a real sense that it's not just about me.*

4.4c Black women face discouragement and despair.

The experiences described above take a psychological toll on Black women. A common thread that surfaced among many participants was the feeling of discouragement and despair. One participant described a time when she was meeting with her staff about the ongoing treatment she had received as a Black woman, and she said to them, "[White male Deputy Commissioner's name] *just retired, and I said,* [White male Deputy Commissioner's name] *has done great work for 40 years. But guess what I told them, people that look like me, we're not*

going to last in this agency for 40 years because of racism. Racism will not allow me to stay in here with y'all. For 40 years. I told them I'd be lucky to make 15."

One participant shared her story about a time where she reached a point in her public service career when she left state government the first time around due to the treatment she received as a Black woman. She stated,

> *There were two other White men that applied for the position, livid that a Black woman got the position and proceeded every day to make my life a living hell, I can remember coming home that first week in that new role, and I cried straight for three hours, wouldn't break on the job. But it was just sort of like that feeling of these people are gonna do everything they can to try and break me, and I just couldn't do it…and I left because of that environment.*

Other participants share examples of their feelings of discouragement and despair.

> *Literally, I was like, I can't do this anymore* [during her interview process]. *This is almost abusive. This is like domestic abuse. You keep asking me to prove that I'm a human being… even the* [interview] *questions are set up in a way, I have since complained, and they've since been changed, not totally, to my liking, because I've recently done hiring, but you know, a lot of DEI questions or diversity, equity, inclusion questions on the interviews really are built for White people.*
>
> *I've never felt like this in my life and people are telling me that it is government work, that just diminishes. You know, I think good lord, I can have in my head and think I'm gonna retire in a year and a half, but to retire on a feeling of what's the best thing about your last four or five years at the Department? And I'm gonna have to think, you know, tears are welling up right now, to feel so unproductive.*
>
> *I'm just like, I can make it, I can make it two years at that point…and there are some days where I think, I don't know if I can make it two years.*
>
> *I don't know how long I want to sit in the seat and do this, especially with the fighting for stuff.*

4.4d Black women leaders perpetuate anti-Blackness in state government.

Three participants spoke about Black women's role in upholding white supremacy culture when demoting, firing, promoting, and supporting Black women that were unrelated to performance concerns.

A participant from an eastern region state describes her experience with a Black women manager preventing her from moving into management by not approving her promotion even though she had no performance issues. She stated, *"believe it or not, the barrier to me moving into management while I was at my initial government job, was a Black lady I worked for. Back then, and I think still in federal government you needed your managers permission to move around."* Participants acknowledged the complexities around Black women practicing what may appear to be anti-Blackness practices and yet they realize such practices trace back to being in alignment with a white supremacy culture.

Other participants share similar experiences when they believed Black women's actions were entrenched in white supremacy culture.

> *In my experience, the biggest hurdle to movement and management, for me specifically, was Black women and White men.*
>
> *I hate to say it, because I've seen it probably more times, and it breaks my heart than not. Sometimes I think we as Black women are our own worst enemies, we do each other so dirty sometimes.*
>
> *We've had people of color, be in charge and demote the other people of color…I feel like they put up other Black people to fire the people of color…so they can say it's mot racism.*

4.5 Strategies Black Women Use to Navigate State Government

Due to the unique racism and other barriers Black women encounter, they have had to adopt strategies to reduce and manage the psychological toll they face daily. Black women have found solace and support in building relationships and communities with other Black women. Literature has found that Black women tend to code-switch or role flex, and several participants reported feeling forced to do this, as a navigation strategy in the workforce. On the other hand, some participants talked about the psychological toll code switching and role flexing has on them

and the ability to perform well. Instead, showing up as their authentic selves and willing to risk the consequences that may be associated with resisting assimilation to White culture.

Participants' examples of Strategies Black Women Use to Navigate State Government were sorted into 2 themes, 1) Black women band together for support, 2) assimilation versus resistance to white supremacy culture.

4.5a Black women band together for support.

Several participants discussed having the support of other Black women who were peers, supervisors, and mentors. Here is what participants said about supporting each other, "*there aren't a lot of African American folks around here, in terms of, you know, leadership and role models and those things. And so, you know, we look around for each other, and we're happy to be there. And we try to band together and kind of be there for each other. But it's tough."* The quotes below are from participants that share the same sentiments.

> *We just try to help each other out because we need diversity in leadership and we need diversity and role models. Each one of us, each new generation…should have an easier time, as hard as we work to try to get into these positions to model for them sustainability and the tools of tenure, if you will, to try to make it through.*
>
> *Many other Black women professionals, directors, and supervisors contacted me within days of my getting there…it was like circling, and I loved it. I've never experienced that. I mean, I cried over it. You know, the other person, a white woman, my second command… she actually reached out to a couple of other directors to ask them how best to support me as a Black woman in the agency. Right from the get, and she's been wonderful as far as that goes. That said, that's it. There's nothing; there's no other.*
>
> *So just knowing that you have someone in your corner that will be there and allow you to speak your truth and not try to sugarcoat it. Not try to, you know, say, oh, 'maybe that's not what's really happening.' Like just having that full support.*
>
> *I am very fortunate that I have another woman of color, in particular African American. As a leader, we uplift and support each other in a, in a wonderful way.*

> *In terms of like, just keeping my mental health together, I find that having a core group of other people who understand so we have a really great network of Black women and leadership in this state. And we're connected informally, you know, so we'll get together have drinks, go to one another's houses, you know, vent, or send hilarious text to each other just like in meetings, just to have somebody in the room that's like, is anybody else seeing this? Is this happening right now? Who, you know, understands. And that's hard to do that network. Because there are so many people who, it's hard to know who to trust.*

4.5b Assimilation versus resistance to White supremacy culture.

