AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE EXECUTIVES ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES:
MANAGING SUCCESS, SUPPORT, AND WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

By
CRESHEMA REKUISE MURRAY

MARY MEARES, COMMITTEE CHAIR
BRUCE BERGER
ROBIN BOYLORN
KIM CAMPBELL
HEATHER PLEASANTS

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Communication & Information Sciences
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2011
ABSTRACT

Addressing the workplace experiences of African American female executives has taken a backseat to contemporary organizational communication topics. The lived experience of Black females in the workplace is a subject with a scarce amount of supporting literature. The lack of scholarship addressing their workplace experience has left a significant number of questions unanswered and unexamined. This project explored the relationships and workplace experiences that African American female executives experience during organizational advancement. Through an examination of the lived experiences of African American women executives this study sheds light on (a) the communicative experiences of successful African American women executives in workplace organizations with dominant- culture members, (b) the various modes of organizational support that aids in their workplace success, and (c) the effects that mentoring relationship have on organizational advancement for African American women. Through face-to-face interviews with seven Black female executives in American based organizations, this research highlights the untold stories about a unique group of women leaders. The findings in this study reveal that Black female executives have workplace communicative experiences similar to other traditionally muted groups, rely on social support from friends and family to help them progress through organizations, and use mentoring relationships as a key tool to advance through organizations.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandparents, Mosely and Janie Murray. Their love, support, wisdom, and guidance directed me on a journey of living beyond my wildest dreams. I am forever grateful that God gave me the privilege of being their great-granddaughter.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to have this opportunity to thank the many colleagues, friends, and faculty members who have helped me with this research project. I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Mary Meares, for helping me to complete my dissertation. Your constant guidance, motivation, support, and feedback helped me to get through this process. You challenged my thought processes and you were always there when I needed you. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Bruce Berger, Dr. Robin Boylorn, Dr. Kim Campbell and Dr. Heather Pleasants, for their positive feedback and support. Your advice and suggestions challenged me to become a better writer and scholar.

Second, I would like to thank the faculty members in the Department of Communication Studies for the constant support and opportunities that you all have provided for me over the last five years. Without the love of Dr. Marsha Houston, the support of Dr. Beth Bennett, the patience of Dr. Jason Black, the advice of Dr. Mark Nelson, the laughs of Dr. Frank Thompson and the guidance of Mrs. Anita Abernathy, I have no idea where I would have landed without your support along the way. I would also like to thank Mrs. Diane Shaddix for her support during my progression in my doctoral program in the College of Communication and Information Sciences. Words cannot accurately express how thankful I am for being a part of such a dynamic program in an outstanding college at a wonderful university.

Third, I am forever indebted to my mother, Chandra Murray Tarver, for her prayers, love,
support, and advice. Your faith in me and the constant mental and emotional support that you showed throughout this process made the journey easy. Thank you for putting up with me being a brat, (blame Papa and Grandma). To my dad, Eric Jackson, thank you for your support during the process and keeping everyone informed every step of the way about my progress. To my sister, Kevenshay Tarver, thank you for always being a listening ear and just being you. I love you so very much, you’re up next. To the rest of my family, thank you for your constant encouragement in helping me to make this dissertation a reality.

To the women who participated in this study, I am most appreciative that you allowed a stranger to ask you personal questions about your family and your work life. Making yourself available for my interviews and providing candid responses, afforded me the opportunity to make this project possible. I am so very thankful for your generosity and your stories.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank the friends who have supported me through this entire process. To one of my best friends, Jameel Rucker, thank you for listening to me complain and cry and encouraging me not to give up. A special thanks to my sorority sisters and my best friends from high school for serving as my cheering squad. To all of my friends who have supported me from St. Jude, to Baldwin, Booker T. Washington, and finally The University of Alabama, our relationships mean so very much to me. Thank you for always loving and supporting me.

I am so very grateful that God placed all of these special individuals in my life. You all have helped me reach a milestone in my life that was merely a dream a few years ago. Without my relationship with God and your presence, this project would not exist. For all of those that I failed to mention in these acknowledgments, family, church family, friends, and teachers, thank you from the bottom of my heart for loving me and assisting me on this journey.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When I reflect on the stories told about the lives of everyday African American women, I do not think about the mainstream myths of the mammy, the oversexed slut, or the jezebel (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000), I think about the stories of determination, perseverance, resistance, and survival that were constantly preached to me throughout my childhood and adolescent years. I reflect on the spirit of my maternal great grandmother, Janie Murray, who worked in the homes of various white families helping them to keep their houses neat and their children fed just to make a little extra pocket money. It is her resistance to being labeled and her relationship with work that drives me to think that no one job is too menial and in life you have to start somewhere. I think about my maternal grandmother, Clara Johnson Murray Blakes, who served in the Persian Gulf War and currently holds three separate master’s degrees, working nights as a nurse practitioner. It is her determination and perseverance that reminds me that despite the color of my skin or my sex, I can do anything that I set out to do. I also think about my mother, Chandra Murray Tarver and her story of survival. It is the story of leaving a company that disregarded the health of their employees, without a safety net to fall back on, to start her own company while putting two children through college. It is the stories of life that are engulfed with Black women and their relationship with work and the stories and experiences of these three women and thousands of other women like them that help me to understand who I am as a Black woman. It is their stories and experiences with work that motivated me to change my work destination and pursue the study of organizations.
As a member of a community traditionally excluded from organizational research because of my gender and race, I believe that it is extremely relevant and very necessary to place the communicative and leadership experiences of successful African American women at the center of organizational communication analysis. In the past it was normal for researchers to study management, leadership, and organizations and to assume that what works for one group of women is indicative of the practices of all women, regardless of race. However, literature has failed to fully include the unique organizational experiences of women of color and their contributions to the larger organizational communication situations (Allen, 1995; 1996; 1998; 2000; Nkomo, 1988; Parker, 1997; 2001; 2005). Allowing the experiences and traditions of African American women to serve as the focal point of organizational communication study signals a shift in paradigms (Parker, 2005), acknowledging the need for new perspectives, values, and norms in research.

With the swift change in the workforce market and globalization, organizations are diversified more now than ever (Bell, 2006; Blake-Beard, 1999). Being able to understand the communication practices from a variety of cultures helps organizations react to the ever changing dynamics in society (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). It is essential that the literature investigating the roles of African American women in workplace organizations in the 21st century expand to meet the growing organizational communication and relational needs of organizations and the people within them. It is also essential to understand that a workplace organization is a division of labor among members who occupy positions that attempt to achieve a common goal.

Historically, Black women’s labor has been essential to the success of the U.S. capitalistic society. Black women have held a long standing employment position as domestic
workers in private households in the United States (Collins, 1998, 2000; Etter-Lewis, 1993). This occupational category has long dominated the work history of African American women. Black women’s placement in domestic work was a result of race and gender labor market practices that forced black women into a narrow range of occupations. Black women’s economic exploitation in the U.S. can be traced back to slavery where the first “ghettoization in service occupations” (Collins, 1998, p. 9) began for African-American women. In addition to domestic work, Black women traditionally held positions in community work. Black women served as leaders in many community organizations, neighborhood associations, and social rights movements (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Their time invested in this sector of work proved to be vital to keeping the Black community together.

In recent years, scholar Patricia Parker (2005) has broadened the focus in organizational communication scholarship to examining Black women and leadership in organizations. This change in conversation has opened the door for other researchers to examine the experiences of Black women in organizations. Historically, organizational studies analyzed white men and their organizational experiences as a reflection of the dominant ideology in organizations (Nkomo, 1992). This blatant exclusion of Black women from the scholarship unfortunately aligns with the historical omission of Black women’s stories from mainstream discourse (Collins, 2000). Presenting white male organizational experiences is a standard in research practices for organizational communication. Incorporating questions about Black women and work and how they cope with, learn from and persevere with oppression has not been identified as a prominent research paradigm (Parker, 2005). By focusing on Black women’s experiences in organizations an avenue for re-defining and re-envisioning Black women’s work is opened.

I am particularly interested in exploring the experiences of Black women who hold
executive leadership positions in workplace organizations. When I first began reviewing organizational communication literature, I noticed that a few of the research participants and results resembled my experiences with work and stories of family member’s experiences with work (Parker, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2005). These experiences and stories of work focused on how difficult it can be for Black women to advance in organizations in which they are not dominant-culture members. My mother had a difficult time climbing the management ladder in her organization despite her level of education and her past workplace experiences. Reading stories about African American women in leadership positions in organizations was extremely rare and did not reflect my experience with Black women leaders in organizations. I was baffled with the paucity of studies that focused on the workplace experiences of Black women workplace leaders. The discipline was filled with studies about white men and work and when stories of women were presented they usually reflected white women’s experiences. As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, so should the discipline. Studying Black women in organizational communication allows fresh perspectives on traditional organizational communication issues.

My fascination with Black women executive leaders in organizations was also reinforced by the statistics on Black women in organizations. Women make up 46.7% of the labor force and 51.4% of managerial, professional, and related positions (Catalyst, 2010). However, African American women only make up 5.3% of all people employed in management and professional related occupations, and African American women represent only 1.1% of corporate offices in Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2010). Out of the fifteen women who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, only one woman is African American. With these numbers in mind Brown (2004) states that the barriers that African American women face in organizations are based on “negative, race-based stereotypes; and a lack of institutional support” (p. 46). All of the major

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1 Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox, Corporation
corporations within the United States have African Americans as employees within the company, but few have risen to a significant position at the executive level (Operario & Fiske, 2001).

Workplace advancement is just one of the barriers that affect African American women in workplace organizations. Black women in leadership and managerial positions in Fortune 1000 companies cite problems of historical negative race-based stereotypes, a lack of credibility and trust in authority and decisions as well as a lack of institutional support seemingly being the main problems that face this segment of the workforce (Catalyst, 2010). Black women understand that facing the double-bind of being Black and female hinders the gender or race commonality shared by most workplace executives. There is a silent exclusion from informal networks with men as well as a conflicted relationship with their white female counterparts. In a study conducted by Catalyst in 2004, 37% of African American women reported seeing their opportunities for organizational advancement to senior level management positions in their companies decline over time. In spite of this some women advance to become executives in workplace organizations. I am particularly fascinated with the resources and skills that are used to help this group of individuals succeed in workplace organizations.

**Significance of Studying African American Women**

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the organizational workplace experiences of African American women executives. This project explores the communicative relationships and workplace experiences that African American women executives encounter during organizational advancement. This project also examines how successful African American women executives perceive their advancement in workplace organizations through communicative practices and the aid of various support systems and relationships. This project is grounded in the idea that the lived experiences of African American women executives provide a
site of organizational exploration. By placing African American women executives’ stories at the forefront of investigation, the discipline acknowledges that the experiences of African American women as leaders in organizations are unique (Nkomo, 1988) and that their roles as leaders in a workplace organization advances the organization, encourage openness, empowers others, and expand and breaks barriers (Parker, 2001). With this understanding, organizations should aim to have a diverse work force that is inclusive of Black women as leaders. Past research has addressed race, gender, and leadership with Black women executives as it pertains to socialization, collaboration, identity negotiation, control, and resistance (Parker, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2005), but these studies have not examined African American women executives’ experience with success, social support, and mentoring relationships.

This study will add to the current body of literature through its examination of the existing state of African American executive women in workplace organizations. As there is an absence of research investigating the lives of successful Black women in organizations, by providing substantial research that investigates the communicative experiences and success stories of African American executive women, the communication literature and organizational discourse can be broadened. It is my goal that this body of work will produce results that will aid in raising the number of African American women executives in workplace organizations.

**Researcher Positionality**

As I worked on this project, I was an African American female doctoral student at a majority white southern university, where there were only three other African American women in my doctoral program. In my master’s program there was one other African American woman. I place a specific importance on these identifying markers because in many ways the dynamics of my graduate education has forced me to acknowledge my identity as a Black woman. Over the
last several years, I have become extremely aware of who I am and the position that has been forced upon me in society as well as in the academy. Even in 2011, I view myself as what Collins (1990) coined the “outsider within” meaning that:

The exclusion of Black women’s ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African-American women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black women intellectuals have remained outsiders in all three communities. Prevented from becoming full insiders…Black women remain outsiders within. (p.12)

It is my current position that has forced me to live in a space where I feel as if I do not always belong in the graduate school environment. Even though I am accepted in the academy because of my credentials I still feel as if I do not belong because I rarely see other women in the academy who look like me. It is this outsider within status that has directed me to explore African American women executives. As a scholar who was raised around many Black women who were leaders in their communities, I feel that it is necessary to explore and understand the Black woman as a leader in the workplace.

During this journey, my research has guided me in a path that exposes the barriers that Black women face as they work to attain respect and prestige in today’s organization. My desire to explore this area has been complicated by the sheer absence of information about Black women in organizations. There are several scholars (e.g., Allen, Collins, Nkomo, Nicotera, Clinkscales, Walker, & Parker) within the last ten years who have investigated Black women in organizations; however, this group of scholars is very small compared to the list of organizational communication scholars who research other areas in the discipline. It is my goal to explore areas that have traditionally been dominated by my white male and female counterparts and give a voice to Black women executives in organizational communication. I do not feel that scholars should investigate Black women stories out of sympathy, nevertheless,
value must be placed on the unique stories and perspectives of these individuals and recognize
difference in their full range of experiences and place value in understanding that their stories are
important in understanding different facets in organizations.

As a Black woman looking at the statistics and reading about Black women’s retention rates in organizations, I am reminded of the everyday struggle and oppression that African American women face. However, I am reminded that Black women have been urged to create and embody a spirit of self-reliance and independence (Collins, 2000). African American women’s voices have historically been silenced, distorted, or marginalized. This tradition of suppression has allowed “dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization” (Collins, 2000, p.3). Despite this oppression, Black women continue to resist obscurity through work, activism, and visibility.

**Key Definitions**

The following is a list of key terms that will be used throughout this dissertation. An *African American female* or *African American woman* refers to a female of African heritage born in the United States. The word *Black female* or *Black woman* is also used synonymously as a cultural signifier for many women, myself included, that use the term as a personal affirmation of cultural identity claimed by people of African descent in the U.S. *Workplace Organizations* are *for profit* organizations that pay individuals to work in order to produce a product for their consumer base. *African American women executives* are African American women who are in top level managerial positions in workplace organizations within four levels of reporting to the chief executive. *Female Executives* are females holding managerial positions in a workplace organization within four levels of reporting to the chief executive position. This study will define
Success as the personal understanding of the positive impact an executives work has upon the lives and work of other people. This definition looks at success in a holistic manner in which the individual understands the impact from a personal, societal and organizational standpoint. A Dominant Culture Workplace Member refers to a white male. A Mentor is an individual who influences the organizational career choices of an individual through career, social, and emotional support, while a Mentee is an individual who learns workplace information and skills from a more experienced individual through creating opportunities for social relationships, support and protection.

Examination

This current study is grounded in social constructionist and critical theorist paradigms of thought. Through in-depth interviews with participants this study aimed to uncover the workplace communication experiences of Black women executives in workplace organizations and how these experiences and relationships aided in workplace advancement. In Chapter Two relevant literature focusing on the established critical feminist and cultural frameworks, organizational social support, and mentoring was reviewed to help establish a framework and justification for the researchers approach. Chapter Three provides the methodological framework that was used to complete this qualitative study. Chapter Four provides the analysis of the interviews conducted for this study. Chapter Five provides the discussion of the results, the implications from this study and the conclusion.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the workplace communicative experiences of African American women executives. Numerous strides have been made to aid in the advancement of African American women serving in leadership positions in various workplace organizations, however there are still several problems (e.g., failure to acknowledge a problem, lack of institutional support). This project will examine how successful African American women executives advance in workplace organizations with the aid of various support systems and communicative relationships. African American women executives in the workplace have previously been studied from a few different perspectives. In this chapter, I review the existing literature and theoretical perspectives of this concept as a foundation for the research questions for my particular study. First, I examine current literature addressing African American female’s historical communicative experiences in workplace organizations in the United States. These communicative challenges provide an outlet for a thorough investigation of the current state of Black women organizational executives. This section includes subsections on Black feminism, feminist standpoint theory, muted group theory, and co-cultural theory. The second section of the literature review focuses on issues examining workplace success with subsections addressing workplace support, interpersonal support, and institutional support. The last section of the literature review addresses mentoring and the benefits of mentoring relationships and programs for African American women executives.
**African American Women and Communication**

In this section, I address some of the communication challenges that Black women executives currently face in workplace organizations. As a general theoretical framework, Black feminism, feminist standpoint theory, muted group theory and co-cultural theory will be examined to express how African American female executives may experience a suppression of voice and therefore alter communication experiences in workplace organizations. This section highlights the historical communicative and work experiences faced by Black females and lays the foundation for studying the workplace communicative experiences of African American female leaders.

**Black Feminist Thinking**

Feminism is the political practice and struggle to eradicate the ideology of male domination and to end sexist oppression (hooks, 2000). Any purposes or goals that seek to enhance the way of life, liberty and equality for a woman represents a feminist consciousness (King, 1988). Feminism demands equality for all women. Despite the discourse of feminism as a mutual standing ground for women to fight oppression, Black women, historically, were forced to remain silent in their fight for gender justice. As a group with limited access to power, African American women have endured a level of oppression that has left them out of the dominant discourse privileging men and white women. In the fight for feminist equality this oppression was no different. When white women voiced a feminist conscious they were overly concerned with White middle class women’s issues excluding African American, Latina, Native American and Asian-American female issues (Collins, 2000). Even though feminism is for everybody, (hook, 2000) Black women and women of color in particular and their ideas were omitted from traditional feminist thinking and theory building (Collins, 2000).
Despite suffering oppression while trying to negate oppression, Black women found different avenues to express a separate voice of feminist activism that allowed for a collaborative consciousness of Black women to emerge (hooks, 2000). For many Black women, it was clear that there would not be equality in the fight to get rid of sexist oppression (hooks, 2000). Despite this silencing from peers, Black women feminist scholars forged ahead to visibly increase Black women ideas. For many Black women the feminist movement created a space to demand respect for women’s work, past and present, and to end gender bias altogether.

Black feminism represents a move to incorporate the ideas and views of African American women (Houston & Davis, 2002). As a theoretical frame, Black feminism allows the communicative experiences of African American women to be placed at the center of investigation. Black feminist (Allen, 2000) ground their research in the lived experiences of African American women by investigating the varying dimensions of discourse that illustrates how Black women make sense of, challenge, and negotiate their experiences. Black feminism illustrates how African American women must negotiate multiple forms of oppression in their daily lives while learning how to construct their identity in the world based on their experiences with dominant group members. A Black feminist conscious celebrates Black women rebuking the historical devaluation of Black women in scholarship.

Black feminist thought, a unique perspective of African American women thinking, is a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) that highlights the way Black women think, interpret and act about issues that exclusively involve African American women. Collins (1986) expressed that marginalized people must define themselves under their own terms and not by others. As a standpoint, Black feminist thought highlights the underlying principles that Black women articulate culture, oppression, and concepts of self in a manner that is not common in other races.
Grounded on the premise that Black women share certain common elements of lived experience, Black feminist thought acknowledges that Black women have various degrees in which they express similar experiences (Bell, Orbe, Drummond, & Camara, 2000). Black feminist thought rearticulates a consciousness that already exists about the importance of agency for Black women (Collins, 2000) and gives a framework for articulating the ways of knowing for African American women. As a vessel, Black feminist thought, enables researchers to explore the everyday communicative experiences of African American women. It is important to note that using this standpoint to examine the lives of Black women can in fact essentialize the voices of Black women (Bell, Orbe, Drummond, & Camara, 2000). Black women have multiple standpoints that can be complex and that do not always represent every Black woman. However it is these various lived and communicative experiences of Black women which make studying this group inherently unique.

Up to this point, this section has defined feminism, Black feminism, and Black feminist thinking. I will now turn to exploring the history of work for African American women in the U.S., making the case that centering Black women in this study advances the understanding of Black women labor in the US while analyzing the advances that are being made in current organizations.

Understanding the premise behind Black feminist thought is imperative to addressing and analyzing the lives of Black females. Black feminism and Black feminist thought were both birthed out of the need to reject oppression. For African American women that oppression dates back to slavery and the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression that has plagued the lives of Black women (Collins, 2000). When analyzing Black female oppression it is essential to understand the exploitation that African American women faced due to the U.S. labor system.
Black women and work in the U.S. have held a special relationship with each other. Scholars have studied Black women and domestic work (Rollins, 1985) labor employment (Terbog-Penn, 1985) and Black women in professional settings (Essed, 1991). These studies discovered the conditions that Black women have subjected themselves to in order to make a living in this country.