The data shows that many Black women in the workforce resort to code-switching to navigate white-cultured workforces. However, several participants talked about showing up as their authentic selves instead of code-switching. According to Wingfield & Alson (2014) White supremacy and racial segregation are maintained in organizations through hierarchy: predominantly White leaders at the top of the organizational hierarchy establish the vision and values, and Black, Indigenous, Staff of Color, disproportionately represented at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, are responsible for operationalizing and maintaining a White vision. One participant shared her story of feeling like the only one, feeling the pressure to fit in, and yet choosing to show up as her authentic self. She states, "*that feeling of being in the room and being the only one and saying, you either say to yourself, you have to make a choice, like two paths diverged in the woods, or whatever. And you can either say, I am here because I'm supposed to be here, I have a unique perspective, a unique point of view, and I'm here to share it. Or you could be like, I'm going to try and blend in. I need to assimilate. I mean, there's kind of these two, and sometimes you have to go back and forth, and for me, it's hard for me not to be my authentic self."*

This expectation for code switching starts before Black women are even hired. One participant emphasizes how strong the expectation to code switch is. *"They are* [interview

questions] *built for white people to be able to answer and say something like, of course, I can tolerate people that are different than me. But for Black and Brown folks, the way that they are written is* [to assess*] can you code switch to fit into our agency and that's what I felt like I was being asked over and over, even though they thought they were technical issues that they were asking me about, about in these succeeding interviews. Really, it was just a different way of asking, Can you code switch? And can you perform whiteness enough for me to be comfortable with supervising you or working alongside you or being led by you."*

Many participants felt the pressure to code switch.

> *I don't eff up because I'm Black, and I can't afford it. I follow the rules. I've never been fired or reprimanded or anything like that. And still push, you know, my ideology, but because I do it carefully and thoughtfully.*

> *One of the things that I have consistently had to be on guard about and conscious of is this need to tone myself down.*
>
> *I have to figure out what works for me, and being aware of how I'm perceived. And being aware that being Black and being a woman, and the stereotypes that come with that impact, every communication that I have with White people. And so, I'm always conscious of that. I'm not always successful… I can come off a little strong. But I try to make sure to be chill and diplomatic and have a smile on my face when I say things to not seem threatening, because that is how people get shut down. And I'm trying to make an impact, I'm trying to be heard. So, it's almost like trying to find the secret sauce.*
>
> *I had to pause because I always have to check my White woman meter, I really do. And I asked,* [White women Deputy Director name] *and she said 'you are right, you are reading it right…that is so inappropriate and disheartening.'*

Other participants felt that the psychological toll of code switching was too damaging to their self-esteem and therefore were not willing to assimilate in this way.

> *I was so unhappy when I would just try to blend in and I wasn't making an impact. And I'm like, You know what, that's not who I am. so it didn't work out for me. I'm not gonna be without a job. I have skills. So, I'm either gonna be at this level or not.*
>
> *I've never been able to code-switch ever, ever. And if people had a problem with it, like they'll say something, and then I'll just be like* (shrug shoulders), *and in environments where it didn't work for me, I left. Because it doesn't come naturally, I can't put any energy into being two or three people; it's unfair to me. You* [White people] *can show up how you are.*

4.6 Committed to Improving the Culture of Government and Invested in Making an Impact

All 12 participants expressed a sincere interest and commitment to public service. They discussed intentional practices they have adopted to improve the experience for Black women and create a healthier workplace for all employees. Further, Black women often decide to remain in state government and honor their commitment as public servants despite their experience because they are invested in improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Participants' examples of their commitment to improving the culture of government and investment in making an impact were sorted into 2 themes, 1) Intentionality around making others feel seen, heard, and respected), 2) Remaining motivated and invested in government.

4.6a Intentionality around making others feel seen, heard, and respected.

At least four participants describe how they intentionally created an environment for staff to feel seen, heard, and respected. This commitment to ensuring others feel welcome at work comes from their experience. So naturally, they are more aware of what it feels like not to feel welcomed and the vast impact on an individual and the overall culture. Here is what one leader says about creating a work culture she wishes she experienced in her tenure in state government,

"*how we are in our work environment matters a lot and how we talk to each other and treat people. So, I would say, selfishly, I think we're one of the few in the divisions where we have an atmosphere of genuine care about each other, and a recognition and appreciation for diversity and diverse voices in perspective."* Other participants shared ways they have attempted to promote work cultures where people feel seen, heard, and respected.

> *I tried to make time to meet individually with folks and have always strived to maintain an open door policy. And for folks to feel like they could genuinely if they had questions, concerns, or problems to be able to, you know, I've tried to work hard to set that up. So yeah, I really do [feel respected], I sincerely don't think, and I've told them all the time, if you've got something to say, you know, and raise it. That's what I need you to do is how we do it. All of us should be respectful of each other.*
>
> *I insist on, and I have trained my staff in psychological safety. We are intentional about paying attention to it, and making sure that it's always present in every conversation. Okay, so I will say that it's definitely a thing that I have championed with my team.*
>
> *I've tried to share the knowledge I have with my people, my next layer of directors, I'm like, I'm here for you. But I'm not gonna smother you, I want you to have an opportunity to take a stab at it. I am literally, a team's chat, a phone call a text* [away], *some of my managers, some of my staff are all virtual. And then a couple of them are in the office daily with me as well. So, I'm like you roll the chair out in the hallway, because we're about six steps from each other and a cube, I will see you and no, that's the red flag and I need to get involved. But otherwise, I will not be a mama bird. You can handle this and know how to do it. But I'm here for you. If you need me, and so I think in that same vein, when it goes further up the leadership chain, it would be nice to know sometimes that you don't have to wonder if you're going to be supported or backed up when you're going into certain situations.*
>
> *I've just been a person who has tried to lead the team and go, anything that's going really, really well. That's the team anything that's not going so well, that's on me. And we need to fix that and get better. And so I've never been one to try to take advantage of their talent. Anyone that knows me well, whether they're with me in some setting out and about or not, I'm gonna always give credit to them because they make my life easier. I can do the other things that I need to do because I've got a great team, and I appreciate them.*
>
> *It's my goal in life, to make sure that every relationship and interaction that I have is one that allows people to have psychological safety, and when I leave, that they have it with each other.*

> *I've tried to infuse psychological safety back into the team because with government, there's a lot of distrust and just a complete lack of psychological safety, especially when you have new people coming in, and managers coming in and new assistant superintendents coming in.*

4.6b Remaining motivated and invested in government.

For participants, making an impact had become part of their legacy. Participants shared numerous examples of how their decision to remain in state government comes down to knowing their ability and commitment to improving the lives of the families who most need government services. One participant talked explicitly about this being her sole reason for remaining in government.

Honestly, the only motivation is the scale of impact. So, when I'm able to get something done, it impacts the whole state and if I can do it well in a way that embeds it. You know, institutionalize it, even better…. you can't get at that level of intensity and deep dive at a county or in a nonprofit organization. You're chipping away at the edges. And so, I want to get deeper into policy change, practice change, institutional change, that's the only thing that keeps me here really, it definitely ain't the pay or the benefits or even the camaraderie, it's about when it happens, it's great. It feels like a strong step forward, and the only thing that can make a stronger step forward is some sort of revolution or the federal government making a change. Below are other examples from participants who are invested in state government.

> *I do enjoy my job and the people I have an opportunity to work with, and the impact that we have opportunities to make every day. So that's what keeps me going and this belief that God willing, we're going to get to the other side of crazy, and it be a little bit better again, I keep holding on there.*

> *I don't know how many times in the last three years, I was like, I'm gone. But every time I get to that, I will have someone in the community that will reach out to me out of the blue. How are you doing? How are things going? Thank you for passing that policy. Thank you for that legislation that passed. Thank you for enduring because if there's not people in*

these agencies in these places that look like us, this stuff won't change. So, I told them, that's the only reason I continue to stay.

It's knowing that the difference you make sometimes outweighs…but there will come a day when I'm just ultimately tired. And I don't want to be bothered with any of this stuff. I just want to come and do my job. And when y'all make that excessively difficult., I'm not staying here with you.

I stay in state government and do what I do, especially early childhood, because I'm a product of the system. I was born and raised in a district, I was a head start kid who was glad to be able to go to Head Start so they'll be safe and fed because I grew up in poverty, my mom was a drug addict, my dad was not there. And then eventually, we were put into the foster care system, where school was our safe place again. And sometimes like, you know, the meal service that they did in summertime, like [former mayor], *put that in place. That's what we got done. Like that might have been the only food we get. And then the impact of going to school in the district, and then showing up at college not ready to learn. It's one of the most devastating things like my high performer and my high school.*

I had worked in non-profit for so long, and seeing what I saw, and then becoming a mom, I was like, oh, something has to be done. Like, this is crazy, you know, and I know I can't change the world overnight. But if I could sit at a table, if I could speak about experiences from not just the clients that I dealt with, and the folks who came to the door, but if I can speak from a personal standpoint and then sit at tables, with leaders who were decision makers, and to be a part of that decision making process. That's what motivated me to stay for so long.

I believe in government, if that sounds kind of corny, but I really do. I think 90% of people out here don't even understand how government works. And they oversimplify it. And make it about individual people like a president or, you know, it's about so much more than that. And I believe in what it's supposed to be, right, I believe in this idea that we should be working for the collective good. And for the good of the people who have the least and have the furthest to go.