Historically, Black women have held positions as domestic workers in the United States. Black women have held positions as servers, dishwashers, cooks, and day care aides, to name a few, working in jobs that place them in positions of serving in physically demanding and intellectually deadening positions (Collins, 2000). Holding positions that were creatively stimulating and expressive of intellectual thinking were not characteristics of Black women and work. Black women have suffered from being exploited economically, physically, and mentally due to the historical placement of being powerless units of labor (Collins, 2000). As a brief overview of Black women’s labor in the U.S. Black women have transitioned from slaves in the South, to free labor immediately after emancipation, to workers in manufacturing plants, serving in domestic and industrial positions, and finally making the move to clerical work. When tracing the history of labor in the U.S. no other group receives credit for holding positions that exploited them physically and mentally while suppressing creativity and banning intellectual thought.

There is a grave need for more research to explore the intersection of gender, race and U.S. work experiences among Black women. Even though this study does not follow the traditional tenets of studying Black women and work in the U.S., it does support traditional Black feminist thinking through its acknowledgment and quest to highlight the lived experiences of Black females. It is my belief that by studying the workplace communicative experiences of executive Black women, a framework for extending research on Black feminist thought is
established. This project will serve as another avenue for the intellectual thoughts of Black women to be shared in a public arena. By engaging in Black feminist thinking there is a celebration of the connection of research and everyday life. By placing Black women and their communicative experiences at the center of analysis a connection of everyday situations and concerns for Black women is celebrated (Houston & Davis, 2002). As a tool of empowerment, hearing the stories of Black women gives voice to those traditionally left out of the dominant discourse in organizational communication literature. Black feminist thought offers meaning for studying the communicative experiences of Black women.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory is one of a group of standpoint theories that is based on the idea that the world looks different depending on the social location of each individual person (Allen, 2000). Feminist standpoint theory analyzes how patriarchy makes it seem natural that women should be subordinate to men. Born out of the Marxist analysis that capitalism naturalizes the bourgeois class divisions, feminist standpoint theory highlights that our identities are shaped by the work and activities that we engage in, based on our level of knowledge (Wood, 2005). It is this knowledge that positions women and people of color, men included, as outsiders. However, it is feminist standpoint theory that highlights and embraces this outsider stance allowing the “other” to speak about their everyday experiences addressing the silencing brought on by the dominant class.

Feminist standpoint theory demands that instances of patriarchy are called out (Allen, 2000; Wood, 2005). Individuals who are consciously and unconsciously oppressed behave in manners that perpetuate patriarchal assumptions that categorize women as unequal individuals (Allen, 2000). Feminist standpoint theory allows a critique of power relations between men and
women and helps to accomplish goals of emancipation (Wood, 2005). A standpoint does not solely refer to a location, rather it highlights a critical understanding of a political consciousness gained from an oppositional stance based on resistance of the dominant worldview. Feminist standpoint theory has two aims; the first is to develop a method to construct knowledge based on women’s experiences. The second aim of feminist standpoint theory is to learn from knowledge that is produced from women’s social location (Woods, 2005).

Hendrix (1998) used a feminist standpoint to investigate the perceptions held by students when professors established their credibility via communication in college classrooms. Hendrix, an African American female doctoral student, investigated the manner in which white students perceived the competency of Black college professors in the classroom. From this project, Hendrix realized that race and gender played a factor in her research results. Hendrix observed, interviewed, and surveyed six college professors, three Black and three white, and 28 female and male college students at a Northwest four-year university. In her findings three primary claims were generated. The first was that traditional research methods hinder research on race conducted by scholars of color. Second, recognizing value in subjectivity and intersubjectivity for scholars of color intersects a double standard to research. Her third and final claim indicated that the first step in rectifying claim one and two was to call out the problems faced by researchers of color. Hendrix used her feminist standpoint to highlight that she was a Black women who recognized and acknowledged that problems that her research about Black people, as a Black women, was being subjected to a higher level of scrutiny.

Brenda Allen (2005) used feminist standpoint theory to highlight her experiences in the academy. As the first African American woman to work in her department at a white school, Allen described experiences of being socialized into an organization and department that had no
idea how to adequately help her deal with her experiences. Through her standpoint she was able to express the feelings of being a token for her department. During her time in her new position she was asked to sit on numerous committees as the minority representative, expected to be a care giver to her African American students, and even labeled as the token hire for her department. Through her standpoint, as a Black woman, she was able to articulate the manner in which she was socialized into an organization. Her standpoint highlights the experience of a marginalized individual that was able to construct knowledge so that others could learn from her experience. Despite the fact that Black women in the United States face common challenges, this does not mean that all Black women have had the same experiences or that all Black women view on the varying degrees of each individual experience. However, examples like Allen (2000) highlight that the response from similar situations from different Black women will highlight the notion that standpoints are not all the same.

It is my belief that African American female executives have unique standpoints in their positions in workplace organizations. Many of these women are the only persons of color or females in a high ranking position in their organizations. To be able to report on their standpoint provides this group of women with a voice to express the knowledge of women in their position as well as an opportunity to negate being oppressed. Feminist standpoint theory allows knowledge to be created from these women educating others about the standpoint of this unique group of women.

**Muted Group Theory**

When individuals are not considered members of the dominant society, they may face silencing of voice and exclusion in communication situations. Anthropologists Shirley Ardener and Edward Ardener established muted group theory to explain the uneven power relationships
that exist in society (E, Ardener, 1978; S, Ardener, 1978). The use of muted group theory works to explain the varying levels of power relationships that exist in society and how these power relationships are maintained and controlled by the dominant group in society. In every society, a hierarchy exists, and individuals at the top of the social hierarchy determine the communication system for all members of society. Dominant group members have control in getting their thoughts and ideas conveyed to other members of society (E, Ardener, 1978). People that are not members of the dominant group are considered muted when their worldview is not represented or presented in the social communication structure. This allows for those in power to control the manner in which members of the subordinate group view and express their experiences. Subordinate group members’ voices are mute due to them not being able to effectively express themselves in the confinement of the dominant communication system (Orbe, 1996). Muted Group theory has been used to study African American men (Orbe, 1994) and women (Kramarae, 1981) gay, lesbians and bisexuals (Orbe, 1996) as well as ability studies (Orber, 1996).

Muted group theory has two goals. The first goal is to call attention to the muting or silencing of any muted groups voices and experiences. The second goal is to reform language so that the experiences and perspectives of women and members of marginalized groups are heard (Wood, 2005). In its simplest form the theory is concerned with what people say, when they say it, and how much they say it and who pays attention to it (Ardener, 2005).

Orbe (1994) examined the manner in which African American male communication can be muted. Since Black men are not a part of the dominant societal discourse, they are also victims of suffering from a silencing of voice. Orbe collected stories from 35 African American men to understand their communication experiences. The research revealed six communication
themes to help understand how Black men communicate with African American women and white people. The themes are: (a) the importance of communication with other African Americans, (b) playing the part, (c) keeping a safe distance, (d) testing the sincerity of non-African Americans, (e) an intense social responsibility, and (f) learning how to interact with non-African Americans (Orbe, 1994, p. 290). This study revealed how Black men coped with living in a white male dominated society and how a muted group implemented different communication strategies to navigate through society.

Muted group theory has also been used to examine the strengths and weaknesses of Black feminist thought in a case study that focused on the communicative experiences of nineteen African American women (Bell, Orbe, Drummond, & Camara, 2000). In their research, Bell, Orbe, Drummond, and Camara (2000) examined how African American women describe the communication situations and practices that they enact within their everyday encounters. The study revealed that Black women have a dual identity, being Black and female, and a natural connection with other African American women. Muted group theory was employed to examine whether or not using a Black feminist framework was another form of silencing Black women’s voices and stories. For Black women, feminism posits itself on the ideology that Black women resist multiple forms of oppression and marginalization placed on their lives (Collins, 2000). Black feminism is the political realization that seemingly comes from the personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives. The authors were concerned with understanding if using Black feminist thought privileged certain Black female voices over others. The case study revealed that the mere opportunity to engage in research that gives voice to marginalized women negates the idea that Black feminist thought, as a standpoint, could mute the voice of African American research participants.
The literature that examines muted group theory investigates the overall silencing of voices. This study expounds upon the manner in which African American female executives workplace communicative voices have been silenced. Even though, the overall body of literature surrounding this group of women is limited, studying their communicative experiences from this frame will enhance the limited nature of stories about Black women leaders in the workplace. Just the mere notion that the literature is so scarce is an example of how their voices have been muted. In addition to adding to the communication scholarship this current study will also enhance the goals of muted group theory. Through an exploration of stories that will place the voice of Black women at the forefront of investigation, this project will advance the way that scholars examine the hierarchical communication structure that has been in place for all members of society. By advancing the theory in a direction that examines Black women workplace executives in particular, this project will aid in addressing how Black women use language in the workplace as well as uncover how they interact with males and non-African Americans. By using muted group theory to investigate the manner in which elite members of a minority group communicates, this study can also unpack communication patterns of workplace executives.

**Co-Cultural Theory**

Orbe (1996) created co-cultural theory as a perspective to view the communication of historically marginalized individuals. In its most basic form, co-cultural theory refers to the communication interaction between underrepresented and dominant group members (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Co-cultural theory helps individuals understand the manner in which different members of marginalized groups perform communicative practices when a person holds membership in one or more social groups (Orbe, 2005). Co-cultural communication theory is
grounded in muted group and standpoint theories and is derived from the lived experiences of non-dominant groups. A number of non-dominant cultures, or co-cultures, exist within the United States based on age, class, ethnicity, religion, abilities, and sexual orientations (Orbe, 1994). The term co-culture was coined to symbolize that non-dominant groups are not inferior but appreciated and acknowledged (Orbe, 1996). Co-cultural theory has five epistemological assumptions: (a) a hierarchy exists in each society that gives privilege to certain groups of people; (b) dominant group members occupy positions of power that they use to create and maintain communication systems that promote their experiences; (c) dominant communication structures hinder growth of groups whose lived experiences are not reflected in the public communication sphere; (d) co-cultural group members all share a marginalized position within the dominant structure; and (e) group members adopt certain communication strategies to negotiate oppressive dominant structures (Orbe, 2005).

Orbe (1996) created a co-cultural communication model that focused on the specific practices that members of co-cultural groups enacted during interaction with dominant group members. This model gave voice to the multiple ways in which co-cultural group members negotiated dominant structures. At the center of the co-cultural theory are the six interrelated factors that influence the way that underrepresented groups communicate with members of dominant societal structures: (a) preferred outcome, (b) field of experience, (c) abilities, (d) situational context, (e) perceived costs and rewards, and (f) communication approach.

The model highlighted the preferred outcome of a communication situation between a co-cultural group member and a dominant group member. There are three interactional outcomes that exist for co-cultural group members: assimilation, accommodation, and separation (Orbe, 1996). When individuals assimilate they work to eliminate cultural differences and conform to
the dominant society. During accommodation the person believes that both parties participating in the communication situation can retain some of their cultural uniqueness and lastly, separation is the notion to reject the dominant structure altogether. Those individuals engaging in the preferred outcome of separation have a goal to join with other co-cultural group members and create their own communication system and social communities (Orbe & Spellers, 2005).

The field of experience in the co-cultural communication process is the total lived experience of each individual in the situation context (Orbe, 1996). Being able to gauge the influence of an individual’s past experiences helps that person understand and negotiate a variety of practices to initiate with the dominant group member. A person’s past experiences are a major factor in the way they choose and evaluate what constitutes appropriate and effective communication with dominant members. A person’s ability is also a major factor in the co-cultural communication process. Every person is not equipped to deal with the varying degrees of communication situations that they are likely to encounter when dealing with a dominant member. The person’s characteristics and situational circumstances play a big role in this area of co-cultural communication. The issue of situational context is a central theme in the co-cultural communication context. Members of a co-culture do not always have the same manner in which they approach communication situations. Depending on the situation, who is present, and the reason for the interaction, the individual will decide what form of communication practices they need to enact.

Over time members of co-cultures understand that there are perceived costs and rewards that come with different communication situations. Each communication situation has certain advantages and disadvantages and each situation’s level of success depends on the person involved in the communicative behaviors assessment of the situation. If a person engages in a
conversation at work and is seeking social approval, they will assess the situation as positive or negative contingent upon what they were seeking from the situation. The last factor in the co-cultural communication process is the communication approach. Communication approaches are categorized as nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive. A nonassertive behavior includes actions of a nonconfrontational person placing others needs in front of their own needs. An assertive communication approach considers the needs of both individuals in the communication situation. Lastly, an aggressive communication behavior enacts hurtful and controlling situation placing self needs over others needs.

These six co-cultural factors are interdependent but they represent the ways that members of co-cultures make decisions in communication situations (Orbe, 1996). Co-cultural theory provides a framework for scholars to study and to conceptually decipher the communication patterns between dominant (Anglo-American, heterosexual males) and non-dominant (women, people of color, gay, bisexual) group members who interact with one another (Allison & Hibbler, 2004). In one of the earliest works developing this theory, Orbe (1998) examined how underrepresented group members functioned and understood the complexities of communication within organizations while feeling like outsiders. Buzzanell (1999) used this theory from an organizational communication approach to highlight the communication experiences of underrepresented groups during the employment interview process. In particular co-cultural theory has been used to highlight several instances of communication experiences with African American women (Gates, 2003; Orbe, 1999; Parker, 2003; Spellers, 2003). These different research projects highlighted the manner in which African American women negotiated the intersection of race, gender, class and identity in organizations. Identity negotiation is extremely crucial for members of non-dominant groups to co-exist and communicate their perspectives and
ideas in relation to one another (Orbe, 1994). Spellers (2003) addressed the manner in which Black women used their hair, clothing, and bodies in organizations to communicate identity and navigate through an organization as an outsider-within. Gates (2003) study examined how co-cultural group members use creative communication in organizations to negotiate power relationships and organizational socialization while maintaining their identity.

Co-cultural group members have “developed specific communication strategies when interacting with dominant group members” (Orbe, 1996, p. 150). According to the theory, co-cultural group members practice certain communication functions based on speech practices that promote interactions with the dominant group (Woods, 2005). A co-cultural framework is designed to “speak to the issues of traditionally underrepresented group members as they function within societal structures governed by cultural groups” (Orbe, 1994, p. 186). Co-cultural theory is different from other theories due to the fact that “one person perceives an aspect of his or her identity to be salient within an interaction” (Orbe & Spellers, 2005, p. 188). This theory explains how individuals navigate their cultural difference when dealing with a person of a culturally different background. The ultimate test of this theory is how it is utilized to understand “relationships among culture, power, and communication” (Orbe & Spellers, p. 189, 2005). By using co-cultural theory to explore Black women executive communication practices the data can produce new insight into how this theory explains the use of voice on organizations.

Each of the theories in this section, Black feminism, feminist standpoint theory, muted group theory, and co-cultural theory, serve as a foundation for researchers to explore the inequalities in African American female executive communication practices in workplace organizations. None of these theories specifically address workplace communication, as solely organizational communication theories examining voice nor do these theories highlight Black
women executives. However, when utilized as a framework to study the communicative practices of African American female executives, these theories can serve as a framework to explore how marginalized groups communicate with dominant group members in organizations. The next section of the literature review examines workplace success and factors that contribute to African American female executive’s success in workplace organizations.

**Workplace Success**

In this section I address how support systems contribute to the workplace success of employees and specifically African American female executives. I begin by looking at theories that explain factors that contribute to workplace success. From there I discuss the work that has been done that examined successful Black women in organizations. I then provide analysis of workplace support that have been studied in previous organizational communication projects that highlight various types of communication and emotional support that have been credited to aid in workplace success. By examining the previous work done in this field I also highlight how African American female executives have been omitted from investigation in each area.

**Contributions to Workplace Success**

Workplace motivation is one of the many driving forces that press individuals to succeed. Social theorists have a history of fascination with the idea that individual self-interest is a motivating factor for social action (Monge & Contractor, 2001). Motivation sets in motion communicative efforts to excel with specific goals in mind compelling individuals to continue on a journey despite the struggles along the way (Jablin & Sias, 2001). Theories of self-interest have tenets that state that people make perceived rational choices in order to gain personal benefits. One theory of self-interest, the theory of social capital, highlights that people accrue resources, and invest in opportunities in which they expect to see a return on their investment (Monge &
Contractor, 2001). In the realm of organizations, this theory postulates that due to self-interest in a profitable gain, individuals are motivated to work harder to achieve personal success (Monge & Contractor, 2001).

Social capital represents power in a given field (Corsun & Costen, 2001). According to Bourdieu (1986) people gain power from structures that are already established and are continuously created. Bourdieu (1986) advances this theory by explaining why people have different access to assets. Social capital is an asset that a person has that is credited from the person’s social network. There are several forms of capital that help to reify power systems and structures. Social capital is a form of power where individuals have resources that are accumulated based off of the social networks that they employ (Bourdieu, 1986; Corsun & Costen, 2001). Social capital is obtained based on the total amount of network resources that a person possesses. The idea of social capital is that individuals build networks of relationships to help achieve outcomes that may be difficult to achieve without having a relationship with a person (Suseno, 2008). A person’s social capital is related to that individual having positive outcomes in finding jobs, obtaining promotions and advancements and having job satisfaction. The strength of one’s social capital is largely dependent on relationships with others and how powerful and well-connected those connections are with other people (Suseno, 2008).

Organizational norms, networks, and trust help build social capital for people (Putnam, 1995). In terms of workplace success, social capital theory, helps explain that in the workplace it is who you know that helps people obtain the goals that they have for their organizational positions. As an example, the more individuals that a person has in their workplace network, the greater their level of social capital. As this theory relates to African American women in the workplace, the more they accrue positive relationships of mutual workplace acquaintances, the
better the chance they have of gaining credibility. A person ultimately has the best social capital when they are a member of a large network with members that have equal or better credentials. For Black women this means that they should work on surrounding themselves with a network of successful people that will help motivate them to work hard for success.

**African American women and success**

Success in workplace organizations is generally measured by the level of occupational rank in an organization, financial gain, and benefits attained by each member in the organization. In a 2005, *Women of Color in Corporate Management*, a qualitative and quantitative research study conducted by the research group Catalyst, investigated 35 women of color asking them to identify which factors they believe were important in obtaining workplace success. The thirty-five women of color executives completed a survey listing nineteen professional and personal factors and traits that they believe attributed to workplace success. Follow up interviews were conducted to gain additional support for responses. These 35 women were considered executives if they held position one to three levels below their company’s CEO. There were 22 African-American women, 8 Asian-American and 5 Hispanic women who participated in this study. I will highlight some of the factors of this study that align with my current investigation of workplace success.

Many of the women in the study (Catalyst, 2005) indicated that a mentor or sponsor is critical to achieving workplace success. Out of all of the success factors, these women believed that forging relationships with some form of mentor aided in workplace success. These interpersonal relationships built a comfort between colleagues and managers and assisted in helping to develop workplace relationships. In addition to becoming successful in organizations, most women cited obtaining high-visibility assignments. A correlation factor with high visibility
assignments was actually having a mentor who was familiar with their work ethic and characteristics to recommend these women for high profile assignments (Catalyst, 2005).

Performing over and above expectations was also a factor cited by women of color as necessary for obtaining organizational success (Catalyst, 2005). With this in mind 17 out of the 35 survey respondents indicated that going over and beyond the call of duty was a major factor in obtaining success in the workplace (Catalyst, 2005). In addition to performing at top levels, having educational credentials aided in establishing workplace credibility for success. Respondents also cited good communication skills as being an essential contributing factor to success. During the interview phase of the study, women cited balancing being direct with having tact as an obstacle to get over. Participants stated that women of color must be more outspoken, social, and friendly to ease and appease the comfort level of their white counterparts (Catalyst, 2005). At the same time these women also sense that they have to defend and speak up for themselves. One respondent mentioned that during a board room presentation a white male interrupted her during the middle of her presentation without saying “excuse me” or justifying his rant in the middle of her speaking (Catalyst, 2005). Other women from the study agreed that often times white male and female colleagues have a tendency to perform direct communication threatening acts that undermine the speech of a woman of color.

Being able to successful manage their career was a common factor among the women who achieved high status and success in organizations (Catalyst, 2005). Women cited being goal-oriented, taking initiative, putting in extraordinary work and organizational commitment are three of the major personal factors that the women in the study attribute to success. Some additional factors include persistence, a “must win” attitude and a strong work ethic.

The Catalyst (2005) study was essential in documenting women of color executives roles
and experiences in workplace organizations. The information gained from this study indicates that there is much to learn about the organizational experiences of minority women. Throughout the study these women shared stories about workplace environments that are extremely essential for organizations to take notice in, especially when considering the hiring practices of women of color. This study further indicates that more research needs to be conducted on the workplace experiences of African American women due to the invaluable perspectives that they can provide to organizations.


Parker’s (2005) most recent work highlights how Black women have always been leaders in the community. During the Civil Rights movement and the Feminist movement Black women played integral roles in helping both movements make progress. In her book, Parker (2005) investigated how growing up during equality movements influenced the leadership styles of the Black women executives that she interviewed. Parker (2005) interviewed 15 Black women executives to determine the leadership styles of Black women executives. The study yielded several implications. The primary implication was that scholars should continue to seek diverse sources of knowledge and view a model of leadership that is a multicultural phenomenon. The leadership styles and traditions that are employed by the African American women executives
that participated in her study represent a distinct style of leading that Parker attributes to Black women. Through her work, Parker (2005) developed new leadership theorizing that did not center on traditional leadership perspectives of assumed white male privilege but work that places Black women at the center. In her work, Parker (2005) highlights theories of collaboration that embraces a duality in leadership practices. The central premise focuses on inclusive leadership theories, research and practices that have a focus on community building by deconstructing a masculine versus feminine style of organizational leading. The work of Parker highlights that Black female executives are a different source of knowledge for scholars to study. The central premise behind the vast majority of Parker’s work highlights that studying the lived experiences of Black women in organizations provided a sounding board to listen to how Black women articulate leadership. There is an organic characterization of leadership knowledge that this group of women provides that supports that idea that research about the other serves as a way of emancipation. Her study does not allow the traditional white privileged male opinions of leadership to take center stage; her work highlights and gives voice to knowledge and communication that is grounded in Black women and their experiences.

Parker’s (1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005) work is justification that it is beneficial to conduct research from the point of view of people that struggle with race and gender oppression. Her work places African American women at the center of organizational communication study. Through a comprehensive examination of the role that work has played in the success of African American females in the United States, Parker (2005) examines how Black women can be extremely successful despite the numerous factors of oppression working against them. The women in her studies are great examples of the budding layers of research that can be uncovered when studying African American women executives in the workplace.
Nkomo (1988) documented the experience of Black female managers in a project that highlighted the workplace issues facing Black women managers in organizations. The article highlighted issues of unequal treatment in workplace advancement, the lack of challenging projects, and the idea of always having to prove themselves to their white male counterparts. In her comprehensive review of the management literature, Nkomo (1988) points out that scholars have studied race in organizations and gender in organizations but they will not study the two concepts simultaneously. The work investigating Black women has been anecdotal highlighting that Black woman managers are subject to the “two-fer” theory. The two-fer theory highlights that the individual is Black and a women so the company is fulfilling the need for two minorities in one person. Since she is Black and a woman, studies will explicate results from white women and Black men to explain how Black women handle different issues in organizations. Other scholars such as Benjamin (1982) suggest that the Black woman working to attain organizational prestige becomes a victim of workplace isolation. These women are talented but they face the double bind of being a woman and Black which makes it hard for certain organizational leaders to accept them. The major assumption from the Nkomo (1988) article is that the general neglect in studying Black women in organizations hurts the discipline. There is a lot that can be learned from the successful Black women leader in organizations if only researchers would investigate their experiences in organizations. Nkomo (1988) calls for Black women to be more proactive in explaining and defining their own definition of success in organizations by ignoring that success equates to white and male.

The work of Catalyst (2005), Parker (1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005) and Nkomo (1988) are examples of research that examines the workplace experiences of African American women that are in leadership roles in organizations. The studies are important because they call for more
work and action to take place in addressing workplace inequalities but more importantly these studies have produced findings that address how organizations treat Black women leaders. Black women managers feel that they are unappreciated and from a generational standpoint they feel that their leadership style has been crafted through their growth and participation in both the women’s movement and the Civil Rights movement. These studies are few and far in between and they only scratch the surface when it comes to exploring successful African American women in workplace organizations. Studies in the past have examined workplace experiences of Black women in the academy (Allen, 1996, 2000), the history of Black women and work (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Browne, 1999; Burgess & Horton, 1993; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Harley, 1997) and Black women and workplace identity (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) however there is still much work that needs to be done. There are several stories about Black women, work, and success that have not been told and there is so much more that needs to be learned.

**Workplace Support**

There are several types of support systems that aid in helping individuals succeed in workplace organizations. Social support is supportive verbal and nonverbal feedback given to a distressed individual to identify, understand, and cope with the stressful situations (Burleson & Macgeorge, 2002). Social support is communication processes where individuals help fellow employees cope with the stress and struggles of everyday work life (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Under the auspice of social support falls instrumental, emotional and informational support (House, 1981). This section of the literature review will exam the current literature on social support, emotional support, and informational support as they pertain to organizations as well as centering a focus of supportive messages.
Social Support

There are several definitions of social support. In the early formulations of social support Caplan (1974) suggested that different types of relationships aids in individuals help with emotional burdens. Cobb (1976) defined social support as information that leads a person to believe that he or she is cared for or loved. House (1981) defined social support as support accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals and larger groups. These three scholars define social support from a sociological and psychological perspective. From a communicative perspective, social support is the study of supportive verbal and nonverbal communication of a person seeking help (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). The communicative perspective conceptualizes social support individuals seeking assistance from individuals that they perceive can offer help (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). For the purposes of this review I use Burleson and MacGeorge’s (2002) definition of social support. They define social support as “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 374). Social support has been credited with improving the well being of another person who is experiencing a problematic situation. From the communicative perspective social support deals with explicit communication efforts with respect to positive relationship outcomes (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

There are multiple sources of social support. An individual can receive support from their family, friends, co-workers, and supervisors (Ganster, Mayes, Fusilier, 1986). Social support is an interpersonal transaction involving one or more of the following: (a) emotional concern, (b) instrumental aid, (c) information, or (d) appraisal (House, 1981). Emotional support involves providing empathy, care, love and trust for a person. Instrumental support comes in the form of helping a person complete work tasks or pay bills. Informational support is providing a person
with information that they can use to cope with any personal or environmental problems that they may have. Appraisal support is providing information that a person can use to gauge their current level of success. For the purposes of studying African American executive women in organizations I will expound upon the use of emotional and informational support in the workplace as a tool to help Black women in organizations.

**Emotional Support**

Deemed as the most helpful form of social support, emotional support is commonly implemented to assist individuals with managing distressed emotional states (House, 1981). Emotional support includes expressing care, concern, and affection for a person (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Expressions of affection for a person or showing confidence in a distressed person are examples of emotional support. Providing emotional support has been credited with managing success, greater workplace relationship satisfaction, a reduction in stress and greater satisfaction with interacting with others (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Beehr & McGrath, 1992; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). This form of support is deemed helpful and serves as an appropriate response to stress (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Recipients of emotional support find it extremely helpful as well as a major contributor to long-lasting relationships (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

**Informational Support**

Informational support involves communicating messages that will aid in solving problems for individuals. Informational support helps people help themselves (House, 1981). Informational support plays a major role when it comes to making suggestions with how a person should handle a situation or providing them with new information. Engaging in informational support may suggest that a person is giving advice in reference to a situation
(Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Advice giving is an opinion an individual recommends or offers to solve a problem in a situation (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004). Giving advice is a familiar method used by individuals to respond to other individual’s problem’s in a supportive situational context (MacGeorge et al., 2004). As it pertains to informational support, advice giving is a problem based action that places emphasis on how to act in the future when dealing with a current situation.

Both emotional support and informational support are extremely important social support concepts. Traditionally social support has been studied in the interpersonal domain but it is also important to investigate its use in organizations. As it pertains to organizational communication, social support is an organizational source of empowerment for employees (Yoon, Han, & Seo, 1996). Social support in the workplace is feedback given to individuals that may need guidance to cope with an issue they are facing that may affect their workplace performance (Amason, Watkins, & Holmes, 1999). Workplace social support has been credited with helping employees find out information and manage emotional concerns. When employees engage in organizational social support systems, results such as increased job security, increased job satisfaction, increased self-worth, better rapport with managers, and decreased job burnout and stress occur (Amason, Watkins, Holmes & Holmes, 1999; Ray & Miller, 1991). Most support in the workplace comes in the form of either emotional support or instrumental support (Adams, King, King, 1996). Emotional workplace support comes in the form of listening to a colleague or by providing empathy during a situation. Instrumental support comes in the form of helping to solve problems and providing assistance when problems seem to be out of hand.

Both emotional and instrumental support has been proven to be helpful coping mechanisms for individuals going through distressed situations. When evaluating these two
concepts they both aim to help those in need. When assessing African American women executives and how social support may be used to assist them with coping with problems I feel compelled to revert back to muted group theory. Cultural differences and language may limit the amount of social support a person receives (Amason, Watkins, & Holmes, 1999). Social support works on the premise that a person is able to communicate that they are in need of help. Black women may communicate a need for workplace help in a manner that someone who is not a member of their same reference group may not pick up on. In this instance, Black women may suffer a muting of voice when they are not able to express the need for care or support. As individuals that are not part of the dominant communication structure, it may seem difficult that these women would reap the same benefits that some of their workplace colleagues would receive as it pertains to obtaining social support.

In a study, Amason, Watkins, and Holmes (1999) examined how perceptions of social support in a multicultural organization differed between white employees and Hispanic employees. In the study, the authors explored the cultural differences in perceptions of social support perceived in a multicultural organization from organizational peers and supervisors. In the study the Hispanic workers reported receiving more social support from their Hispanic coworkers versus their white supervisors. Amason, Watkins, and Holmes (1999) in many ways support the concern that African American female executives may not be receiving the workplace social support that they need to thrive in organizations. Unfortunately, there is not any scholarship that examines the social support that African American executive females receive.

Throughout this section I examined the manner in which support systems have been studied to aid in social support for individuals. Through this review there was an absence of material that investigated the role of organizational social support for Black women executives.
Mentoring

Mentoring is often cited as an essential tool to aid in career advancement (Giscombe, 2007). This section of the literature review will define mentoring, address the mentoring needs of women in organizations, discuss formal and informal mentoring programs in organizations, and attend to the benefits of mentoring relationships for African American women.

Mentoring Defined

Ragins and Kram (2007) describe mentoring as a “life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development” (p. 3), mentoring is the ancient idea that work relationships guide professional development. There are numerous definitions for mentoring but they are all based in the idea that mentoring is a form of social support (Egan, 1996; Sosik & Lee, 2002). The premise of mentoring is that “individuals with more advanced experience and knowledge are matched with a lesser experienced and knowledgeable individual” (Sosik & Lee, 2002, p. 19). It is assumed that the mentor will aid in the advancement of a protégée’s career by showing them the ropes of the industry or the company. Mentoring helps develop leaders from within the organization while providing support and care for individuals to learn, grow and develop. A mentor helps with self-esteem, psychological support, career development and socialization (Sosik & Lee, 2002). A mentor provides encouragement and guidance to the rookie employee along with company knowledge that is gained from advanced experience. The mentor provides, “a variety of functions that support, guide, and counsel the young adult” (Kram, 1983, p. 608) while transitioning from school to career or organization to organization. Scholars have noted that mentors are frequently high ranking officials in organizations who have advanced experience and knowledge in a given field, who are dedicated to providing emotional and mental support to a protégé’s career (Kram, 1983, DeWine, 2001).
“Organizations pay close attention to the relationships developing between experienced employees and their subordinates” (DeWine, 2001, p. 423) and it is in these relationships that the foundation for workplace satisfaction has received credit. Organizations are aware of the value that mentors provide to less experienced employees as well as those individuals who have not been with the organization for a long time (DeWine, 2001). Mentoring helps “bridge the gap between strictly professional relationships and those that are more personal” (DeWine, 2001, p. 423). One of the most important aspects of mentoring is that it helps advance careers in organizations through increased individual attention (Blake-Beard, 1999; Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). A mentor helps provide the protégée with a sense of security while allowing the individual to gain confidence in their ability to perform at various levels throughout the organization. Even though definitions of mentoring have numerous tenets and can be viewed from different angles, the primary feature that constitutes a mentoring relationship is that it is “embedded within the career context” (Ragins & Kram, 2001, p.5). Mentoring exposes both the mentor and the protégée to numerous communication outlets and aids in career satisfaction.

Organizational Mentoring Needs for Women

Women face several challenges that hinder organizational advancement: work and family conflicts, lack of general management experience, exclusion from informal networks, and gender based stereotyping are just a few of the workplace barriers that women face in organizations (Catalyst, 2010). For women the benefits of mentoring relationships are critical to growth and success in organizations. Mentoring has several advantages which include aiding in career development, organizational development and advancing network opportunities (Sloan, 2008).

Mentoring relationships helps to improve an individual’s personal growth, self-worth, self-efficacy, and organizational identity (Ragins & Kram, 2001). A mentoring relationship
provides confirmation, acceptance, trust and interpersonal bonds that allows the two individuals to form a counseling relationship, a role-modeling relationship, and in some instances, a friendship (Ragins & Kram, 2001). Women need mentoring to help successfully navigate through the systems embedded in organizations that do not embrace their presence (Giscombe, 2007).

Mentoring helps organizations address work life conflict that women experience in the workplace. When a woman is paired with a mentor who supports the protégés’ need to balance work and family, the simultaneous conflicts that the two items produce can be reduced. When a mentor understands and aids a woman with dealing with the pressure of balancing work and family the conflict and demands from both roles are lessened (Giscombe, 2007). In addition to work-life barriers, women are many times not included in informal networks or “good-ole-boy” systems. A mentoring relationship can give women access to the “good ole boy” network by simply allowing them access to inner circles of men, if the mentor is a part of that network. By not having access to these informal networks women miss out on the opportunity to learn about the dominant organizational culture as well as participating in certain workplace interactions (Mckeen & Bujaki, 2007). In addition, women must also deal with gender-based stereotypes that are perpetuated by men. Recent research has suggested that senior male executives are reluctant to promote women to roles of power in organizations based on gender stereotypes (Catalyst, 2005). The workplace stereotypes that deem women as being passive, always on the defense, and negligent when supporting colleagues, become a hindrance for women in the workplace. These overt and covert forms of discrimination can be lessened if a woman teams up with a mentor who can illustrate how to demystify these gender-based stereotypes.

For African American women, the organizational challenges are similar to those of their
white female peers; however, gender and race-based stereotypes provide an additional strain on advancing Black women in organizations. Skewed presentations of African American culture and experiences may be merged into accounts of incongruent interior definitions of Blackness that are stereotypes (Coleman, 1998). Utilized as a conventional oversimplified concept, stereotypes promote patterns of a group that are associated around negative portrayals or aspects of that group. This form of categorization confines African Americans to a group of individuals that are based on category attributes that possess a negative image that unambiguously link antebellum stereotypes to contemporary representations (Coleman, 1998). For African American women, the mythical character of the mammy to justify Black women and work or the jezebel to reinforce sexual connotations of Black women as extremely promiscuous continue to follow Black women into the workplace (Collins, 1998). These examples are just a few of the reasons that women, Black women in particular, could benefit from mentoring relationships in organizations. Mentors can help challenge the historical stereotypical myths that disadvantage Black women. Not only would Black women benefit from these relationships but the mentoring literature could grow to include areas that looked at the role that mentoring and mentoring relationships play in advancing Black women in organizations.

**Organizational Mentoring Relationships**

**Formal mentoring relationships.** A mentoring relationship can begin through a formalized program or as a natural occurrence with colleagues in organizations that develop a close relationship (DeWine, 2001). Due to the numerous benefits of mentoring it is not surprising that organizations have tried to formalize mentoring relationships. Mentoring speeds up socialization into new roles in organizations, encourages socialization, provides an avenue for interpersonal interaction and enhances identification making the relationship a great way to
assimilate new organizational members (Jablin, 2001). A formalized mentoring relationship is a mutual agreement between a lesser skilled individual and a more skilled person in an organization to assist in the facilitation of organizational growth and development. Traditional formal mentoring relationships were based on a hierarchical one-on-one approach; however, more recently organizations have developed programs that include peer relationships and team mentoring to provide a collegial atmosphere (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007). Formal mentoring programs are set to fulfill specific organizational goals to enhance organizational experiences for both the mentee and the mentor (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Benabou & Benabou, 2000).

Formal mentoring programs traditionally have two goals; the first is to groom experienced incumbents for advancement in organizations, the second is to aid in the smooth adjustments for organizational newcomers (Jablin, 2001). With organizational assistance, formal programs have a set time limit to allow for smooth periods of assimilation for the newcomer. A successful mentoring program provides an orientation to the program, guidelines for both parties to follow, training and development of both parties skills, and accountability (Giscombe, 2007). Some programs are set up through a careful matching process in organizations (Sontag, Vappie, & Wanberg, 2007) whereas other programs are set up similar to blind dates where individuals are matched based on potential compatibility (Blake-Beard, O’Neil, & McGowan, 2007). Some of the benefits for formal mentoring programs include the identification of management, talent, and leadership development (Hegstad, 1999; Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007), improved organizational communication (Singh et al., 2002) as well as enhancing diversity amongst the management ranks of women and minorities (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Benabou & Benabou, 2000).
Informal mentoring relationships. Informal mentoring relationships are considered to be relationships between experienced individuals who work in the organization and who guide, protect, promote, teach, and sponsor less experienced organizational members (Jablin, 2001). These relationships are distinct from formal mentoring relationships in the sense that these relationships are not facilitated through the organization. Informal mentoring relationships develop naturally, based on the desires of the mentor and the protégée and these relationships last as long as the mentor and protégée are both in agreement that the relationship is providing beneficial outcomes (Jablin, 2001). Informal mentoring relationships have traditionally differed in the content exchanged between mentee and protégée. In these relationships, information about company history, culture, and organizational politics are deemed more relevant than job features and work groups (Jablin, 2001; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993).

Informal mentoring relationships tend to provide more career-related support versus the formal programs; however, newcomers are often not easily able to spot or develop an informal mentoring relationship (Jablin, 2001). The fact that many informal relationships are developed based on interaction, it may not be easy for a newcomer to immediately develop an informal mentoring relationship in the organization (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007). Informal relationships are not developed with set constraints as to the length of the relationship, depth of the materials discussed, or frequency in meetings. Informal relationships are also less visible than formal relationships (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007). Formal mentoring relationships may require the mentor to engage in training classes to prepare for interaction with the mentee and that is a constraint that does not exist in informal relationships. Informal relationships however, focus on the skills and knowledge that the mentor has to share with the protégé to advance their career. People tend to develop informal relationships with people they perceive to be like them.
Mentoring benefits for African American women. There has been a limited amount of scholarship reported on mentoring programs that successfully help minority group members in organizations (e.g., Haring, 1999; Sloan, 2008). The number of academic articles, book chapters, or books dedicated to mentoring minorities, particularly Black women, is extremely small. Numerous scholars have stated that mentoring aids in organizational advancement (Blake-Beard, 1999; Blake-Beard, Murrell & Thomas, 2007; Catalyst, 2010; Giscombe, 2007; Ragins & Kram, 2001; Sloan, 2008). However, statistics indicate that Black women are not matriculating through organizations at the same speed as their white counterparts (Catalyst, 2010). African American women who are in positions of leadership in organizations report rarely receiving support or having mentors who are members of their organization (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). These women share that they receive workplace assistance and advice from individuals who are not members of their workplace organization. Rather Black women who are highly successful in their professional careers often receive support from their family and friends, not members of organizations (Allen, 1995; Sloan 2008). The lack of mentoring history among this group leads many of these individuals to believe that having a mentor in the workplace is not necessary to help them advance, foster workplace relationships, or assimilate into the organization like their peers (Allen, 2000).