I feel responsible, I feel like if I'm not at the table, who is at the table? Certainly, somebody else will come along, but I have something to contribute there. You know, I have something to contribute there beyond rhetoric. So, I kind of finally feel like I'm at a point where I have an understanding of the big levers that drive government.
I felt like somebody had to go to bat. And if I wasn't me, who was? I felt like that was important, like every day in the trenches going into those communities, mainly of kids of color, and wanting people to know that I was trying to build a program, that which my own children went to the state funded program that I was building a program that I believed in, not for those kids. But for every child, and that's why my own kids went to the program, because I felt like I had helped build a successful program, that it was worthy for me to put my kids there, and that they would flourish and grow from.

> *I felt like it was an opportunity for me to do right by people who need it, who needed a voice. And it was an area I felt over time I just felt passionate about, you know, I felt like, oh, wow, this is really great work. And this is the foundation, this is where we can make a huge impact on families and children for the rest of their lives. So, I decided to stay where I would have never thought 24 years ago, I would still be here. It wasn't the plan. But clearly, it became my sort of battle cry that I was going to do right by those who had the least amount of power and voice in a system that was supposedly being built to know to embody them and power them and move them forward.*

In summary, this chapter provides an overview of the categories and themes reflected in the experience of Black women leaders in state government. The findings were spread between five categories: institutional racism, interpersonal racism, conscious and unconscious alignment with White supremacy, strategies Black women use to navigate state government, and committed to improving the culture of government and invested in making an impact.

CHAPTER 5

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the research results, which answered the following research questions: What have been the experiences of Black women leaders in state government, and what strategies have they used to navigate government? How do those experiences affect Black women's decision to work in government? And What can those experiences tell us about the changes needed to promote robust involvement of Black women leaders in government as government agencies strive to eliminate institutional racism in society? First, the findings supported by the literature will be discussed. Second, unexpected findings will be reviewed. Third, the implications for the government will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the research limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Findings Supported by the Literature

A number of the findings were consistent with the literature. The findings from the data suggest that Black women leaders in state government experience significant discrimination and microaggressions. This pattern of results is consistent with previous literature (McKenzie and Company, 2021, Fekedulengn et al., 2019). Black women leaders' experiences fall into five categories: Institutional Racism, Interpersonal Racism, The Conscious and Unconscious Alignment and Perpetuation of White Supremacy Culture, Strategies Black Women Use to Navigate State Government, and Committed to Improving the Culture of Government and Invested in Making an Impact.

5.1a Institutional Racism

Despite a national movement for DEI in the workplace, including in the areas of recruiting and promoting, participants reported experiencing tokenism in state government. Interviewees reported being the only one or one of the few at their level. Not only was being the only one isolating for many of the participants, but many participants felt they had to represent all Black women. And in some cases, participants reported that they believed they were hired or promoted in the position because they were Black. These results are consistent with the claim that tokenism is another diversionary strategy that gives the appearance of inclusion (Emerson & Murphy, 2004) or what Crenshaw (1991) calls "voyeuristic inclusion," which can be just as disempowering and exclusionary.

Despite the Civil Rights Act's promise to provide equal protection and equal opportunity for all through several policy and practice shifts, interview participants reported that several examples of DEI practices and initiatives are superficial at best. This finding may be explained by the idea that many agencies adopted anti-discrimination policies and practices without the proper training, implementation, and enforcement (Edelman, 1992, Ingram & Simons, 1995). The former could explain the finding that Black women leaders often feel responsible for hiring, supporting, and promoting Black staff (Collins, 1997) and show more support for affirmative action (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021).

Participants reported the lack of support they received from their supervisors despite their agency's claims to DEI. In one case, a participant felt like her supervisor did not like her but hired her out of pressure to build a racially diverse leadership team. Several participants shared that the political pressure their agencies are under has led to agencies hiring and promoting Black women but not finding ways to be inclusive and sustainably support their success. This finding

highlights the importance of Executive Order 2021. Executive Order 2021 is intended hold the federal government accountable for advancing equity through developing a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Plan. While Executive Order 2021 is focused on the federal government but has implications for state government in its recognition and efforts to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain diverse talent (The White House, 2021).

Participants reported needing more protection from their agency's Human Resources processes. Participants felt like when they reported discrimination, racism, and retaliation to HR, they were often met with inadequate responses and did not receive anti-discrimination protection they were entitled to. Instead, participants shared stories about when they had to take their protection into their own hands due to being unable to rely on HR. These findings further support and demonstrate the failure of the Civil Rights Act in that state governments continue to struggle with enforceable anti-discriminatory policies and accountability.

5.1b Interpersonal Racism

The results strongly imply that state government hasn't yet addressed the racism of its employees. The Interviews showed that White employees often don't respect Black women leaders' expertise and experience. Several participants discussed experiencing microaggressions. For example, having to repeat themselves several times before being heard, being talked over, needing to find a White person to carry their message, and not being taken seriously. Past research has found that Black women are three times as likely to experience microaggressions compared to White women (McKinsey and Lean In, 2022, Lewis et al., 2016).

Many participants provided examples of ways they are held to a different standard and treated differently than their white counterparts (Emerson and Murphy, 2014). For instance,

participants reported having a higher level of scrutiny for mistakes made and discussed needing to jump through more hoops to achieve the same outcome and the difference in advancement opportunities. As a result, Black women have to constantly be on guard and hypervigilant (Emmerson and Murphy, 2014). This constant state of vigilance can lead to stress, anxiety, and ultimately racialized trauma (Menaken, 2017), illustrated repeatedly in the interviews.