Recent research indicates that Black women do not have the same level of access to mentors as their peers in organizations. (Ragins & Kram, 2001; Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). This idea is consistent with why there are lower rates of career satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational involvement and turnover rates among this group, which are all results of mentoring relationship satisfaction (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). In the instance of mentoring and organizational advancement for Black women, the “glass
“ceiling” is an organizational metaphor that must be reexamined. The glass ceiling metaphor reflects women’s inability to break through the barrier of career advancement to higher executive positions. In the instance of the Black woman, the glass ceiling metaphor has been compared to a concrete ceiling (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). The glass ceiling metaphor allows for women to see that it is possible to advance to a leadership position but this metaphor only works for white women. The metaphor of the concrete ceiling applies to Black women because many Black women cannot even see the possibility of attaining a leadership position in an organization. The concrete ceiling does not allow for Black women to see the board room or the individuals who are decision makers in the boardroom, yet alone envision themselves in that very same boardroom. By having a mentor who is in the boardroom or is striving to be in that boardroom, Black women may be able to see past that concrete ceiling.

Mentoring relationships and programs can help African American women in workplace organizations in numerous ways. Not only can mentoring relationships provide a good social support system to Black women who may feel as if they are in the organization alone, but mentoring relationships and programs can serve as a personal and professional learning instrument that can aid in company morale, leadership, and professional development (Allen, 2007). A positive mentoring relationship can also help with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1998). Black women can receive support which can in turn boost personal confidence in workplace capabilities and give Black women a sense of power to be able to fully execute to their highest potential. Understanding that other members in the workplace are concerned about the well being of a Black woman can be extremely beneficial for personal and company morale. Mentoring programs can help Black women gain access to informal networks and can help them to shatter the concrete ceiling.
**Gender, race, and relationships.** Formal mentoring programs developed for women and minorities provide access for members of these groups to engage in additional organizational educational socialization, enhance upward mobility, serve as an outlet to discuss challenges faced by women and minorities, and to generally provide access to another member of the organization to serve as a role-model (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007). Even though there are some organizations that have established formal mentoring programs, there are only a handful of research studies that addresses the benefits that these programs have on the success of women and minorities in organizations.

For instance, McKeen and Bujaki (2007) proposed an agenda for dealing with gender and mentoring research. In the agenda they propose certain methodological issues and research questions that should be addressed when investigating gender in formal mentoring programs. One of the issues brought up for question was how to tackle mentoring and diversity. The authors discussed how diversity is important for mentoring relationships and how gender should be included as a primary construct for investigation. However, the article failed to address how diversity and mentoring relationships in organizations are beneficial to employees. Even though the authors mentioned diversity, they never specified if diversity represented sex, race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. It would seem that it would be asking for a lot for scholars to specifically investigate Black women and formal mentoring programs especially when the vague term of diversity is used to be all-inclusive of everyone except for white men.

Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas (2007) highlight that when questions of race and mentoring are discussed; examples from comparative studies are used to provide the answers about non-white mentoring relationships. Similar to the issues of examining race in organizations (Nkomo, 1992) examining race and mentoring relationships in organizations subject researchers
to dealing with a limited array of research. Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas (2007) discuss the key to understanding and highlighting race and mentoring in the literature should be one of inclusion. Typically, one group’s experience has been highlighted to signify the norm and any differences are rare exceptions. Even though there is substantial literature available about theories and various topics related to mentoring, there is a little literature that examines the intersection of race and organizations as it pertains to mentoring (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; McKeen & Bujaki 2007).

By examining African American executive women in workplace organizations and the benefits of mentoring relationships for this group of women, research in the organizational communication discipline and leadership and management disciplines are significantly advanced in areas where literature is scarce or nonexistent. Through an examination of the stories of Black women executives and their experiences with mentoring relationships as a tool for advancement, the generalizations made in the mentoring literature can be more reflective of other groups besides white males. By examining Black women leaders and mentoring, the area of how mentoring is defined within the context of race and gender is advanced as well.

**Research Questions**

Based on the literature reviewed that examines the communicative experiences of African American female executives, three research questions are posed for the current study. The questions focus on learning more about the communicative experiences and workplace relationships of African American female executives. The first question attempts to examine the manner in which African American females perceive their communication with dominant individuals in the workplace. Due to the historical and social nature of silencing Black women’s voice, this question attempts to understand how Black female executives communicate due to
their workplace position.

RQ1: How do African American female executives perceive their communication with dominant-culture individuals in workplace organizations?

The second research question addresses the manner in which organizational and interpersonal communication factors help Black women to achieve workplace success.

RQ2: What organizational and interpersonal communication factors do African American women executives perceive as aiding in their workplace success?

The third research question addresses African American executive women’s mentoring relationships in organizations and how they perceive formal or informal mentoring relationships to help with advancement to leadership positions in organizations.

RQ3: When African American women executives are the beneficiaries of mentoring relationships, how do these women perceive mentors and mentoring relationships as assisting them with organizational advancement?
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The purpose of this research project was to study the workplace communicative experiences of African American women executives and how successful African American women executives advance in workplace organizations with the aid of various support systems and relationships. This project is grounded in the idea that the lived experience of African American women executives provides a site of organizational exploration in order to understand how Black women executives communicate in organizations, receive support, and handle relationships. It is the belief of the researcher that a better understanding of the experiences of Black women executives could lead to an increase in the amount of Black women executive leaders in organizations.

This chapter describes the study’s research methods and includes discussions around the following areas: (a) a rationale for the research approach, (b) methods of data collection, (c) description of the participants, (d) analysis and synthesis of data, and (e) issues of validity.

**Rationale of Methods**

In the past three decades, a growing number of organizational communication scholars have employed qualitative research to study various aspects of organizational life (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Qualitative research examines lived experiences, behaviors, perceptions, and feelings about organizational functioning and cultural phenomena (Allen, 2001). Some researchers have turned to qualitative research methods due to some of the limitations of
positivistic epistemology and quantitative methods (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Different research methods tap into different dimensions of organizational reality.

It would be naïve of scholars to think that only one methodological perspective could reveal the intricacies of organizational communication (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). When compared to positivist standards, critics of the use of qualitative methods in organizational communication have deemed research unverifiable and unreliable (Lindlof, 1995; Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). However, researchers and supporters of qualitative research have stated that qualitative research is an “interdisciplinary enterprise that spans a variety of methodological positions” (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001, p. 162). The use of qualitative methods to study organizations can help make a difference in the lives of the people studied. Qualitative methods can have an activist dimension, by focusing on the wholeness of experiences of the individuals being studied and not solely on its objects and parts; the first person description of experiences allows the researcher to examine problems that not only interest themselves but can also be helpful for the subject being studied. Formulating questions and viewing experiences and behaviors of research participants can aid in helping participants understand their perceptions of their experiences which can in turn help participants change situations that they may deem as not safe or unhealthy. Interviewing, observing, conducting focus groups, and listening to narratives about organizational experiences can lead to more activist research in the field, aiding in making organizations safe spaces for people to communicate and work (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001).

Traditionally, feminist research uses qualitative research methods to study the competing narratives about gender and sexual identities (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Feminist researchers understand that there is value placed in qualitative methods to study ideas, perceptions, behaviors
and community phenomena that critique the use of gender bias. Qualitative research explores the “complexity and variability of phenomena and of human action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 9) which requires a researcher to respect the words and actions of the people and phenomena studied (Strauss & Crobin, 1998). Feminist scholarship produces knowledge and awareness about experiences based on description and understanding of phenomena rather than repeatability in numbers. When using qualitative methods, rapport and relationships are established through the involvement of the researcher and the participant. This perspective is synonymous with the feminist idea of holistic research (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Taylor and Trujillo (2001) present five issues in feminist methodology that intersects with qualitative methods and organizational communication research: (a) a concern with diversity, (b) a concern with involvement among researchers and subjects, (c) accountable investments by researchers, (d) achieving social change through qualitative research, and (e) the gendered nature of the qualitative research experience. These five issues challenge organizational scholars to use research methods that find the real needs of women in organizations in the interest of sexual justice.

With my particular research questions in mind, it was essential to allow the narratives of my research participants to guide this study by providing perceptions from African American executive women in workplace organizations. Answering the research questions I asked, examined how African American female executives perceive their communication with dominant-culture individuals in workplace organizations as well as how these women perceive receiving help in workplace organizations. In addition, I explored organizational and interpersonal communication factors to understand the Black women executives’ perception of assistance with workplace success. The only way for me to determine perception of experiences
was through the interpretation received from the voices and gestures conveyed by the women in the study. Qualitative interviews provided the opportunity to explore and understand the workplace communicative experiences of African American female workplace executives.

By placing Black women at the center of my research, I understand that I am challenging traditional mainstream ideas and approaches (Allen, 2002). Allen (2002) presents seven goals of Black feminist research in the field of communication that provides direction for taking on this endeavor: (a) to emancipate Black women, (b) to challenge essentialist notions of Black womanhood, (c) to study a variety of Black women, (d) to study domination and oppression, (e) to discover Black women’s skills and strategies, (f) to generate practical wisdom, and (g) to use procedure and methods that honor our primary purpose. These seven goals guide research endeavors by providing a framework that aims to improve the lives of African American women. By utilizing methods that place the lives of Black women stories at the center of investigation, the historical misrepresentation and mischaracterization of Black women lives can be negated.

In most disciplines, scholarly research creates a singular reality about the population they study. The study of Black women’s lives has traditionally been categorized under African American issues and women’s issues, assuming that what is average for the larger groups are the norms of the smaller group. As an example, in the past, studies about female and African American speech focused on white women and Black men drawing conclusions about Black women speech (Etter-Lewis, 1993). Once speech studies were conducted with Black women as the primary research participants, results reported vast differences in the way that African American women had been generalized from previous studies.

As a researcher, it is essential that I use methods that show respect for the people and
phenomena that I study. It can be difficult and almost impossible to emancipate Black women and use them as agents of knowledge if I cannot use their stories. Qualitative research honors and respects different aspects and complexities in research participants’ experiences (Allen, 2002). Qualitative methods such as narratives, oral histories, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and ethnographies are particularly important in helping understand the negotiation of everyday interactions that Black women face (Allen, 2002). A qualitative approach to research on Black women allows researchers to investigate and understand Black women experiences from a holistic point of view. Qualitative inquiry can help Black women celebrate the experiences of other Black women while generating knowledge, negating historical stereotypes, and providing intimate glimpses of Black womanhood.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviews. After receiving approval from the University of Alabama’s institutional review board, I conducted face-to-face interviews in order to encourage and facilitate emancipator interactions between participants (Allen, 2002). In-depth interviews capture the participants understanding of the phenomena through detailed stories and accounts of events that cannot be directly observed. Interviews allow participants the opportunity to express, in their own words, communicative practices, thoughts and feelings. Through interviewing, we can learn about “interior experiences” (Weiss, 1994, p.1). Face-to-face interviews allow time to adjust to verbal and non-verbal cues throughout the conversation as well as allowing for time to clarify statements and dig deeper into certain stories (Allen, 2002). Individual interviews also ensure the participants a safe space to express themselves freely, with confidentiality and anonymity in mind.

This study employed the use of semi-structured interviews to allow time to revise
questions, clarify answers, and probe into certain areas that may have been missed during the construction of questions (Allen, 2002). The use of semi-structured interviews fosters disclosure which yields rich data to code and analyze. Semi-structured interview questions allow for the participant to reveal answers they deem appropriate and important. The interview questions (see Appendix A) provide a glimpse into the life of African American executive women in workplace organizations by examining their communication styles and workplace relationships.

The first interview consisted of three different sets of questions that addressed the communication practices that African American executive women practice in organizations; the organizational and communication factors that help with workplace success; mentoring programs and relationships that may assist with workplace advancement. The intended protocol was designed to ask about the participants experiences. The following is a general summary list of questions used during the first interview.

When discussing workplace communicative practices of African-American females, I focused on questions that would address how the participants perceived their workplace communication practices with dominant-culture members. I asked, in what way does being the only or (one of few) African American women in an executive position influence your communication style in the workplace; how do you communicate with your colleagues in the workplace; does your communication in the workplace alter due to your position in the company; and does your communication style differ from that of your peers? Those questions were asked so that participants could access how they communicated in the workplace. I also asked about the specific communication strategies that they employ in the workplace and if their race and gender influenced their communication style in the workplace.
To answer the second research question I began by asking all participants their personal definition of success. That question was followed by asking how they communicate success in the workplace; what steps they took to get to their current position; what lessons they learned as a result of obtaining workplace success; what relationships they deem as most influential in helping to get to their level of organizational success; and, of all of their workplace accomplishments, what did they deem as most important. Those questions were asked so that the participants could express how they measured success and their own personal key factors in obtaining success.

For the third research question I focused on mentoring programs and mentoring relationships that aided in workplace success. I asked the participants whether they had been a part of any formal mentoring programs; if so, did they believe this program had assisted them in workplace advancement; whether they had any formal mentoring relationships; whether they had any informal mentoring relationships; and did they believe that mentoring relationships were a factor in workplace success and advancement for Black women. At the conclusion I asked the women to provide me with three rules that they feel are necessary for every African American women to know to be successful in workplace organizations.

The second interview consisted of a shorter list of questions that I believed were not directly addressed during the first interview as well as areas that I believed needed to be explored in more detail. Those questions in the second interview were, how they thought their peers perceived their communication style; how they thought senior management perceived their communication style; what was the biggest factor in getting to their current position; what obstacles they had faced in this position that may have influenced their communication style; and
whether they had ever felt like an imposter in their organization. I concluded with asking for a specific examples of how they received support in their current organization.

Throughout the interviews, follow-up questions and additional probing was used to encourage the participants to express, describe, celebrate and enhance their communication experiences and relationships (Allen, 2002). Each participant was given the opportunity to view each transcript once completed and only one person chose to do so. I also asked each participant if I could conduct a brief follow up discussion to ensure that I have represented their ideas correctly. Four agreed and three stated that due to the nature of their work they trusted that their ideas were represented well. During the discussion held with four of the participants they either agreed with my interpretation of their stories or probed more questions from me to think as a leader when analyzing their stories.

The participants. All but one of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location the participant deemed convenient and comfortable to talk about workplace experiences. The other interview was held via the phone. Two separate in-depth interviews with 7 women comprise this study. The first set of interviews with my participants ranged from 70 minutes to two hours. The second interview, designed to clarify any statements from the first interview, ranged from 17 minutes to 34 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded with the permission of the participant. The African-American women were solicited using a criterion that is consistent with those used by other researchers (e.g. Collins, 1993; Mainer, 1994; Parker, 2005) who have done work that examines women in top management and executive positions in workplace organizations in the United States. To recruit participants I first gathered numerous popular press publications (Black Enterprise Magazine, Ebony, Essence, Working Woman, and Fortune) that list women in top management positions and formulated a list of women who fit the criteria of
holding an executive leadership position within four positions of the chief executive officer of a workplace organization. I also used a snowball technique of gathering personal contacts, calling friends, and contacting acquaintances in various social and professional organizations to assist me in identifying African American female executives. I initially identified thirty women who fit my criteria and solicited twenty of the women via postal mail and email. Due to the time intensive nature of this study and the nature of scheduling conflicts with the women solicited, seven African American female executives became the participants.

All of the participants self-identified as African American. Four of the seven were in executive vice-president positions, within one level of the CEO, two were within two levels and one person was three levels below the CEO. They each worked in the main headquarters for their organization, which had a primary base in the United States. A list of participant occupations is provided in the table below. The participants represented six different states throughout the south, southeast, northeast, and the Midwest. The women ranged in age from 38 to 63 with the average age being 47.

Table 1-Participants Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Executive Title</th>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Vice President &amp; Deputy General Counsel</td>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>Vice President of Operations</td>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>Senior Vice President of Sale Operations</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Vice President of Operations</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td></td>
<td>State Government</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant’s bio. Simone, walking into her downtown office was very mysterious. After going through three levels of security and having two different people escort me to her private lobby, you can say I was extremely intimidated. As I waited for her secretary to escort me into her office, I heard a voice say, “Did you get dressed up just to interview me”? I was startled, to say the least, of this friendly comment coming from a very petite young African American woman. Simone was the first person that I interviewed for this project and her interview lasted the longest. When I finally arrived in her office, I was mystified by the large windows overlooking the beautiful view of the city. She had a very large sitting area surrounded by numerous bookshelves to the immediate right of her office entrance. In the center of her office was a large wooden desk covered in papers and books. On her walls were pictures of family members and friends, plaques with various accomplishments scrolled throughout, and large pieces of framed African Art. She immediately offered me a cup of coffee and our interview began in her sitting area.

Evie, the interview with Evie took place in the comfort of her home office. Even though I was a stranger, she allowed into her home so that we could have a very candid interview without interruptions. Evie was an older woman with honey brown skin; she had very curly hair and beautiful white teeth. She walked with a grandiose march and talked with a thick, rich accent. Her home office was lined with pictures of her husband, daughter, and grandson. Throughout the interview I could hear her grandson practicing the piano in the living room, she was his teacher. On her desk was a stack of papers, some newspaper clippings, and her laptop. Her home office faced the backyard and I could see trees lining the backyard for miles.

Robin, I was thrown aback at how young Robin was to be so accomplished. Almond
colored skin and coco brown hair, her office was located at her companies US headquarters. Everything in her office was run by her secretary and unless it was an immediate emergency, Robin was never to be interrupted. Robin’s office was very practical. A picture of her spouse sat on her desk and the wall was lined with photos that she had taken with friends and family members. Her office had a smaller than expected window but her desk and sitting area made up for her small view into the city.

Dominique, I met Dominique in her downtown office. Dominique was a slender woman with short dreadlocks twisted throughout her hair. She wore a fashionable pants suit with some short flat shoes. If I had to select an office to work in, it would have been Dominique’s office. Her waiting area was extremely large surrounded by windows and plants. The office was located on the 53rd floor and just like the waiting room her view was the city’s skyline. She had cherry wood furniture. Unlike the other offices there were not pictures that lined the bookshelves but more so awards and plaques. Her office, like her personality was very professional.

Diane, for our first interview Diane was an hour late. The city had been hit with a nasty snow storm the night before and she lived in the suburbs with her husband and son, who she proudly told me spoke three different languages. Diane is a six feet three inches tall, extremely slender, with long think beautiful black hair. Her office was on the 36th floor of her building and held a very homey feel to it. On the wall there were photos of her husband and her son. Her desk was extremely neat and I can tell that she was a woman that worked based on functionality of office space. Her degrees lines one wall, while the two other walls were filled with bookshelves from the top to the bottom. She has a view of the city that seemed to never end.

Sandy, if I had to pick an interview that was my favorite, it would have been the conversation that I had with Sandy. Sandy has a very beautiful smile and a laugh that is hard to
forget. When I first met her we were in her home office. On this snowy day, the shades were
drawn and the room was dimly lit. She was very laid back in her attire of t-shirt and jeans.
Throughout our conversation she snacked on coffee and a muffin and kept apologizing for eating
during the interview. Sandy was well versed on the theoretical literature of my project and was
able to quote other philosophers and scholars that I should talk to about future research.

Angela, I met Angela in a restaurant. The most private research participant of them all, I
was shocked that we were talking so candidly in a very open space. Angela has almond milk
colored skinned with brown hair with random grey streaks peaking through. She was dressed in
an expensive suit with pears hugging her neck and hanging from her ears. The restaurant was
very lavish and I must say that I am glad that she offered to pick up the tab. I really wanted to see
her office but due to her nature of work, it would have taken a whole for me to get security
clearance into the building and she did not want her coworkers to know why I was interviewing
her.

My role as researcher. Within this research project I held a very personal role. The
purpose in conducting this study was to examine stories of Black women and work, from the
vantage point of an elite group of Black women. I set out to share stories about Black women
that are not routinely told in organizational research. This group of women represented a
minority in not only the workforce but also in the African American community. I viewed the
participants as pioneers, women that took risks to get what they want, and females who did not
take being told no lightly. The participants each had a unique stance on how they viewed their
relationship with work and their current organization and the manner in which they interacted
with their family, friends, and colleagues.
I presented myself as a twenty-something Black female yearning for a glimpse inside of the participant’s world. I saw the participants in this study as a group of women who were potential role models for me and my career. My questions talked about their jobs, families, educational background and relationships. Through the sharing of their stories, I also shared my stories of work, family, and relationships. In the two interviews held with each participant, I still feel as if I only cracked the surface of their true stories. In many ways, the participants had control over what they shared, and how much of their information that they shared. I viewed these women and vessels full of hidden knowledge and I feel as if they saw me as a young Black woman and potential mentee wanting to know all of their secrets (which was true, to an extent).

The participants were very thorough with the information that they presented to me. I was referred to each participant through mutual connections and in many ways I was a stranger asking personal questions about their home and work life. Based on verbal and nonverbal cues, I was able to judge when they felt comfortable divulging deep secrets and when they felt that they had told me as much as they were willing to tell. I will say that going into this project I felt that since I was a Black woman, asking other Black women questions that my role would be easy. However, upon reflecting on the interviews certain barriers did not allow me to go as deep as I had initially hoped. The fact that I was a stranger, recording personal stories hindered some of the information that the participants were willing to share. However, I do believe though that the fact that I was a Black woman seeking knowledge from other Black women, that factor alone helped me to gain the participants stories.

**Analysis and Synthesis of Data**

In order for me to generate categories from the interviews, a microanalysis approach to the data was essential. By examining each line, sentence, and word of the data I was determined
to not conform to a structured or rigid preexisting analytic category (Straus & Corbin, 1998). I actively interpreted and reacted to the multiple categories generated from the coding of the data asking questions and making comparisons.

I engaged in a qualitative evaluation that focused on both critical and creative thinking (Straus & Corbin, 1998). During the coding process I asked several questions while making constant comparisons to the data in front of me. I compared incident to incident to classify the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and aid in a discovery of a general pattern. I then used the process of open coding to aid in generating categories and properties derived from the data. I continued the process of sampling the categories until no more categories emerged. From that point, I took the categories and wrote memos and drew diagrams that illustrate the relationships between all of the categories and properties. When that was finished, I created categories in order to assist in the development of a central story.

Validity

In order to ensure that my use of qualitative research was sound, rigorous, and an accurate reflection of the phenomena that I examined, I employed two methods of validity checks. Qualitative research calls for member checks and thick description to guarantee that I was true to the perspectives of the participants. Member checks, also known as member validation, increase the validity of qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Once I analyzed the data and came up with answers, I returned the results to the participants. The participants were able to look at the categories that were derived from their stories and the supporting factors behind the interpretation. Participants had the opportunity to agree or disagree with the categories as well as ask questions about the material present. The participants did not make any suggestions for changes to the categories and were very pleased with the manner in
which their quotations supported the information. In addition to member checks, thick
description was employed to ensure the validity of the data. Thick description entails providing
elaborate details about the study and its context so that readers can understand the results
garnered from the stories told by the participants (Patton, 2002). The use of thick, rich
description enabled me to paint a picture for the readers so that they can gain a better
understanding of the experiences of the participants. I provide thick details about the experiences
of the participants with support from direct quotes. In this area of my research, validity is
extremely important to me. Due to the use of qualitative methods, it is very important that I
employ the appropriate methods to ensure that my work was examined with rigor.

Summary

Consistent with Black feminist methodology, the use of in-depth interviews for this
project allowed my participants the opportunity to share their stories. This method promoted
disclosure in an environment that is comfortable and safe to the participants and allowed me to
place Black women at the center of my research. The interviews were semi-structured allowing
for the flow of conversation to guide the questions. Through transcription and analysis, it is my
hope that the workplace communicative experiences of African American women executives and
how successful African American women executives advance in workplace organizations with
the aid of various support systems and relationships is conveyed to all readers.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter presents results from the analysis of the interview data obtained from the seven participants who participated in this project. The data is organized according to the three research questions that guide this project and the common themes that were found from the analysis. Pseudonyms have been used for the names of the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Direct quotations are used to provide the reader with the voices of the participants. The use of direct quotes allows their stories to emerge throughout the chapter. The participants shared many stories about their communicative, organizational and interpersonal experiences in the workplace. After spending several hours with each participant it was evident that I was extremely fortunate to be in the presence of women who handled budgets for Fortune 500 companies as large as $500 million and some who supervised over 700 subordinates. The stories were candid and yielded information that helps to succinctly understand some of the issues that face this dynamic group of women.

**Research Question 1: Communication with Dominant-Culture Individuals**

The first research question in this study asked: how African American female executives perceive their communication with dominant-culture individuals in workplace organizations. The data analysis yielded three themes: (a) Planning Communication with Dominant Culture Individuals, (b) Adopting Style to Achieve Goals, and (c) Remaining Task Oriented. These themes emerged after the participants shared stories that focused on how this group of women negotiated their identities and voices in their organizations. The results show that the participants
are very strategic in how they interact with dominant-culture workplace individuals. The Black women executives are very cognizant of their social and cultural position in their respective organizations and share stories that focus on how they work against having to suppress their voice.

**Planning communication with dominant individuals.** The majority of the participants acknowledged that in order to have a successful conversation with dominant-culture individuals in the workplace, proper planning is necessary. The participants insist that planning out the message is essential in order to prevent a stressful situation with a dominant-culture member. The planning is strategic and it helps to alleviate misconstrued messages. Robin explains:

> I think anybody who is in a large organization has to be strategic. It’s not a, “Let me sit down and map out how I’m going to say this, or how I’m going do this,” but there’re so many levers that you have to be aware of when you’re trying to accomplish a goal, that I think you’re forced to be. I try to do a lot of pre-work, when I’m trying to accomplish something, you know. In one-on-one scenarios, one-on-one conversations. I try to be over-prepared when I’m dealing with something because, you know, you will lose credibility immediately.

For Robin, being in a leadership position means that she has to make sure that she covers every area surrounding her given specialty. Sandy states, “I usually go into it [a conversation] if... if, if I’m requesting a meeting, I’m going into it with a very specific agenda, and kind of a...a clear recommendation of what I need to happen, and the reasons why.” By having this specific agenda Sandy expressed that, “the message has to be very crisp, concise, clear... senior level managers don’t want you coming to them, dumping a bunch of problems. They want you to, you know, come to them with recommendations of how you want to get it resolved.” For Sandy and Robin, being in a position of leadership means that these women have to always be ready to lead while setting an example for others. Sandy hinges on an important factor of being ready for any situation that may come in the path of an organizational leader.
The participants insisted that whenever they are in situations in which they must deal with co-workers on their level or above, they are cautious. In many instances these women are cultural representatives in the workplace. They represent African Americans and women and those two cultural modifiers are not very far from the front of their mind while in the workplace. When the participants spoke about conversations in the workplace everything was very thought-out and strategically planned.

In having a strategic plan of action when interacting with dominant-culture individuals, Black women executives are prepared for any verbal confrontation that may arise. Evie states that you are more prepared because “you have the challenges in the room, you have challenges from males, first of all; and then, mostly WHITE males which made it even more difficult because, part of what you bring with you when you’re communicating, you’re bringing your life experiences.” In that same instance, Simone makes it a point when dealing with colleagues that are equal to her in rank to:

- speak my mind and I make it a point to be very cordial and nice to them. What I don’t want them to look at me as, I’m not some little gal. I picked out the ones I wanted to, I watched and I said, okay that’s the person that I want to deal with. And the rest are kind to me and I can call on them if I need something.

In this instance, both Evie and Simone acknowledge the difference of race and gender and how they both play a part in planning out their communication with members of the dominant-culture. These women understand the historical connotations that are at play when they are at the workplace and they make sure that they are cognizant of the hidden barriers in place.

Angela believes that in addition to planning out the communication situation before it happens, Black executive women must already be equipped with the knowledge and fortitude needed to maneuver corporate America. Angela says, “she needs to know how to communicate verbally or orally. She needs to know how to dress and present herself, because first impressions
mean a lot. And you’ve gotta know your stuff.” All in all, the Black female executive must always be prepared. She has to approach each communication situation ready. The judgment begins well before she opens her mouth. Colleagues and dominant-culture members are accessing her credibility based off of her appearance and her nonverbal cues.

Through her ascension through the ranks of her organization, Evie agrees with the other participants in her stance on planning out communication situations. She also adds a different view because she acknowledges how careful and cognizant that Black women executives must be during their workplace advancement, Evie explains:

I became a little more guarded with my messages, the farther up the corporate ladder I climbed…. All I’m saying is the higher up the tree you go, the more vulnerable. So, any mis-statement you make has a greater ramification. So you’re always more careful about WHAT you say and who you say it to. So I couldn’t talk about the things that a Black person might be comfortable talking about.

With being guarded and alleviating vulnerability, “you have to be strong and assertive to be in a leadership role where you’re gonna be responsible for hundreds of people. You can’t just roll over and let people treat you any kind of way”, explains Evie. It is in these vulnerable states where the participants learn that they must have a plan for everything. If they can prevent a catastrophe then they remain one step ahead of their colleagues.

Even though the workplace is a space where individuals spend 40 or more hours a week around other co-workers, creating relationships, African American female executives have a hard time feeling like they should not let their guards down. Diane says that when, “I’m at work, I need to speak, think and act as if I’m at work.” Evie supports that statement through her explanation of having to be, “very, very astute. You have to pay a lot of attention, and you have to LISTEN – not only to the words, to what is said, but to what is NOT said. What is inferred. And where the conversation might be going.” For Diane and Evie, the workplace is a place
where they must remain aware of their surroundings and must guard their actions in those surroundings.

The theme of constant planning and preparation is very resounding throughout the stories told by the participants. These women have advanced in their careers due to a constant consciousness of their intersectionality. By being aware of their race and gender while communicating in the workplace with individuals that are members of dominant-cultural structures, the participants are attentive to how people perceive them.

My participants all agreed that working in high profile positions can be stressful and in stressful situations communication can be misconstrued. Robin was very proud when she stated that, “I am cognizant of the feelings of others, and how, you know, the message is being received. But I’m very focused on the outcomes and not necessarily on how people will think of me.” In many ways Sandy’s statement is affirmation for Robin’s proclamation:

my style is probably a little more direct. I, I don’t have a problem with disagreements in the workplace. You know, in fact, I’m open to it and I welcome a healthy discussion about what the right course of action is, and I find generally, that when you have that kind of open dialogue, you come up with a better decision in the end.

Simone echoes both statements in stating that:

When I interact with my colleagues, I am vocal, I’m reflective, umm I try to be unemotional but I also try to be true to who I am as a woman. I learned early on that, I shouldn’t…I don’t have to act like a man to be in a leadership position. I don’t have to be stoic and hard. I can be feeling and engaging and empathetic and show my emotions to a certain degree. So when I’m in those settings and I’m interacting with my colleagues, I’m pretty authentic. You pretty much get what you get.

These statements are examples that the participants are aware of how they communicate effectively and are cognizant of how to remain effective in the workplace.

Overall the women know that there are numerous factors at play when they communicate in the workplace. Being aware of their race and gender and the connotations that may arise from
those positions assists Black women executives with being strategic in planning out how they will communicate with members of dominant-cultural workplace groups. These women perceive that when they communicate with dominant-culture individuals not only are there oral skills in play but also how they interact nonverbally.

**Adopting style to achieve goals.** The participants made it a point to emphasize that in almost every communication situation there are goals that must be met. The participants highlighted a conscious understanding of their individual communication style, how they feel they are perceived, and how peers have stated that they perceive their communication. Sandy highlights how she is always conscious about how her communication is being perceived by others as well as the differences in styles between men and women, Sandy explains:

> I always have to be conscious of how my communication is being perceived. And, you know, I think it’s a reality that...that women... you know, let’s set aside even the African-American piece, but just women in general, are perceived to be more emotional in their communication, and I’ve read books that have talked about how if a man and a woman respond to a situation at the same level of emotion, it might be considered, the man being just passionate, and strongly convicted about his opinion; whereas a woman is seen as emotional. And, if you combine that with being African-American, where our communication styles on average, you know, this is a generalization; but, on average, may be more direct... than some other cultures or styles that are a little more passive/aggressive. You know, I have to really be conscious of how I tailor my message — that I am being constructive, that it is perceived as non-threatening, non-emotional, concise...

Under a similar guise, Simone acknowledges that her communication style is, “very inclusive..umm it’s very open, it is very reflective. I am constantly talking about leadership. I believe that a leader should not be scared to let people speak so I’m comfortable with discourse.”

Evie points out that “women in general were not well-received in the corporate boardroom.” So even though the participants understand their own communication style and the overall goals of communication they still have an internal understanding of the history of their presence in their current position. Angela shares that, “with my family and friends, you know, I like to joke a lot
and play around and whatever. But, you know, when I communicate with my clients, you can’t do that.” In the workplace, there is a certain demeanor that the participants acknowledge that they must possess. To get their point across they must be aware of how others are interpreting their message.

By acknowledging that there is a difference in how dominant-culture individuals perceive their communication, Black women executives are cognizant of the topics that they must address when dealing with people in the workplace. Similar to the theme of strategically planning out their communication situations, understanding the importance of having communication goals alleviates difficult communication situations. Understanding their communication style and the goals that they must achieve when communicating with dominant-culture members assists Black women executives in addressing workplace issues.

Diane was on the fence with whether or not communication goals were important during her conversation with colleagues and superiors, “I don’t think that that... that that... doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with being African-American, and being a woman.” However in the same breath she states that, “But, in some ways, it does. Like, a white man could say certain things at work... that I would say are inappropriate. But if I say it I’m just as inappropriate, if that same thing came out of my mouth, uh, it would be inappropriate. You know, seen as MORE inappropriate. I think that the boundaries are just wider, you know.” For Diane, she does not interpret that her goals are due to her race and gender; however she states that she is aware that others may perceive her messages due to those two constructs.

Evie highlights additional communication goals for Black women executives to follow: you had to be able to communicate effectively, you have to be able to make your point very quickly and succinctly, you cannot sound as if you were questioning what your own decision was, you had to sound like, if you really knew, you have to portray that confidence. You have two minutes to make an impression. It’s how you greet someone and how they receive you, it will be established within the first two minutes. Someone
sizes you up. That’s the first rule. The second is, you have to be confident, but not arrogant. And you have to know your stuff. You really, really have to know what you are doing, and know your topic inside and out. And understand perseverance, because you will get turned down. And you cannot give up. You have to keep going.

In her statement, Evie highlights how Black women executives have a series of steps that they must adhere to in addition to a list of goals that they must follow in order to be credible in organizations as well as prevent the formation and delivery of incorrect messages. The women in this section highlight that they perceive that situations are positive as long as there is a clear understanding of the goals and as long as the executive follows the communication rules.

Robin states that she is “very straightforward….No matter WHO it is.” In many ways her straightforward attitude helps her to achieve her goals because her intended message is never crossed. With that notion, Robin also says that, “I try to disarm people. Um... I try not to approach things sort of utilizing or leveraging my position…. I try to focus on the intended or the required outcomes.” By personally accepting how they communicate the participants believe that they rarely have problems communicating with peers or subordinates.

I asked the women how they handled when and if a communication situation is not executed properly. Evie states, “so you have certain filters, and maybe your audience might not have even been aware of the filters that you were using. So, you come in with, “Are they going to... to, am I gonna be judged, not only on the content of my conversation, but also, on the delivery of my conversation.” Evie points out that if the situation does not go as planned, you remain aware and you never slip or let people see you get uncomfortable. Even though she made it a point to say that she rarely got angry, Diane says that, “if I get angry at work, I’ll go, you know, -Excuse me for awhile- and asking... ‘cause I’m not going to step right up, like I was talking, if we were at the mall.” In both instances the women highlight that execution is crucial to maintaining the title in the workplace. Simone credits her examination of proper
communication execution to her own personal goals. “I’m an over achiever, completely. I’m hard on myself. So in my personal life, success is about Step A, Step B, Step C and if I fall short of that then I’ve failed.” The participants exhibit that if the communication occurrence is not deemed successful in their eyes, then they may feel disheartened but they never let others know that they feel like that.

While examining her own style, Sandy took on a holistic view of how Black women in general must execute communication:

The only thing I’m gonna add is that, you know, as a Black woman, there’s...even though I feel like I’ve made a lot of progress, there’s still always gonna be certain struggles and... and, you know, I think we always have to kind of examine ourselves and get feedback that maybe other people don’t even need to do.

In Sandy’s comment she acknowledges that there is a constant examination and comparison of what the communication messages entails. In Angela’s assessment of her personal communication execution, she focuses on the overall rules and goals that all Black women must adhere to:

you have to be smarter than the next person, to get the job that you want and to keep that job. And sometimes, you don’t always get it? And we [African-Americans] have to go above and beyond, you know, what other people are doing so you can be recognized, but we must not internalize the struggle that face us on this journey called leadership.

In Angela’s comment, she acknowledges that Black women leaders have to work harder and be more aware of their surroundings than their colleagues.

When these Black women executives handle communication situations with dominant-culture individuals they know that the words that they use, the demeanor that they express, and their intended message can make or break any organizational communicative situation. The participants highlighted certain values that they use to assist with achieving successful communication situations. As for Robin, she states that in order to have a successful
conversation with a dominant-culture member, African American executives must, “show your value, and be confident in yourself, and keep looking…keep your eye on the ball. Keep trying to make things happen and it will come to you.” Black women must concentrate on the skills that they have and use those skills to help elevate them. Robin reiterates that “you’ve got skills that you gain, moving around, and the ability to assimilate into organizations and understand other organizational cultures” So for Robin’s she highlights putting yourself out there for other people to see you while understanding and adjusting to the organizations culture will help smooth out any potential problems.

Simone insists that achieving goals means that Black women must be: willing to take risks. You need to work hard. You need to be willing to work extra and hard on the weekends. You will have to do more. It isn’t fair but it’s always been that way for us. You will have to dress differently, present yourself professionally, and sometimes you may have to go in a little bit harder. But then once you get to where you’re going to be, you can be who you are.

Simone’s communication assessment, reiterates Angela’s views about Black women having to work hard. These statements signal that the participants have internalized the idea that in order for them to get ahead, they must be several steps ahead of their competition.

The theme of achieving goals is supported by Diane; she states that, “I put a lot of pressure on myself to perform BETTER than my peers. Not to outshine my peers, ‘cause that... that kind of makes it look like it’s a competition?” So not only must these women understand their goals they must also plan on how these goals will be accomplished. Evie supports, “making sure that you bring your very best to the table. Because people expect that you are NOT the best. Some back here that have seniority, most were questioned... not because you’re... necessarily because you’re Black, but because you’re a woman.” The theme of, adopting style to achieve goals, was supported by all participants. The women were able to acknowledge the communication goals that they use when they exchange dialogue with other members of their
organizations. Similar to the theme of planning communication with dominant-culture members, having a certain communication style is also very important. Both themes are very strategic in nature and illustrate the manner in which Black women executives perceive the importance of communicating with dominant-culture individuals.

**Remaining task oriented despite obstacles.** Through my analysis, it was apparent that when my participants were involved in communication situations with dominant-culture members in their organizations, they always perceived themselves as remaining professional. It was business first in all organizational situations. Despite the numerous issues and situations that may influence the development and success of an organization, executives cannot internalize the problems. It is the duty of senior executives to have solutions to organizational problems while not allowing personal problems to interfere. Participants mentioned that even during communication occurrences that may have been well thought out and planned from A to Z, sometimes a disturbance may occur. Simone summarizes that statement by saying, “you have to take all of those influences from the outside that are related to the organization and come into the organization and figure out how to keep it functioning.” In many ways it is easy to say that other executives have it easy because they delegate responsibilities but when Black women are leaders they have to take a holistic view of everything going on around them and the organization that could have a negative impact and effect on the organization. It is in this same sense that Black women executives must sustain work or the organization even when problems arise or they feel as if they may not be performing at their peak. When negative situations arise, the participants consistently shared that they had to keep focus at all times and never sway from their intended goal or message.

The reason many of the women in this study achieved exceptional organizational
advancement in organizations was through the relationships that they fostered, but those were mainly through making sure that they kept the goals of the organization at the forefront. The women believed that completing work must be the number one goal while in the organization. In doing their jobs they are not afraid to make tough decisions. Simone reiterates that by stating, “don’t take my kindness as weakness because if I have to do what I have to do or make that decision, I’m going to do that.” Not to say that the workplace communication situation will be hostile, Angela is reassuring in stating, “I like to be approachable so my peers feel like they can come and talk with me about anything. I am receptive and open to new ideas.” Diane echoes the statement of being open to peers while also acknowledging that work is work and “sometimes Black women have to be careful with what you say. You might not speak the same as some of your peers, but you know that that’s not acceptable... in the same way. And that probably has more to do with being a woman.” Overall the participants are more focused on making sure that their communication in the workplace is focused solely on work and helping peers and subordinates get their jobs done.