5.1c The conscious and unconscious alignment and perpetuation of White supremacy culture.

Participants shared examples of consciously or subconsciously subscribing to White supremacy or internalized racism. Participants expressed their feelings of self-doubt of not feeling like they were enough, incapable of leading and measuring up to their White counterparts that derive from the pervasive dismissive and devaluing of Black women. These results represent the first direct demonstration of what Gooden-Shorter (2003) calls the sisterella complex, a complex which is the impact of internalized racism and/or sexism has on Black women. The psychological abuse of white supremacy culture leads to Black women experiencing the sisterella complex which results in over achieving, devaluing of self and trying to prove their humanity and competency

5.1d Strategies Black women use to navigate state government.

The findings highlight that Black women rely on the support of one another to cope with their negative experiences in state government. Many participants talked about having the support and mentoring of another Black woman leader, peer, or supervisor. This result supports Hall (2012), which identifies developing relationships and mentorships as a way Black women cope with stress in the workplace. In addition to providing moral support, Black women

supported each other in ensuring each other was acknowledged and considered in their role as leaders.

Participants reported several instances of the need to fit in and associate with White supremacy culture. Participants discuss the need to constantly tone themselves down, be on guard about how they are perceived, and monitor their speech and deliver so as not to be associated with societal stereotypes that objectify Black women (Collins, 1990, Essed, 1991). Role-flexing is among the strategies Black women use to cope (Shorter-Gooder, 2004). However, role flexing to fit in with white culture does not come without a high price. Role-flexing can psychologically affect Black women (Dickens, 2014).

5.1e Committed to improving the culture of government and invested in making an impact.

Participants unanimously conveyed their commitment and investment in public service. In fact, some participants named their commitment to working toward a better state government for Black women coming behind them and for the communities and families that rely on leadership as the sole reason for remaining in their role. Participants reported going above and beyond to ensure others feel seen, heard, and respected because they know all too well what it feels like to not be.

In many ways, this commitment derives from their own experience and demonstrating the leadership presence they desired in their superiors. Further, participants overwhelmingly discussed their commitment to their desire to impact. Black women leaders want to contribute to large-scale societal change. Despite the challenges faced by the state government, participants were cognizant of the scale of impact they have in their position.

5.2 New Aspects of Black Women's Experiences Revealed in This Research

Three new experiences were found in the research that were not found in the literature review. The first finding that emerged is Black women leaders are demoted from leadership positions. Participants discussed experiencing or witnessing Black women leaders being hired in leadership positions and demoted for reasons other than performance. In some cases, their positions were backfilled with White leaders. This recurring process could be the result of hiring Black women in leadership positions to meet DEI performance quotas without a plan or commitment to sustain or support Black women in the role. Participants described practices of demotions being disguised reorganizations, which led to Black women leaders having less authority and monetary and policy influence. For example, one leader was moved from a policy leadership role where she was positioned to influence and shape policy for the entire state to a position where she received the same compensation but was now charged with providing educational resources to the community.

For another leader, her demotion was disguised as a promotion by receiving a higher title and moving to a floor reserved for the highest leadership. However, she received a pay cut, went from having hundreds of direct reports to being a team of one, and ultimately had less responsibility and authority in her new role to lead organizational DEI efforts at an agency whose highest level leadership had shown little actionable support. These demotion practices limit the advancement of Black women and their ability to implement current policy and influence new policies being created, leading to a larger gap in Black voices at the table to ensure that the impact of adverse consequences is minimized upon vulnerable communities.

Next, the decision to show up authentically and resist code-switching or role-flexing in state government was unexpected. Several participants spoke about showing up as their authentic selves as a coping strategy as opposed to assimilating, as many Black women leaders feel forced to do. Historically, Black women have been required to change their dress, speech, and mannerism to obtain leadership positions (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). However, despite knowing the consequences and limitations of not assimilating into white culture, participants were still committed to showing up as their authentic selves.

In some cases, participants expressed that they knew not blending and making a conscious effort to assimilate would put their position at risk, which was a risk they were willing to take. In other cases, participants made decisions to leave when they felt they could not show up as their authentic selves. When Black women leaders face the ongoing pressure to assimilate or risk career advancement, White supremacy culture perpetuates. It adds to the psychological toll Black women leaders pay in exchange for working for state government.

Finally, the research found that white supremacy culture produces an environment where Black women leaders perpetuate anti-Blackness in state government. Anti-Blackness dehumanizes Black women through the glaring hypervisibility and policing of Black women's bodies. This results in Black women policing other Black women's bodies to be perceived as the model minority. Participants reported that other Black women often hinder their success in state government.

The findings sometimes show Black women leaders' alignment with White supremacy culture through not supporting or promoting, firing, and demoting other Black women unrelated to performance concerns. The finding indicates that White supremacy culture positions Black women leaders to cause harm to other Black women to be in alignment with white supremacy

culture for survival and career advancement. The concept of Black women practicing anti-Blackness within White supremacy in state government needs more qualitative inquiry.