Two participants highlighted how Black female executives are resourceful with their skills and talents to remain task oriented. Through the use of her skills and talents Sandy affirms that she is:

straightforward and honest about what the situation is, what’s going well, what isn’t... um, very focused on solutions and outcomes. And my communication, um... my style is collaborative. I like to get input from the entire team, at our levels of the organization, I expect participation from the team. I expect them to think and I challenge them to... to look at how things could be better, and to give me their honest feedback. My style is about accountability. I hold myself accountable and I hold my team accountable, and I hold my colleagues accountable, for what they need to do as part of the solution. And, I try to balance being warm and personable, you know, when I came. And then, you know, there are times, unfortunately, when you have to take out some of the personal piece when needed, and stick to really a very tough business decision, sometimes, that can have a personal impact on somebody’s life, but unfortunately, in a leadership role, you have to make decisions based on the business requirement.
In Sandy’s statement she highlights how there are a conglomerate of skills that must be tapped into and used in order to communicate with dominant-culture people in the workplace. Sandy understands her communication style and uses her unique qualities to accomplish her job. Centering work as the primary focus for being in the organization keeps her team on task which in turn keeps her on task. By remaining task oriented even during difficult situations, she is able to communicate what needs to be done while getting it done.

When discussing how important it was to keep the organizations business at the forefront Evie makes a comment about her lack of friends in the organization, “I found that it was very difficult to make friends in the workplace. And the friends that I’ve had, I usually make sure that they have absolutely nothing to do with my department, my unit, my division or my area.” Evie’s acknowledgement of not being able to make friends in the workplace in many ways centers on how important it is to not mix business with pleasure. None of the women considered their colleagues friends because at this stage in their career, collegial work relationships are more important than adding a set of new friends. Everything at this point in their career is about the business of the organization.

Research question 1 highlights and addresses how Black female executives communicate in their workplace organizations. The participants acknowledge that they plan out their communication situations. During their planning they remain aware that they will be judged based on their race, gender, appearance, and professionalism. Even though they make it a point to not internalize these issues, they keep their differences at the forefront of their thoughts during preparation. In addition to being prepared they acknowledge that they have a list of goals that they work to achieve in each situation with dominant-culture members. Finally, the participants respond to communication situations in the workplace by placing the goals of work first in all
that they do. Even if it means sacrificing friendships in the workplace they constantly reminded me that they are in the organization to do a job and that they would have never made it to their current level without a clear understanding of that.

**Research Question 2: Communication Factors that Aide Workplace Success**

The second research question guiding this study asked: what organizational and interpersonal communication factors African American women executives perceive as aiding in their workplace success. The data analysis yielded three themes: (a) An Understanding of the Self, (b) Appreciation of Organic Interpersonal Relationships, and (c) Willingness to Sacrifice. These themes emerged after the participants shares stories that centered on multiple factors, in which the women believe contributed to their organizational success. The participants all stated that the most important factor in becoming a successful executive was to have a clear understanding of your identity. The women also contributed success to having and appreciating organic relationships. The results will also illustrate how the women identify personal and organizational sacrifice as a key mechanism in helping them advance in the workplace.

In order to answer the research question, it was important to understand how the participants define success, so each participant was asked to give their definition of success. Some definitions were very short and to the point, others were more elaborate and defined, some women defined success from the standpoint of organizational success while others defined success based on familial relationships. I have included all seven participants definition of success in order to give the reader a better understanding of how the women perceived this word.

For Robin, success is:

achieving an acceptable percentage of your potential. A lot of people communicate success based on title, which is the easiest thing. Or, money, you know, position, access to power, those kinds of things. You know, for me, um... success is in seeing things done well. You know? And seeing the benefit of it.
Sandy has a more familial view of success; her response was:

I feel successful because I am a wife and a mother, and I spend a lot of time doing volunteer work... oh, and by the way I happen have a job that I like. And... and that’s success to me, because I feel like I can balance my life professional, I can be challenged in the workplace. But if that workplace success impacted my ability to be a wife and a mother, I would be miserable, so that would not be successful to me. So, and then I also feel successful because I feel like I can go to work every day and be who I am, and not compromise my integrity or personal values, in order to assimilate... into the work environment.

Angela’s definition of success was short and to the point. “Getting to the wherever, where you want to be in your life, and being happy with what you’re doing, and happy with yourself.

Simone’s definition was also very succinct, “I think success is a person’s ability to think about a goal or an objective or a vision and move to completing or accomplishing that goal, vision.”

Diane took on a more reflective tone through her description of success by explaining success from the standpoint of career placement:

the most successful places were places where I feel like I’ve grown the most, are places I can be sort of 100% the work me. let’s see...uh, that people appreciate that, they understand that, and, uh... and that they don’t try to be somebody different. 

Evie defined success as, “getting the job you paid for, and building a reputation that’s solid, so that even when you’re not there or something happens that’s... if it is negative, people will not believe it because they don’t believe that that is you. I think you’re successful when you’re able to bring other people along with you to share in that success.

Her definition of success mirrored her experiences as an executive that has climbed the corporate ladder through her experiences with multiple organizations.

Lastly, Dominique defined success as the “ability to have some freedom and flexibility in what you do, enjoying what you do. And if you can make a living... whether, you know, financially from it, then to me, that’s success”. Dominique reiterates that success is being happy with the company that you work. If the person is able to enjoy what they do for a living, then
they have reached success.

Even though no one definition was the same I was surprised that none of the participants attributed success to monetary possessions. In many ways, this general acknowledgment of success as being happy with whatever you are doing sets the stage for the answers to the second research question.

**Understanding of the self.** The participants in this study discussed several different avenues that they took in order to make it to the position that they are in today. Stories centered on what they believed contributed to their success. In these stories, the women addressed several obstacles that made them stronger individuals ready to handle the business world. Throughout every incident the women would reflect on how important knowing who they are or focusing on their identity assisted them in getting through easy and tough times. Identity was a key concept in stories that focused on organizational advancement. Out of all of the statements made by the participants about their identity and organizational advancement, Evie’s comment, “know what you are and the first thing is, you ARE an African-American woman” stands out in a resounding way. Her statement signifies that no matter how things may be do not forget your identity, your true self. Sandy’s comment, “you don’t have to sell your soul to work for a company” is extremely powerful in the sense that sometimes people may sacrifice their integrity or values in order to make a deal in an organization, but Sandy advices against that. In the ultimate form of being true to who you are, when maneuvering the ranks of an organization, these Black women assert the need true to stay true to who they are. All of the participants proudly acknowledge that they are African American women. Diane highlights that, “You can annoy me more by not trying to act like I’m NOT African-American. Like, if you just laugh at me, and you never say I’m African-American?” They just, to me, it’s just... you’re trying to avoid something that’s
obvious.” Diane appreciate, respects and expects you to acknowledge her race, “it doesn’t bother me for you to say I’m African-American or whatever... whatever the case might be.” The participants embrace their identity and feel that it is important for peers and other workplace colleagues to do so as well.

When visiting the participant’s offices, the women would have numerous artifacts that were cultural representations of who they are. Pictures of themselves with family members lined every desk. Plaques with degree information hung on the walls, book cases filled with awards supported corners and in some offices various pieces of cultural African art designs displayed creativity. It is my belief that these artifacts allow office visitors an opportunity to engage in pieces of each executive’s life. In each discussion about the importance of how they embrace being Black women and how important it is for others to acknowledge their identity, there was a sense of I women asserting, upfront, that they know who they are and the find their identity unique and important.

The participants discuss how many of the important lessons learned through gaining workplace success was understanding their identity and staying true to who they defined themselves as. Being conscious of their identity went a long way. Robin states that, “I think one lesson is, you have to be sort of self-defined, and you have to draw on your inner sense of who you are, and your inner sense of strength.” Sandy points out that she needed to, “be true to myself as to who I am as an individual, which IS a direct and honest person.” Statements from Diane also support those same ideas, “you have to be yourself and be true to yourself. Understand who you are and what...what your abilities are. Be true to yourself, know who you are, and be comfortable in your own skin. But be yourself.” While working in large organizations, getting lost in the company can be easy. There are numerous situations that
executives face that can challenge how they view themselves.

If Black women find themselves in a situation that questions their identity, they must stand their ground. Robin reiterates that, “people can’t see you in a certain place. They don’t see you, and therefore, you don’t see yourself. It’s all about how you look at somebody. It’s all about what you’re willing to SEE when you look at them.” This thought is controlling. Black women must stay centered and focused on their identity so that they can see themselves when obstacles come. “You can’t be strong without identity. You can’t be in these places [organizations] without a sense of purpose and a sense of strength, a fountain of strength, and knowing where and how to draw on that”, states Robin. Knowing what their identity represents allows Black executive women to, “put the defensiveness aside, to hear it, and not that you have to believe everything that is said to you, but you have to be willing to listen, and dissect it, and to see what little nuggets might be in there that really DOES apply to you,” claims Evie. Even though people may be critical of your work, pass you up for a promotion, or question your belonging to the group, Black women executives must be able to take constructive criticism without internalizing it while staying strong in knowing who they are. Diane understands her identity and places her Blackness as a form of her self-acknowledgement very high. She understands that she is the only African American executive in her organization, which in many ways forces her to be conscious of her race:

I think because I am the only one, there’s an expectation that I am LIKE somebody else, so I can be me. But to some extent, I also put up with that, um, because there ISN’T anybody else like me. So I don’t want to be, uh... perceived as being too different. I don’t mind being different and having a different style, but I don’t want to be perceived as being TOO different.

Diane’s position in her company made her extremely aware of her identity. She discussed that as the only African American in leadership, she is very prideful of her accomplishment in
penetrating the company’s leadership wall.

In Sandy’s organization, the few Black women that are leaders, “talk to each other”, these women, “coach each other through situations, coach each other on who the audience is… I think, as African-American women, you have to understand the general stereotypes and perceptions people have but do not internalize those perceptions, do not allow others thoughts to help you create your thinking of who you are.”

Understanding your identity and staying true to yourself is not easy. Evie was verbally beaten down pretty bad in her escalation to a leadership positions in her company and she attributes that to her not knowing herself, “I had to overcome my OWN lack of confidence and my own fear of failure, because I did have that. Because I had risen pretty high at the time, and to see other people around me, most of whom were not like me, was frightening.” So in order to face that fear of being alone in an organization yet having to stay true to yourself you have to be courageous. Simone states that, “when you are a person of color your lived experiences are so different.” She highlights that you should not internalize those differences but use the tool of courage. Simone affirms that, “courage encompasses a lot because courage means you have to be willing to change the status, stand up for the things that you think are right, fight the establishment, have a voice and give others a voice, share your leadership, and most importantly remain true to yourself, that takes courage.” Both Evie and Simone speak on acknowledging their differences with colleagues in the workplace, but not allowing those differences to stray them away from their goals.

The data supporting the theme that identity is an integral part of organizational success for Black executive women highlight that knowing who you are, staying true to who you are no matter what obstacles may come your way, not allowing others to define you or discredit your
identity are all key tenets in being successful in organizations.

**Organic interpersonal relationships.** Throughout each interview the participants reflected on key relationships that had a positive impact on their organizational advancement.

One key element about these relationships was the nature in which they formed. Many of the key relationships that the participants focused on were relationships with their family. Sandy focused on how her relationship with her mother, her first mentor, helped to elevate her to her current organizational role:

> she had achieved a high level of success, professionally, and she balanced the family and so, everything that she represented was what I modeled myself after. So she was most influential because, beyond the career success, her personal values were... were what I modeled after.

Simone discussed how her relationship with her husband was the most influential relationship that she had, “if you’re married, your spouse influences your decisions that you make about your professional life and helps you to see the bigger picture” Evie focuses on how the support and understanding from her family allowed her to rise as high as she did in her organization:

> My family had to be supportive, because I worked LONG hours. And as I already explained to you, I even had to do assignments, and I traveled a lot, I lived away from home. If my family had not been supportive, then it would not have worked. If my husband had complained, either our marriage would have failed or a job would have failed. But, he supported me.

From there Evie highlighted how her relationships with friends helped her to achieve success, “So, EVERYBODY was supportive. My friends wouldn’t let me quit, when I got afraid.”

Dominique states, “I think I’ve gotten as far as I have, by... you know, the contacts and connections in addition to people knowing, you know, what my worth is.” Sandy speaks of these similar contacts but more so from an organizational aspect, “the biggest piece is that I’ve built relationships with a lot of people, and have a strong reputation in the company, that has helped build bridges to other places that I wouldn’t have been able to get to on my own.” Robin assess
that the key to successful relationships that help with advancement, “it starts with who you align
yourself with, and by that, who you know… people make the mistake of saying, you know, “I
want you to mentor me ‘cause I want you to help me get to where I want to be.” Right? And
that’s just not natural.” The participants understand that having relationships that are supportive
and trustworthy assist them with accomplishing their goals.

The participants focus on the naturally organic relationships, spouse, family, friends and
acquaintances in the organization. Robin highlights that:

There are those with whom I have a natural proclivity, and those with whom I don’t. You
know? And the people that I tend to have that, you know, natural proclivity to, you
know, I… obviously would communicate and interact with in a different way than I would
those who I don’t.

This mere acknowledgement highlights the notion that the group of participant’s interpersonal
relationships are deemed highly successful when they form relationships with those individuals
who serve key integral roles in their life. In terms of understanding the organizational advantage,
Sandy highlights that “there is a formal way of doing business and then there’s the informal
relationships that really are the things that are gonna, you know, take you beyond the manager
level.” It is that understanding that keeps the participants at an advantage from other individuals
trying to obtain the level of success that these women have gained. Sandy’s personal experience
with using organic relationships for her advancement came after being stagnant in her
organization for five years. For Sandy, “the networking really was kind of like the… the piece
that made the difference, though, because there was, I mean, it took me almost five years to get
my first promotion.” Sandy also states that:

once I started building relationships with people who were doing well, a lot of doors
started opening up and, in my company relationships are very important? And, and
fortunately, I LIKE relationships. You know, and so, um… that, to me, is where the
difference comes in. You’re only going to get so far – especially as a Black female –
you’re only going to get so far solely based on hard work; and then, it has to become...
there is a point where the relationships, and having advocates in the company push for you, is really going to be the difference on how far you go. You know, you might be able to get there with your hard work, but when you start really talking about having significant leadership roles, there are a lot of soft skills that are going to make the difference. And the technical skills become a much smaller portion of your success...

Had it not been for the relationships that Sandy built with members of her organization, she acknowledges that she would not be in her current position. Her statement reifies the idea that building genuine relationships are important for organizational growth.

Organic interpersonal relationships in many ways are the glue that keeps this group of women focused and obtaining goals. Having family, friends, and acquaintances that are rooting for your success and ready to uplift during hard times is one of the only ways the participants stated that made it successfully through their organization.

**Willingness to sacrifice.** Throughout the interviews many of the participants shared very personal and intimate stories about sacrifices that were made that in many ways shaped their careers and propelled their advancement. Every participant shared a story about having to make some type of sacrifice, whether it was personal or professional, that in many ways made them successful. However, it is through perseverance, a good support system and remaining true to their identity that helped these women get up despite a massive blow to their self-esteem and in some cases their ego.

Simone tells the story of how, “Whether it is the establishment, whether it is individuals, the biggest barriers professionally have been the gatekeepers that were already here [in her organization], that have made this experience sometimes so unbearable that I thought why am I doing this.” This included fighting the status quo, that included African American leaders that were here that treated me like how dare you. Who are you? They treated me so bad and then once I was okay and Black enough then I had a series of like five or six White women who did everything but try to cut my legs from underneath me.
During this conversation she recalls how she had sacrificed the development of her family due to the stress of her job:

I was pregnant twice and lost both of those babies, second trimester babies. So I had given birth to them and helped them. Both of them were five months. There are stressors and factors that all become a part of that whole dynamic in your own achievement.

As a researcher I never expected the stories told by the participants to become so candid. Simone expressed how in many ways her career had placed strains on her marriage; however she was determined to not allow her career to interfere with her overall happiness.

Evie spoke about sacrifices made in her workplace organization through public humiliation. During her rise in corporate America she always viewed herself as a social butterfly, however she did not know that management did not favor social butterflies. Evie tells the story about how efficient she was in the organization. She would finish all her work before lunch and make it a habit to visit and talk with her peers. Little did she know, she was more so of a hindrance to her peers than a friend. Evie recalls being publically scolded by her boss:

She put me over in the corner, and she told me, she said, “You know, I see potential in you. I see the potential for you to either succeed, or to fail. The choice is yours.” So, she sat me over there. Everybody talked about me, you know, I became the... you know, but they talk about me ANYWAY. But I thought I was popular, and I really wasn’t!

Evie used that experience as a reminder that the organization is a place for work. That experience served as a stepping stone for Evie to prove people wrong about her. Many acquaintances in her organization stopped hanging around her after that incident and Evie used that public humiliation as motivation.

Robin refers to sacrifice in the metaphoric term of going through the fire. She does not speak of any one incident but more so speaks of how to handle incidents of discrimination and rejection in the workplace:
You know, and be able to stand in the middle of it all. You know, because once you, once you start going up and you start taking on different things, you don’t KNOW how it’s gonna come out. You don’t KNOW that it’s always gonna work. You don’t know... you just don’t know the outcomes. There’s risk....You know? There’s risk. And you are exposed, and you could fail. You could fail miserably. You could go down in flames! You know? You could have things completely flip on you through no reason of your own. There’re lots of things that can happen, but the deal is not... THAT that stuff happens. The deal is, how do you stand in the midst of all that stuff? What kind of leader are you? How do you feel about yourself? Do you keep getting up every morning? You know? Can you shake it off? Can you put it in perspective? Can you keep going? Or will they break you?

Robin’s attitude about organizational sacrifice is from the standpoint that it happens but you must bounce back. Her views and thinking align with Sandy when she states that:

if I talk about overcoming obstacles, it was probably to move from being, um... one who complains about the problems to one that, um, says, “Okay, yeah. Let’s be honest. This is a challenge for us, but, you know, a lot of times challenges in a company aren’t because people are intentionally trying to create challenges?

Taken from a more optimistic stance, Sandy did not regard her obstacles as others causing harm but more so, she was not ready for the situation.

Throughout her interview, Angela was very proud in stating how hard she worked and how many times her work would go unnoticed. There is one story in particular that Angela tells about receiving national recognition from her organization but being looked over in receiving the award:

well, at the time, the boss did not want me to step up. I was selected for this Director’s Award, which is a big award presented by the Attorney General. And they did not want me to go! Prejudiced, since I worked... they didn’t want me to go. I found out about it, I think, by almost nearly last minute. So, because they called me like three days before and asked me was I coming? And I didn’t know anything about it. So I asked my boss at that time, about it and he said, “Well, I told this other person that either he could go or you could go.” He was like my immediate boss. So I went and talked to him about it, and of course I knew that was not true ‘cause he would have definitely told me that, you know. And I asked him about it and he said, “You know I wouldn’t let you go!” And he said, “You’re all the one doing all the work, you go.”
During this incident Angela learned that even though her divisional boss was on her side her immediate boss was extremely shady. Angela held back how she really felt about this situation and this person in the organization. However she did elaborate on the situation by explaining that sometimes you have to fight for what is rightfully yours and not allow others to always steal your shine. Angela also recalls being passed up for a promotion two years in a row and then finally being promoted without the perks and benefits that other members of the organization had received. “I think I got... one promotion was kind of like a... an apology. You know? “I’m sorry, we’ve done you wrong, and this is gonna make it up for it?”When I asked how come she never complained, she stated that she,” picked her battles” and that sometimes in organizations you have to learn to sacrifice because ultimately you will get what you want.

Overall the women agree that in obtaining workplace success in organizations you must be willing to make sacrifices and sometimes the sacrifice that is being made is not always cut and dry. It is evident to see that Simone sacrificed her family for her job but in other ways listening to Evie and Angela describe scenarios in which they made sacrifices shows a new lens of being willing to sacrifice. Angela described two moments in which she was discriminated against but due to her not wanting to stir the pot, she sacrificed and suppressed her voice. Evie sacrificed her identity, at the end of the day being put in a corner helped to elevate her to a being looked down upon by her peers.

The answer to Research Question 2 highlights and addresses how Black female executives perceive organizational and interpersonal communication factors as aiding in their workplace success. In this section each participants defined what success meant to them. Those definitions guided the remaining portion of the answer to research question 2. The participants identify that understanding the unique aspects of your identity is central in surviving workplace
organizations. Due to the nature of difficult situations that may arise, these women say that in order to pass the challenges faced, Black women executives must remain true to themselves. Additionally, the women address that organic interpersonal relationships are the key to helping them succeed. Different from interpersonal relationships that may form with peers in the workplace, these relationships are happen-chance. They are relationships with family members and friends that do not play a role in their organizational life. Lastly, the participants address how Black women in leadership positions must sacrifice something in order to succeed professionally. If it is not a personal sacrifice it is an organizational sacrifice.