5.3 Implications for Reducing Racism in State Government

This study comes at a time when all state agencies are grappling, and many have publicly stated their commitment to creating a workplace free of racism and discrimination. However, in many respects, there's been failed execution between an anti-racist workplace in theory and an anti-racist workplace in practice. State agencies are invested in upholding a public image committed to DEI but fail to create a culture of DEI and strategies that have led to sustainable change. Equity initiatives seem superficial and more like checking the box instead of being concerned about making a real impact. I have three suggestions for the state government to advance Black women leaders.

Recommendation: Creating an anti-racist and anti-discrimination workplace for Black women should be informed by Black women by leveraging qualitative data. Often agencies measure and track their success with quantitative data. Quantitative data can inform government agencies on how many Black women leaders are being hired, retained, promoted, and resigning. However, quantitative data alone can't provide insight into the experiences Black women leaders encounter while navigating state government. The systematic use of qualitative data to inform DEI strategic planning will tell the actual story of how well an agency is or isn't doing. The finding demonstrates that having Black women in leadership positions is insufficient in that it's the floor of equity but does not equate to inclusion.

Hence, even when numbers show the retention and promotion of Black women, it fails to tell the story of inclusion. DEI strategies intended to support Black women should be tailored for

Black women leaders, and culturally matched support is critical in supporting Black women leaders. Be that one size fits all approaches don't take into account the intersectionality of what it means to be Black and what it means to be a woman. Tailoring should be done in a way that doesn't promote tokenism or burden the few Black women leaders available. Black women's experiences differ from those of White women, other women of color, and Black men. The onus should fall on the agency to find fair and just strategies to center the voices of Black women. Anti-racist and anti-discrimination efforts that are not informed from the lens of Black women are likely to miss the mark in building inclusive work environments for Black women. If the state government is going to move toward real inclusion, then prioritizing and centering the voices you seek to include is critical.

Recommendation: The state government would benefit from establishing partnerships and retaining external culturally competent investigators to investigate patterns of discrimination complaints involving Black women. Doing so would promote neutrality and prevent conflict of interest. Participants reported a lack of internal human resource protection. Participants often felt like their complaints of discrimination weren't taken seriously, fell on deaf ears, were met with unresponsive solutions, and in some cases, were instructed to address the discriminatory behavior on their own. Even when EEO and HR staff identify as black or are culturally competent, there is still a lack of policies and procedures that allow them to enforce just practices and consequences for discrimination.

For example, instances of racism alone are not seen as discrimination; one must provide evidence that an act of discrimination has occurred to substantiate a complaint. These narrowly defined policies often cannot detect or account for microaggressions. Failure to adequately address complaints of discrimination perpetuates racism and sends a clear message about the

value of Black women leaders. In addition, participants reported being the subject of a pattern of false complaints initiated by white staff, which in some cases were the same white staff who were the subject of their discrimination complaint. Often, human resources have a conflicting role in that they are responsible for investigating complaints. They are often held responsible for reporting how well the agency is doing in adhering to the Civil Right Act. Further, substantiating discrimination complaints could lead to undesired attention and damages for state agencies. State agencies have a history of being risk averse and doing what's best for the agency rather than individuals, which sometimes leads to a conflicting agenda.

Recommendation: Participants discussed the value and importance of having the support of other Black women leaders as a strategy to navigate state government. Support from other Black women leaders and peers supported participants through experiences of isolation based on their race and gender. Moreover, given these intersecting identities, there are times when Black women leaders may feel unsafe or comfortable disclosing learning gaps and leadership development needs within the macro-systems of state government without risking compromise to their professional competency. Having the support of a peer or mentor with the same cultural background has an impact that non-culturally matched support cannot provide. Developing and implementing a culturally specific mentorship program for Black women leaders currently employed to support with onboarding and ongoing support.

However, Black women leaders often face their own challenges navigating state government and may not have the bandwidth to extend support in a formal sustainable way. Having access to a mentor with previous government experience but who is retired is likely to be in a better position to provide mentorship and support in a way that a leader currently in state government cannot. As more Black women leaders feel more supported in leadership roles, they

will experience a greater likelihood of not only remaining in leadership positions but advancing in state government. The future generation of Black women will be less likely to disqualify themselves from leadership positions because they will have increasing examples of people who look like them. Increasing the representation of Black women leadership has the potential of placing society in a better position to dismantle institutional racism but also catapults government into the vanguard in advancing systems of inclusion and diversity by developing equitable policies and detecting policies that have continued to lead to the disadvantage of marginalized communities.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The lack of research specifically focused on Black women, let alone Black women leaders in government, make it challenging to build without a foundation. I have four suggestions on where future research could focus better to understand the experience of Black women leaders in government. First, future research should include an in-depth examination of Black women's experiences in state government, examining their experiences with being recruited in government leadership roles and their experiences with being promoted and demoted. While this study did not specifically focus on recruitment or promotion experiences, many participants shared stories that suggest exploring further would be beneficial.

Second, the concept of Black women leaders aligning with white supremacy culture practicing anti-Blackness is poorly understood, and the field would benefit from studying this topic, particularly because much of the research is focused on anti-Black practices of Whites or

other groups. Participants identified other Black leaders as a hindrance or barrier to their success in government.