**Research Question 3: Help from Mentors**

The third and final research question in this study asked: when African American women executives are the beneficiaries of mentoring relationships how do these women perceive mentors and mentoring relationship as assisting them with organizational advancement? The data analysis yielded two themes: (a) Mentors Alleviate Organizational Vulnerability and (b) Mentors Help Penetrate Informal Occupational Networks. These themes emerged after the participants in this study highlighted that in order for Black women to succeed and advance in organizations, mentoring relationships are the key to success. Through this study the participants suggested that African American women must concentrate on alleviating organizational vulnerability while moving towards a natural proclivity to penetrate informal occupational networks. In other words, African American women must take action in ensuring that mentoring relationships are helpful in assisting in advancement.

**Alleviating organizational vulnerability.** Under this theme the first set of responses that I received from participants was that when they started working they did not even think that it was possible to obtain a higher level of success besides being in the sales room or performing as
The assistant, but they all did. Not all of the participants felt like that but Sandy in particular states, “I guess what I would say is, when I first came into this organization, I... I never even thought it would be possible for me to even be a VP level, ‘cause I just felt like, I don’t see anybody that looks like me. So it’s just not possible.” Following along with the metaphor that states that African American women suffer from what is called the concrete ceiling in organizations. Black women do not even realize that there is a board room above their heads nor are they able to see that there is a seat for them at the table.

The participants highlight certain roles that their mentors play for them in order to alleviate organizational vulnerability. Robin states that her mentors:

They have strength, they have the ability to deal with adversity, they have the ability to deal with uncertainty, they have the ability to just rely on good information and their own instincts to make things happen. And they’re willing to take the heat when it all goes down, you know?

Sandy contributes to this argument by stating that the mentor serves in a role of advocacy. “If you have a mentor who can be an advocate, who can help you get connected with people that you otherwise wouldn’t know you are a step ahead of the crowd.” Sandy said that her mentors were advocates and opened doors that she would have never knocked on. “So, I’ve had mentors who have reached out to other leaders and said, “I want, I want you to meet with Sandy.” The mentor mentee relationship should be one based on functionality. There should be some purpose to help put you at ease. “You need to... need to have a mentor, at least one. And I recommend more than one. You could have a mentor based on functionally what you’re trying to do. You could have a mentor based on just other, broader skills that you like to emulate,” states Sandy. Dominique agrees that, “it’s important for, you know, us to have a mentor. And for Black women to really take advantage of that relationship.” Simone is an advocate for having mentoring relationships. She states:
I don’t know how else I could do it. I don’t know how anyone could do it. Because if you are in any leadership position it is lonely. Who you gone talk to? You gone call your staff in and say you all really make me sick and I need to fire you. So what should I do? Or there are decisions that you cannot discuss with anyone. Or sometimes you have to make decisions and you just don’t really know if it’s the right one. That’s going to affect your whole organization. Or you have to make a decision about yourself professionally that is going to affect the whole organization. Do I stay? Do I leave? Do I stop all of the work that I’ve done right now and leave? And you’ve got to be able to talk to someone, for me I can’t make those decisions in isolation.

Mentors are people that not only help the participants navigate through situations in organizations that they may not have a clear understanding of, but they also serve as a listening ear to help the participants address problems that are unique to leadership.

Sandy campaigned for a mentoring relationship in her organization once she learned the benefits of the relationship. Sandy states that, “after my first promotion I said, it really would be nice to have a mentor, because I realize how important it is and... and, you know... I don’t have access to some of the people that I think I need to have access to.” Simone would say that in many ways Sandy was “alleviating personal vulnerability” by seeking out a relationship within the company. Sandy was happy that, “the company took that feedback and created a mentoring program. Initially, with Blacks and Hispanics who were at the director level and above. And, ironically, you know, how things work out.” Sandy’s company listened to her story and worked with her to imitate a mentoring program. Sandy credits the mentoring relationship in her organization to giving her a voice to speak up for herself, allowing her to help others that needed those same type of relationships.

Simone expressed a different side to the mentoring relationship. She states that:

I have gone to my mentors just in tears and crying and I know that I can say to them I don’t feel worthy or I’m afraid. Or this is stupid with no condemnation. And to be able to be that authentic with someone, it’s scary because you don’t know what they’re going to do with it.
Her acknowledgement of being in a very low mental point highlights the vulnerability that women face when in leadership positions. To further alleviate confusion that may arise, Evie advocates for having multiple mentors on different levels. Evie says:

"My mentors on the job. Critical, critical to have good mentors! And that doesn’t mean that they all have to be in a higher position than you are. A mentor can be a colleague, it can be a subordinate, it could be somebody in the control room. I had mentors throughout the company. Some in the same area that I was in; some that had nothing to do with it. I had mentors at every level. I had, mentors that were in the positions that I WANTED to be in, and mentors that were in areas that maybe were affiliated with us, but not necessarily part of our organization.

Having more than one mentor provided advice from different vantage points allowing Evie to have multiple points of view of situations that she may not understand. Evie’s description of her relationships with multiple mentor’s supports the idea of feminist mentoring (Dua, 2007) which supports the idea that women should engage in multiple relationships with multiple women holding various organizational positions. This type of mentoring allows the mentee to have several different vantage points in various levels in their organization.

Once the participants highlighted why they had mentors and the type of mentoring relationships that they had, they also talked about areas of mentoring that was unique for them. Simone says that she prefers to have a mentor who looks like her, “I know that mentoring isn’t about race but for me I sought out Black women because for me, I need that perspective. But it’s also uncomfortable because Black women can be cruel and judgmental and you just don’t want that when you are trying to figure out your way.” Diane elaborates by stating that many times Black women get lonely in the organization and they want to seek out faces that look similar to theirs:

"If you, if you’re feeling lonely or alone, or somebody doesn’t understand, think of other African-American women. We are here, um... for my company, an African-American woman sits on the board. And so, I just call her from time to time to get advice. She will call when she is in town and when she is here, we have lunch. She’s been a"
friend. So, you’ve gotta pick those people who will support you and, um... and help to advance your career.

In that same instance, when picking out those relationships you have to be honest with yourself, Sandy states that:

You have to be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, and that’s both from a technical standpoint as well as some of the interpersonal skills, like communication style, um, the way you dress, the way you... communicate, whether... I think you really have to be honest about where you are, and, um... and, and... and I say that because a lot of us don’t (chuckles), don’t want to acknowledge that... that we have some gaps, or that we may not be as polished in certain areas.

That honesty helps Black women to understand the role that they are in and the type of relationship that they are on the verge of forming. “Mentoring relationships are about, are far more important for... for us to have mentors beyond ourselves so that we CAN see what the possibilities are,” states Sandy. Even though Black women may acknowledge that they have areas that may need to be polished, actually having someone beyond your scope to help with that polishing is very important. Angela concludes that you cannot:

be afraid to stretch yourself, because, um... if, if... if you’re never uncomfortable, you’re probably not stretching enough… stretch yourself, challenge yourself, and... and, and put yourself out there as someone who is, is... you know, willing to go above and beyond, seek out those relationships and use that knowledge and connection to your advantage.

All in all, mentoring relationships are about risk taking. The participants take a chance in allowing someone to become actively involved in their life. Developing relationships of this magnitude takes away some level of control but in doing that the participants challenge themselves to grow.

The participants were very open and honest during the talk about the importance of mentoring relationships. Even though none of them had been the beneficiaries of formal mentoring relationships, they all acknowledged how important it is to have some sort of mentor
Mentors help penetrate informal occupational networks. There are always stories about how some of the best business deals are made on the golf course or in the country club, well those stories are true but the sad reality about those stories is that many times African American women are not in the position to participate in that network. When asked why they believe that Black women may not be included in many of the occupational networks, Sandy replied, “there’re some general perceptions (chuckles) that people have about Black women? I think, in general, we don’t have the same informal access. We’re not necessarily... YOU might be golfing on Saturday with Joe, you know, the leader from the other department, but you may not even be invited. Simone says that she believes the problems lie in the fact that:

women of color don’t create enough circles for one another. We don’t come together just as women. It’s a whole issue with trust. And so now, I’m purposely seeking out those women who are not Black. Because I think you have to have balance. You need to create relationships with people that you wouldn’t necessary have them with.

The participants address that stereotypes can hinder the formation of relationships that ultimately help with advancing in the workplace.

Evie looked at the situation more so from the position that, “it’s really not all about who you are. It’s really about who knows that you know what you know” standpoint that supports several ideas that relationships are half of the battle. Simone says that in order for the relationship to work properly, “sometimes mentoring relationship happen very naturally and sometimes you have to seek them out.”

Exposure creates the opportunity for mentoring relationships to form.

Sometimes breaking into the informal networks depends on the organization that you represent. Sandy works for a conservation company, “one very much relationship-based, very white male dominated, you know, where people knew each other through being neighbors, the
country club and, you know, so didn’t have any of those connections, when I came in.” So she talks about how she sought those relationships so that she could become a part of those circles, “you know, you can tell early on, like a lady who is my mentor now, used to be my boss, her scope of influence was so significant, you know, you could just tell that she was like a go-to person in the company. Everybody knew her, she was always asked to be on various teams, she’s a problem solver, she’s... she’s collaborative, and... and I watched her move, you know, very quickly up the chain.” Sandy states that it was at that moment that she knew she wanted to be like her mentor. She witnessed the advancement and in many ways had a chance to follow a blueprint made by someone who she had a very close connection with.

Dominique says that is when women realize they can become a part of those relationships, the scope of advancement can be limitless, she said that her relationship with her mentor was a give and take she, “saw something in me and decided that, you know, if she made it this far, that there may be, you know, more to it, and she gave me an opportunity. And, I think she’s been satisfied, I’ve certainly been satisfied. Speaking once again about mentoring relationships being more so about risk taking, Dominique addresses that the mentors are investing a lost into their mentee as well. The mentoring relationship is reciprocal and both parties must feel that something is being gained from the relationship.

The answers to Research Question 3 highlight and address how African American female executives perceive mentors and mentoring relationships as assisting them with organizational advancement. The participants are extremely vocal in stating that it is imperative for Black women to have mentors. Some of the participants addressed needing a Black woman to mentor them and others said the color did not matter. All in all, the women credit their advancement with those magical mentoring relationships. Not only do the mentoring relationships help the
Black women executives deal with unfamiliar situations but mentoring relationships have assisted the participants with penetrating networks of people that are traditional not available to them.

Chapter 4 has allowed readers to take a step into the thoughts of the participants involved in this study. The Black women executives were able to shed light on issues about a select group of Black women that rarely share their stories in this type of setting.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

While working on this project, I made it a point to present work that would shed light onto a group of Black women who were familiar to my lived experience. When interviewing the participants for this project, I constantly reflected on stories of work told by my mother, my maternal grandmother, and great-grandmother. For me, this project allowed me to examine how other Black women dealt with workplace issues. When I started the project, I kept the work experiences of my great-grandmother, Janie Murray, and grandmother, Clara Murray Blakes, in the forefront of my mind. Their experiences with dominant culture members, their stories of familial support, and their examples of mentoring relationships were evident when I talked with the participants of this study. Even though neither woman held an executive leadership position in any form of work they represented, my grandmothers shared the experiences of being Black woman working in the US. If not for their stories, I may not have been able to tell my participants’ stories.

This current study examined the manner in which African American female executives perceive communication with dominant culture members in workplace organizations, organizational and interpersonal communication factors that contribute to workplace success for African American female executives, and mentoring relationships that assist these women with workplace advancement. Through an analysis of workplace communication situations with dominant culture members, it was my hope that a better understanding of the manner in which Black female executives achieve workplace success and advancement would offer insight for...
other Black women to achieve success in their respective workplace organizations.

In this chapter, I discuss how the results from the analysis presented in Chapter 4 provide answers for the research questions guiding this study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide interpretive insights into the answers given by the participants. In this chapter, I reconstruct a more holistic understanding of the results provided in chapter 4, in order to depict a more integrated picture of the various layers provided through the collected data. Throughout this chapter, I illustrate the connective threads shared in the experiences of the participants, the manner in which the data is consistent or inconsistent with the literature, and practical implications gained from the connections, as well as the limitations and directions for future research.

**Research Questions Discussion**

In this project, I answered three questions (a) How do African American female executives perceive their communication with dominant-culture individuals in workplace organizations?; (b) What organizational and interpersonal communication factors do African American women executives perceive as aiding in their workplace success?; and (c) When African American women executives are the beneficiaries of mentoring relationships, how do these women perceive mentors and mentoring relationships as assisting them with organizational advancement? In this section, I address each of these questions and discuss how the answers provided by the participants advance the current literature before discussing, in broader terms, the connection to theory and the practical implications.

**RQ1: Communication with Dominant-Culture Individuals**

The first research question asked how Black female executives perceived their communication with dominant culture individuals. The women in this study each represent a rare
part of the working population in the sense that all seven participants are members of the highest
tier of management in their respective organization. Each participant was able to identify as the
only Black female in a leadership position at their company, in a top executive level of
management. Four participants identified as the only African-American or member of a minority
group in an executive leadership position in their company. Based on the national statistical
numbers presented in chapter 1 of this project, I anticipated that the women involved in this
study would in fact either be the only African American executive or one of a few African
American executives. The question was posed so that a clearer understanding of how Black
female leaders assessed their perception of communication with dominant-culture individuals
(i.e., white males). The analysis of in-depth interviews with each participant produced three
themes: (a) planning communication with dominant culture individuals, (b) adopting style to
achieve goals, and (c) remaining task oriented.

Each theme addressed the manner in which the participants handled workplace
communication with dominant-culture individuals. When analyzing their stories, additional
layers of workplace experiences from the lives of the participants emerged. The three themes are
the most prevalent answers to the research question, but in this discussion, I highlight smaller
tenets that support the overall general themes produced. This section will provide a summary of
how the participants maneuver through communication situations with dominant-culture
members by highlighting the strategic nature of workplace communication situations with
dominant-culture members.

The participants are members of upper management and are a part of an elite group of
members in their organization. In each case, participant’s communication with dominant-culture
members included interactions with a colleague with equal organizational power or one to two
tiers higher than the women in the study. I was not surprised to hear that the participants are very strategic when dealing with dominant-culture members. These women tell stories that highlight the significance of understanding organizational assimilation, organizational socialization, silencing, and identity negotiation. These more detailed answers of the overall themes highlight the underlining communication situations expressed by the participants.

Assimilation

Organizational assimilation is the process of individuals being integrated into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 2001). Assimilation into an organization is the incorporation of the organization’s culture into the life of a new employee. Individuals going through the assimilation process change their work practices to adhere to the values, attitudes, and policies of the organization that they are joining. During this process, individuals negotiate their role in an organization. The process is different for each organizational member depending on their background and preconceived behaviors and beliefs about their position and the organization. During this process people learn how to address individuals in the company, the norms of the organization, the rules of formal and informal communicating, as well as many other things. It is during this process that new members of the organization learn how to interact with people (Jablin, 2001).

For Black executive women, the process of organizational assimilation is imperative for successfully growing in the organization. The period of organizational assimilation calls for interpreting and organizing a new method of workplace experiences (Jablin, 2001). Assimilation, or learning the ropes, helps to smooth out the transitional period for new members. For the participants, information learned during assimilation is a guide for how to properly handle their new organizational environment. Assimilation requires learning how to communicate with
people in a new organizational culture (Jablin, 2001). Through the stories told by the participants, it is evident that they were able to successfully assimilate into each of their respective organizations. One story told by a participant highlighted how she had to pay very close attention to all of her surroundings in each department that she moved to. Even though her ascension up the corporate ladder was in the same organization, she essentially had to go through a departmental assimilation at each new juncture. New members to organizations must adjust to new styles of communication at each new juncture in an organization. For African American women, not only must they learn to adjust to the manner in which each department communicated as well as learning the expected norms for each position they have to adjust just so that they can be successful.

For Black women executives assimilation means that they are actively becoming a part of the dominant culture in the organization’s social network. If Black women do not work to increase their visibility and social status in their organization they may face demographic dissimilarity (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009), further isolating themselves from members in the organization based solely on their race and gender. For this group of women there is a greater burden placed on them to assimilate into the organization and become involved members of the workplace social network. As the primary contributor to the glass and concrete ceiling metaphors, demographic dissimilarity provides the example of how Black women are excluded from power informal friendships and interactions (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009).

During the assimilation period, newcomers to organizations or departments within organizations are bringing in a conglomerate of experiences (Jablin, 2001). It is essential to be able to adapt quickly to each situation. By being aware of the norms of the organization, understanding the expectations of the organization, and having a clear understanding of the
actual reality of how the organization functions, African American women are better able to adapt to communication situations. In the stories told by the participants, they placed great emphasis on understanding the style of communication that best gets the point across. Each participant represents a different industry, yet they all highlight that understanding the uniqueness of the company leads to a better understanding of company norms and communication patterns. By having a clear understanding of the formal and informal organizational communication rules, African American executive women are better able to adapt to the appropriate company style. Expectations for appropriate style also vary depending on the employees’ level within the organization, often more direct and focused at higher levels. The women also found that the higher they climbed on the organizational ladder, the more aware they had to be of how to process communication situations.

Organizational assimilation is a negotiation period between the organization and the newcomer (Jablin, 2001). In order for participants to successfully meet expectations they must understand the practices, beliefs, and norms of the organization. Participants understand that successful assimilation leads to a better organizational experience. Black women executives must learn how to adjust to the organizations communication expectations in order to successfully integrate into the culture and communicate with other members. The process of assimilation is by no means easy because role negotiation and uncertainty are both at play; however, understanding that there is a period during organizational entry or role entry that requires an adjustment helps to alleviate potential negative communication encounters.

Socialization

Organizational socialization, in part, is established via our communication with others (Weick & Ashford, 2001). Socialization within organizations is supported and reinforced by the
existing cultural structures and practices that have been put in place by dominant-culture members. Structural and historical constraints guide the construction of organizational socialization (Weick & Ashford, 2001). Individuals form their own identities through family socialization and gender socialization, which both affect the way that people define themselves (Weick & Ashford, 2001). Similar to those two concepts, organizational socialization affects the manner in which individuals define their work life experiences. The executive women interviewed have all reached a point in their career where they have learned how to maneuver through workplace organizations. Organizational socialization is a dual venture. In order to have a successful adjustment of understanding new organizational roles, organizational commitment, and organizational success, members in organizations must participate and engage in activities that fully integrate them into the organization.

To have reached an executive level in an organization, the participants have all learned of the spoken and unspoken socialization rules of their respective organizations (Weick & Ashford, 2001; Harris & Nelson, 2008). In order to efficiently handle communication with dominant-culture members, co-cultural group members must understand the organization’s cultural expectations. Either through formalized socialization strategies or informally through encounters with others in the organization, the participants become aware of policies and procedures that affect their communication. At this juncture, Black executive women must be willing to enact strategies that will lead to profitable organizational knowledge. When discussing communication patterns in the organization, some participants found that communicating with colleagues and superiors was unique to the values, norms, and beliefs that these people hold in high esteem. Through socialization tactics, the participants learned where to place value when communicating in their respective organizations. Through their own socialization period, they learned the
importance of being overly prepared with clear, crisp messages to ensure that their messages are converted successfully. The participants attributed the culture of their organization to the manner in which they communicated with dominant-culture members, placing an emphasis on how they learned how to communicate with members of their organization. If these women had not successfully negotiated the socialization process of their respective organizations, they might have missed cues which highlighted how to understand organizational goals, politics, and power structures. When properly integrated into an organization, the participants pointed out that Black executive women are able to take some form of ownership into their work life and control how deep they will delve into the organization.

Understanding the importance of organizational socialization addresses issues of message creation and message dissemination. Most organizations have formal training programs that assist with organizational socialization (Weick & Ashford, 2001). In these programs, stories are shared that helps individuals learn about the organization. For the participants the topic “how to successfully communicate with dominant-culture members” is typically not on the list of items to be discussed. Black women must learn through trial and error about the communication functions and goals of members of dominant culture groups. The more interactions that take place with dominant culture members, the better the chances of having a winning communication encounter.