Third, it may be worthwhile to research to understand and compare the experiences of Black men in leadership positions to Black women in leadership positions. Similarly, Black women and Black men likely share a unique experience in government that is different in government. While the questions specifically focused on Black women, the participants oscillated between discussing Black women and Black leaders, suggesting the inclusion of Black men when sharing.

Finally, my fourth suggestion is that future research should explore how the experience of Black women of appointed termed leaders may differ from those in non-terms or appointed positions. Two of the twelve participants were appointed, and only one was in a termed position. However, the leader in the termed positions shared her experience may be different if she was in a career or permanent position given the time limitations.

5.5 Limitations

Although the present results show similar themes to the current literature, it is appropriate to recognize several research limitations. The research represents a small sample spanning a subset of states, not including the Western region. In addition, the findings are within state government and do not represent the government at large. The study relied on self-reports of Black women leaders who shared their experiences in state government leadership as the sole measure. Interviews were conducted in a one-time setting for roughly 90 minutes. Therefore, there was no opportunity for prolonged or multiple engagement.

In addition, those interested in sharing their experiences in state government potentially had different experiences than those who chose not to share their story. The recruitment flier and consent form were explicit in the desire to understand the impact of racism on Black women in government. Therefore, participants were guided to share their experiences with racism as opposed to an approach that may have allowed experiences with racism to surface organically. The finding represents experiences, not outcome measures. The research is exploratory and can hopefully provide a foundation for other researchers to expand on and center the voices of Black women to inform research, policy, and practice.

5.6 Summary and Conclusion

State government agencies often do not have a process to protect Black women leaders. Current policies and practices tend to be designed to protect blatant discrimination practices defined by law and don't always account for race-neutral policies and practices. Further, protections do not account for racism alone unless there is evidence that racism leads to discrimination. Racism and discrimination are viewed as two distinct issues instead of being viewed as cause and effect. In other words, any and all racist acts have to have evidence of discrimination before action can be taken instead of it being assumed that racism inherently leads to discrimination. The burden to prove discrimination falls on Black women whose voices are already not seen, respected, and heard.

Further, the political pressure government agencies are under to advance racially inclusive environments has likely resulted in using a one size fits all approach instead of first understanding Black women's unique experiences and needs and second being intentional about

including and tailoring policies and practices for Black women. Often anti-racist initiatives and DEI practices are not tailored to specific racial groups or women. Instead, they tend to cast a wide net instead of tailoring services for specific racial groups. Understanding the needs of Black women requires agencies to become curious about the stories and experiences behind the numbers. So often, government agencies become hyper-focused on the numbers, which only tell part of the story but certainly not the whole story and alone can't lead to sustainable solutions that address the institutional and interpersonal racism Black women experience in state government.

Supporting the success of Black women leaders includes sustained commitment, transparency, and accountability. Current protections for Black women leaders lack enforceability and consequences for not moving the needles on DEI. Black women in leadership feel an overwhelming responsibility to pick up where state agencies fall short by being responsible for hiring, promoting, and supporting other Black women. At the same time, Black women feel that it won't get done if they do not intentionally ensure Black women are represented and supported. Racism and superficial anti-discrimination practices have likely led to the underrepresentation of Black women leaders in state government.

State governments often lack sufficient accountability measures when it comes to DEI. Some state agencies have responded by circumventing the actual work that needs to be done around DEI and instead have supported the ideology that denies there is a problem by choosing to look at one piece of the puzzle, such as engagement surveys. Advancement of Black women leaders cannot be made if the state government is more interested in the appearance of DEI initiatives instead of authentic DEI initiatives.

Black women leaders are often the "only" or among the few in leadership positions. Black women feel they must constantly prove they are qualified and deserving of their positions. Often, when Black women hold positions that peers and subordinates don't believe they are qualified for, it places a target on their backs. Black women are hired in leadership positions to fulfill a diversity goal. Black women hired in leadership positions or promoted do not always receive the proper onboarding or support from their immediate supervisor. This can often lead to a revolving door of Black women leaders. Black women leaders struggle to identify equitable practices or policies tailored for their advancement, except for a Black Women's Employee Resource Group that some agencies have operationalized in various capacities.

America was built and has prospered on racism. There have been clear indicators of who continues to benefit from inequities and who has not. However, the murder of George Floyd was catalytic for the nation to address racism finally. Still, nearly three years later, anti-racist initiatives often do not translate into sustained momentum and are more commonly connected to funding, compliance, political correctness, or something other than creating equal access for all. Sustained momentum requires that the government lead by example and not by being paternalistic.

Leading by example is difficult without understanding the experience of the most marginalized in the government workforce to inform policies and practices that provide sufficient support and protection for Black women leaders. Black women are among the most marginalized in the public sector and have an experience different from white and Black women. Intentionally creating a workforce where the most marginalized feel supported and included will lead to advancement for all.

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APPENDIX A: Virtual Flier

My name is Maisha Giles, and I am a doctoral candidate conducting a dissertation study at the Hamline School of Business on the impact of institutional racism on the retention of Black women leaders employed by state government.
To be eligible to participate in the study, participants must:

- Employed in a director-level or above position in a state government agency?
- Been in your role for at least 3 years
- Self-identify as a Black or African American woman
- Have access to Zoom (video conferencing)

If you are interested in participation, you will be asked to complete a virtual interview (via Zoom). The interview will last approximately 1 hour.
If you would like to participate, please contact Maisha Giles at mgiles03@hamline.edu or at 612-

432-5519.

*This study has been approved by the Hamline Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B: Screening Questionnaire

Date:
Name:
Email Address:
Name of Government Agency:

Screening Questions

1) Are you currently employed in a director-level or above position in a state or federal government agency?
2) Have you been in your role for at least 3 years?

3) Do you self-identify as a Black or African American woman>

4) Do you have access to ZOOM (video conferencing)?

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

Background

My name is Maisha Giles, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Doctorate in Management and Public Service Program at Hamline University. This research project is being conducted to fulfill the dissertation requirements at Hamline University to graduate. Once finished, the research project will be printed and stored at Hamline University because it is considered a public scholarship. Anyone who wishes to access the dissertation can do so. The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of institutional racism on the retention of Black women in leadership positions in state government. The study aims to explore and understand the role racism has on your experience in state government. The significance of this study is in its contribution to understanding how state government agencies can shift antiracist patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that negatively impact Black women.

Participation

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to be interviewed about your personal and professional experiences. In particular, you are agreeing to the following:

- Committed to 1.5 hours of time to review the research project, gain consent, and conduct a personal interview.
- Be recorded during the interview.

- Assist the researcher later in the research process to help clarify ideas or items that may be unclear during the transcription process.

All interviews are confidential, and anonymity will be maintained. Interviews will be recorded and then transcribed. All recordings and transcriptions will be de-identified and destroyed at the end of the study. All materials will be stored at the researcher's home office, and items will be locked. Even the agency in which you work will not be identified.

Potential Risks and Benefits

Talking about race and gender can sometimes be uncomfortable and/or risky. Interview questions will be sent to you at least one week before the interview for your review. You can choose not to move forward with participating in the study if you feel uncomfortable with all or part of the questions. If you do decide to move forward but choose not to answer certain questions, that is fine too.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at Maisha Giles, mgiles03@hamline.edu, or (612) 432-5519.

I have read the consent form and agree to participate in this study about the impact of

institutional racism on the retention of Black women in the state and federal government.

Participant

Signature_____Date_____

Researcher Signature_____Date_____

APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of institutional racism on the retention of Black women leaders who work in state government. The research aims to understand the collective experience of Black women leaders in state government through individual stories.

For this research, institutional racism is defined as those patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white racial/ethnic groups (Better, 2002, p. 11).

You should have received the consent form by email and an option to digitally sign it.

For participants who signed the consent form before the interview:

Thank you for taking the time to review and sign the consent form.

Before we get started, I would like to review the confidentiality statement on the consent form **(review with the participant).**

I want to reiterate that everything you choose to share with me about your experience in government will be protected. Your experiences will be used to describe a collective experience and whatever you say will be anonymous and confidential. In addition to your identity being confidential, your agency will be described using general terms only.

Do you have any questions about the study or your participation?

Okay, let us get started.

As a reminder, you can stop me at any time or just say "next question" if I asked a question you prefer not to answer.

For participants who did not sign the consent form prior to the interview:

I see you have not signed the consent forms, if you are okay, I would like to take a few minutes to go over the consent form before you sign it **(review with the participant).**

Do you have any questions about the study, participation, or confidentiality?

Do you feel comfortable digitally signing the consent form before we get started?

Verify that the consent form was digitally signed before starting

Okay, let us get started

As a reminder, you can stop me at any time or just say next question if I asked a question you prefer not to answer.

Do I have permission to start recording now?

Interview

Background questions:

Tell me about your role/position?

- What is your title, and what are you responsible for?
- How long have you been in your position?
- How would you describe the overall culture of government?
- Were you hired into your position, or were you promoted to your position?

Thinking about the definition of institutional racism that I read at the onset of the interview, I would like to talk about your experience with the patterns, procedures, practices, and policies in your agency that perpetuate and challenge institutional racism, particularly for Black women.

- Have you experienced any patterns of racism during your employment with the government?
- Are there any procedures or practices that you feel are harmful to you as a Black woman?
- Can you think of any policies that intentionally or unintentionally harm you as a Black woman?

- Are there any procedures or practices that you feel challenge institutional racism and support you as a Black woman?
- Can you think of any policies that are intentionally designed to be equitable and inclusive of Black women?

Okay, for the rest of our time together, I would like to hear about interpersonal relationships

- How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
- How would you describe your relationship with your peers?
- How would you describe your relationships with your direct reports?
- When do you feel most supported, and when do you feel least supported?
- Do you feel seen, respected, and heard on most days?

Historically, Black women have faced unique challenges in state government, such as isolation, invisibility, and discrimination. These challenges have negatively impacted the overall health of Black women. I would like to ask you a few questions about your "why."

- What motivates you to work in government?
- Tell me about where you see your future in government.

That is all the questions I have for you; do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for your time.

End recording