Even though the organizational orientation programs may not include information on how to communicate with dominant-culture members, there is a good chance that workplace expectations and dress are addressed. Several participants point out the importance of dress for Black women in the workplace. The participants discuss how imperative it is for Black women in the workplace to dress in a manner that respects the professional world. Due to the culture of
each organization, industry and the positions held, dress and presentation may not be high on the list of company values and norms when dealing with an executive. Professional attire is expected; however the participants felt that it was necessary to address appearance when addressing communicating with dominant culture members. I address the importance of workplace attire in this section on socialization because I believe it is important to note that not every high powered executive wears business suits to work every day. However, in the case of those Black executive women, it would be extremely rare to not see them in professional workplace attire when in the office or representing the organization. It is important to note that attire was placed of high value when the participants addressed communicating with dominant-culture members. The participants were adamant about Black women knowing how to present themselves while ensuring that they are maintaining professional norms. Due to the historical depictions and current stereotypes of African American women, the women expressed a necessity in having proper business attire on at all times when at the workplace or representing the workplace.

Through socialization in the workplace, the women in this study have acquired the knowledge to successfully maneuver through communication situations with dominant-culture colleagues. Experience in a variety of organizational situations prepared the participants to process the organizational communication norms and make them work to the advantage of each situation.

Silencing

When the participants discussed, in detail, how they planned out encounters with colleagues, their stories aligned with muted group theory and the silencing of minority voices. The dominant white male structure that exists in the participant’s companies have influence of
workplace communication. The ideas, views, and opinions of dominant group members will generally be heard because of their social status (Orbe, 1996). As African American women, there is always a chance that their voices can be suppressed or muted due to social status alone.

The stories told by the participants reinforce this muted group theory theme, emphasizing learning how to interact with non-African Americans (Orbe, 1994). The participants, through their elevation to higher tier positions in organizations, have learned how they must interact with individuals who are not Black. The women are not only aware of the possibility of being victims of silencing, but they approach dominant-culture members with the possibility that at any moment the communication situation may turn in a direction that is not benefitting to the overall intended communication goals.

Muted group theory explores silencing (Orbe, 1994); even though this group of women has a unique social and cultural position, they are still the victims of silencing. The mere notion that communication with dominant culture members is so strategic implies another layer of subjugation. Why must the women be so strategic and why must their communication be guarded? When reviewing stories told by the participants, the first thought that came to mind was the tactical approach to communicating with dominant-culture members that these women take on. Their actions with dominant culture members are careful and strategic as if they are engaged in a game of chess. Even though the participants have obtained a level of organizational success that most people will never get to, they are still in many ways victims. These women cannot, for lack of a better term, let their hair down.

In another form of silencing, the women point out how they must be guarded during communication situations. The participants describe keeping their guard up with what they say in their respective organization and how they express their thoughts when talking with dominant-
culture members in the workplace. The women stress not wanting to reveal more information than was needed and did not want to expose themselves to situations that may reveal their feelings of being imposters in their respective organizations.

When the women told stories that references them being guarded in the workplace due to a fear of allowing people to get too close, stories and incidents from my work experiences and my mother’s workplace experiences crept to the forefront of my thoughts. The notion of Black women being guarded when communicating with members of the dominant-culture is a familiar story. Being in a leadership position presents various levels of vulnerability and the participants find that the key manner in alleviating that vulnerability was to remain closed off. The idea of remaining guarded or putting up a wall allows a form of protection for the participants. These women are alleviating themselves from situations that may affect their power in the organization, situations that may compromise their respect in the organization, as well as protection from people that may not want to see them advance in the organization or in the industry.

**Identity Negotiation**

When the African American executive women in this study engaged in communication situations with dominant-culture members they described themselves as taking on a reflective stance on themselves and others’ perceptions of their own individual self-image. During interaction situations, Black executive women are negotiating multiple aspects of their social identities. At play are their cultural memberships, gender identity, social class identity, age identity, and professional identity, to name a few (Ting-Toomey, 2005). These identities influence their behaviors with workplace dominant-culture members.

Having a clear understanding and appreciation for how we define ourselves and how others define themselves, individuals open themselves up to being able to communicate with
members of different cultures in a more appreciative and sensitive manner (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The participants desire respect for their identity. These women discussed how increasing their knowledge about their colleagues in the workplace assisted them with being able to negotiate their own identity in the workplace. Participants use phrases in their explanation of their identity that reflect a clear understanding of personal identities. When communicating with dominant-culture individuals, whose attention focuses on the multiple identities that an individual posses. Learning to negotiate various self-constructed aspects of one’s identity shows a respect for their own culture and the culture of the person they are interacting with.

When engaged in identity negotiation in the workplace with dominant-culture members, African American executive women must define, modify, and challenge their own desired self-image. Identity negotiation is a mutual communication activity that requires an individual to challenge some of their personal identities while supporting others identities. The participants express being attuned to the dynamics of identity negotiation. By acknowledging that they are aware of the multiple identities that they possess and how they must present certain aspects of their identities depending on the communication interaction, the participants promote identity understanding and respect. When communicating with dominant-culture members, these executives express the basic need for inclusion and respect. They approach communication in a manner that will alleviate anxiety and frustration. They engage in careful negotiation to ensure that all needs are met during the communication encounter.

The participants admitted that they can feel vulnerable while in leadership roles in the workplace and at the end of the day they want to feel secure, included, and respected. These women are very guarded and strategic when engaging in identity negotiation tactics in order to gain trust from dominant-culture members. Recognizing the need to establish and assert different
areas of their identity is just one phase in interacting with dominant-culture colleagues. Black executive women negotiate communication boundaries to assure that they retain a connection with self while establishing trust and inclusion with colleagues. Identity-negotiation aids Black women during communication interactions with dominant-culture members.

**Summary**

Black women executives must remain cognizant of their surroundings in the organization. They work in a realm that hinders their voice due to their social position. When I initially wrote the research question for this section, I expected the answer to reveal that Black women executives perceive communication to be fairly easy with dominant-culture individuals, not extremely laid back due to the cultural differences but I did not expect for there to be numerous layers unfolding with this question.

Black women executives revealed that communicating with dominant-culture individuals requires an understanding of organizational cultural norms. Black women executives must properly complete steps to allow them to fully engage in organizational assimilation and socialization. Following the proper steps to fully integrate themselves into the organizational culture, the participants are learning how communication norms work in their organization. Additionally, the participants reveal that when communicating with dominant-culture members, they must be aware that the there is the potential for their voices to be silenced. As a technique to alleviate vulnerability with dominant-culture members, the participants mute their own voices through continually remaining guarded. Lastly, the participants express the importance of identity negotiation while communicating with dominant culture members. The executives highlight the importance of knowing the self in order to remain dedicated to their work and to the organization.
RQ2: Communication Factors that Aide Workplace Success

The second research question addressed the organizational and interpersonal communication factors that Black female executives perceive as aiding in their workplace success. This question was asked based on the desire to expand literature addressing workplace success and social support in order to include the stories of Black executive women in workplace organizations. The analysis of in-depth interviews with each participant produced three themes: (a) an understanding of the self, (b) an appreciation of organic interpersonal relationships, and (c) and a willingness to sacrifice.

Each theme answering the second research question highlights how the participants use their personal definitions of success to define their workplace accomplishments. When reviewing the stories told by the participants, the analysis revealed the importance placed on simplicity. Even though this study targets an underrepresented population, the participants approach to recognizing their success in the workplace is very humbling. During the discussion of this section, I highlight key views that support the stories expressed to me about workplace success. This section will provide a summary of the significance of having a personal definition of success, how that definition of success contributes to the identity management of the participants, and how social support is received in organic relationships.

It was important for me to begin my interview questions for this section of the study by addressing the participant’s personal definition of success. Success in workplace organizations is often measured by the level of occupational rank in an organization, financial gain, and benefits attained by each member in the organization. During my discussion with each participant, I asked the women to tell me what their personal definition of success was. The question did not limit their response to workplace success but more so to how they viewed success in a general
form with their life. Each participant highlighted a different aspect of success. The responses ranged from being able to balance the role of spouse, mother, daughter, and friend to an overall general feeling of happiness and a sense of accomplishment.

While each definition was different they all ascribed to non-tangible ideals. The participants did not discuss material possessions that make people feel successful, nor did the definitions place a high value on organizational rank and position. The definitions provided by the participants support personal self interests. The choice to be successful is not in concrete things but rather through personal benefits. The definitions of success mirror the lived experiences of the women in this study. The participants did not display, through their definition of success, placing a high value in items (i.e., money, houses, cars, stocks) that might be expected at their managerial level as not a personal measure of success, but rather described valuing family, relationships, and happiness.

The stories surrounding the individual definitions of success position the responses regarding interpersonal and organizational workplace factors into an interesting context. It is important to recognize that the participants views on success are a reflection of how they adjust to incidents that may affect their advancement in organizations. These women are centered; they place value on relationships with people, not things, and they embrace living for happiness and not for stress. Gaining prestige and recognition, two forms of workplace success, was not mentioned in the definitions provided by the participants. The women are satisfied with their current organizational recognition and claim to not measure success by organizational positions.

**Identity Management**

Different cultures have different expectations when assessing effective and socially appropriate communicative behaviors (Imahori & Cupah, 2005). As a communication factor
used to measure how mutually acceptable identities are negotiated during interactions, identity management is a useful tool for Black executive women to use in the workplace. Identity management is a beneficial communication tool that helps individuals explain how cultural identities are negotiated through interpersonal relationships. For the women in the current study, a sound understanding of the self is required in order to effectively manage communication interactions.

Identity management says that communication competence is a mutually satisfying behavior that must be appropriately used in interpersonal relationships. Collier (1998) makes the argument that judging communication competence is based on the implicit privilege, held by dominant-culture members. Participants understanding of identity management assist the women with being able to effectively manage relationships with members of different cultures. As an aide to advancing workplace careers, identity management, serves as a framework for understanding ones identity and surroundings and using that knowledge to help with communication. Throughout the analysis of the workplace stories shared by the participants, I was able to pinpoint multiple stories of self-identification as a tool to help with career advancement. These women shared stories revealing how imperative it is for Black female executives to understand the self when working in the workplace with dominant-culture members and how that understanding helps to navigate adversity and turmoil.

The participants explained that focusing on understanding and maintaining personal identity in the workplace was a key success factor in maneuvering through the various workplace challenges. One participant expressed that understanding social roles such as being a wife, mother, sister, and friend assisted her in being able to perform the role of leader in the workplace. Having an understanding of these roles keeps the women focused on their workplace
goals. Acknowledging these roles helps to negate to cultural stereotypes that may follow them through organizational progression.

Participants highlight that acknowledging their identity, or social role, as African American is an additional factor that helps them maneuver through corporate culture. Serving in an executive leadership role as an African American woman is rare, so when these women enter the workplace and interact with members of different cultures they are dealing with potential identity constraints. Expressing the importance of racial identity highlights the comment that one participant makes about Black women leaders being lonely in leadership positions in organizations. The concept of loneliness was also reiterated by several other participants that suggested that being “one of” or “the only” is not a privilege. Further explication of loneliness was not addressed during these interviews but a deeper exploration of this concept may lead to additional tenets of identity management for Black executive leaders.

Having a clear understanding of their cultural identity allows the women executives in the current study to understand how they must interact with members of different cultures in the workplace. When assessing how open the women are about their identities in the workplace, the women expressed an elevated intensity. By displaying cultural artifacts as well as familial artifacts, the participants acknowledge the importance of numerous aspects of their identity being on display. These key markers remind people of other roles held by the women outside of leader in their company. By having artifacts on display the participants have a visual reference reminding them to see their identity. Identity management is a controlling factor of the participants remaining conscious of their personal and professional goals. One woman mentioned how leaders are sometime put into compromising positions that can affect workplace decisions
that may in turn affect personal decisions. Without understanding who they are, Black women leaders may end up giving in to destructive organizational practices.

As an aide to workplace success, having a clearly defined understanding of the self is important. Black women leader’s successful management of their identity helps them to deal with cultural different members, remain true to themselves, while avoiding dangerous workplace situations.

**Organic Relationships**

The participants represent an elite population in society. As an elite group of women in the African American community and in the workplace, these women have a unique vantage point on interpersonal relationships. I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to spend time with each woman exploring various aspects of their family and work life. My connection with the participants came through relationships that they had formed with people that I had a mutual connection with. Each woman agreed to be a part of this study based on a professional or collegial relationship held with other African American women.

In the stories that the participants shared about relationships that aided in their workplace success, each woman described a relationship with either a family member or friend who provided social support. In the stories shared by this group of Black female executives the women focused on intimate parental and spousal relationships that provided social and emotional support during various times in their lives when they faced hardships. In these stories the women discuss how motivation from family encouraged them to not stay stagnant in organizational position for a company that did not respect diversity. When the participants shared stories of spousal and familial support, they displayed a more reflective tone, honing in on the importance of these relationships to their career success. Discussing issues related to wanting to
quit a job due to stress, feelings of abandoning the family, as well as lack of job satisfaction were all alleviated due to the care provided by members of their immediate family. Without those connections and the constant support showed in each relationship, the women expressed not knowing how they would have advanced.

In addition to stories of familial and spousal social support, participants shared stories of only forming relationships with those who provided a natural connection of some sort. Due to the sensitive nature of some of their professions and the clients who they represent, they described it as best to be cautious of the people that are in their circle of friends. As elite Black executives, sensitive issues and topics surround their line of work and trust is essential to success. They described that collegial relationships that are formed must not be for financial or social profit. All relationships must be organically crafted with intentions of supporting the executive to meet her personal goals.

For these women relationships are very important. The participants credit success in the workplace to their relationships with their parents, spouse and close friends. The relationships however are very intimate. Unlike relationships that they form with mentors, people that they also credit with helping them gain success; these organic relationships are not forced. They are essential to overall well being and not just solely to the success of their work life. As a measure of interpersonal factors for success, organic relationships are placed high on the list.

Summary

This section of the discussion highlights what Black female executives assess as successful tools for workplace success. As a guiding frame to answer this question, each participant provided her own definition of success. Each woman emphasized a different aspect of their life that is a representation of success. As a collective definition of success, the participants
place emphasis on being happy with what they are doing at that given moment in their lives. That definition led to a better understanding of the values of this group of women. As a measure of factors that they believe help them to obtain success, the women credit taking pride in their identities and allowing their identity to guide the formation of workplace relationships. Additionally, the participants emphasize how relationships with their spouses, parents, and friends provide social support that keeps them encouraged through the various phases of organizational work life.

**RQ3: Mentoring Relationships Assisting with Advancement**

The third research question addressed the benefits of mentoring relationships for African American female executives and how these women perceive mentors and mentoring relationship as assisting them with organizational advancement. I have always had a fascination with the various dynamics that are in place in mentoring relationships. As a beneficiary of successful mentoring relationships on a collegiate level, I have always wondered how those relationships transpired in the workplace. That curiosity led to the formation of this question.

The analysis of in-depth interviews with each participant produced two themes: (a) mentors alleviate organizational vulnerability and (b) mentors help penetrate informal occupational networks. Each theme answering the third research question highlights how the participants embrace mentoring relationships. These women place a high regard on how beneficial mentoring relationships are to the success of organizational advancement. This section will highlight and provide a summary on the importance of mentoring relationships to Black executive women, the importance of penetrating informal networks and the participants use of informal mentoring relationships versus formal mentoring relationships.
Mentoring Importance

The literature on mentoring relationship benefits for Black women in the workplace (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; Catalyst, 2010; Haring, 1999; Sloan, 2008) consistently supports the idea that every Black woman needs a mentor. Mentoring and workplace advancement work hand in hand. It is rare for people to say that they were extremely successful with their jobs without giving credit to a mentoring relationship. Mentoring relationships help with personal-growth, self-worth, and organizational identity (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; McKeen & Bujaki 2007). For women, mentoring helps with clearing up conflict, easing gender based stereotyping and reducing overt discrimination. For Black women, mentoring relationships provide resources and support, helps with self-esteem, and provides encouragement (Allen, 2007).

The women in this study constantly mentioned how important it is for any successful executive woman, especially Black woman, to have a mentor. Characteristic roles of mentoring relationships described by the participants include life counselor, organizational guide, mental supporter, and protector. Mentoring relationships provide security and helps with personal confidence. Due to the unique challenges that women face in the workplace, mentors provide advice from experiences on how to maneuver through difficult situations. For Black women in the workplace, the key to organizational growth is a relationship with a mentor. The participants all agreed that the main reason they were in their current positions, was due to a mentoring relationship. The participants cited that mentors helped them to recognize that they could reach executive level status in organizations as well as provided guidance and helped them with boosting their self-esteem. Participants also cited that their journey to leadership happened because someone else saw potential in them that they did not see in themselves.
Mentoring is important for Black women because it helps them to recognize that they can be leaders in the workplace. The women in this study express that they never imagined themselves in leadership positions, let alone in their current level. Two participants discussed how they were the only women of color in their organization who held a leadership position and how being “the only” was a catalyst for them to work harder in their organization. Participants credit mentoring relationships to allowing them to see the leadership threshold and then cross it. For Black women, the problem with attaining executive positions in organizations is due to the fact that Black women do not see other people who look like us in those positions. For the participants, they credit mentors to helping them to see that they could be organizational leaders.

When relating mentoring to advancement it is very difficult for people to say that they will be the next chief executive officer of a company when they have never seen a person who shares a similar identity in that position. The participants agree that they did not know that they could be members of leadership in their company. There was no female of color that looked like any of them in leadership; therefore it was never apparent that company leadership was an option. One participant credits a white female executive who took her under her wings as preparing her for organizational leadership. The problem for Black women and organizational advancement is that they have no one to mirror. Why would any of these women think that they could represent an entire region of a company when no person of color, let alone a woman held the position? The participants agree that the lack of visibility of Black women in leadership roles hinders the pursuit of advancement. The Catalyst (2010) study supports these stories through their report on women of color in leadership. The study contends that invisibility is a major issue when it comes to identifying factors for the lack of women of color in leadership roles. Baugh and Fagenson-Eland (2007) express that women and minorities need mentors to provide access
to other members of the organization to serve as a role models so that these women can obtain
organizational advancement.

In order to break the cycle, mentoring relationships proved to be beneficial for all women
in the study. Diane credits a mentor from graduate school as guiding her through the corporate
world. Robin credits the high visibility of her mentors to her success. The literature (Ragins &
Kram, 2001; Allen, 2007; Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007) explains this and the
participants concur that without guidance from a mentor they would have not known how to ask
for raises, pursue different positions, or feel comfortable discussing the potential for company
growth. The benefits of mentoring importance for Black women are enormous. Having that
person to guide you through the ropes of organizational life can mean the difference from
executive vice-president and division manager.

**Informal Network Penetration**

The participants discussed how many deals in their respective organizations are not made
in the boardroom. One participant remembers a plane ride that helped her to land the biggest
client for her division of her company. The only reason that she was on that plane, sitting in that
seat, was due to the fact that a white male colleague became ill at the last minute. Informal
network penetration is a growing benefit assisting with organizational advancement. Business
deals are made while men play golf together, enjoy a glass of whisky after work, or smoke a nice
Cuban in the lounge of their country clubs. The problem with that lends itself to the fact that
those are all places that Black women do not frequent. Having access to a mentor who will take
you along on golf trips or invite you to cocktail evenings assists with making those
organizational connections that could bring the next best contract. Penetrating informal networks
is not easy and usually only happens when there is a guide.
Throughout our discussion I asked the participants if they had a preference with race or gender when selecting individuals to mentor them. The overall consensus was that there was not a preference; however, certain women pinpointed certain needs that specific mentoring relationships fulfilled. One participant said that she needed to have Black women to mentor her in order for her to keep that connection with her own identity. For this executive, only another Black woman could understand her lived experiences. Other participants discussed how their mentors either sought them out or how the relationship just randomly happened. The participants credit relationships with white females and males in addition to Black males and females as assisting them in the workplace. For this group of Black women the core group of mentors varies in age, race, gender, and career. The women credit a need for different perspectives, views, and ideas as well as social networks that helped them succeed.

Even though the participants vary when it comes to the specifics of what type of mentor to have, they all agree that a mentor is needed. Someone who is in your field and someone who can help you break through networks that are not typically open to Black women. Only one participant was adamant about having a Black woman as a mentor; however, she reinforced that the women that she sought out to guide her through her career was well connected.

Mentors help to place the participants in situations that they would not normally have the opportunity to be a part of. Informal networks are not always exclusive to networks of white men, but informal networks also include networks of women-only groups. One participant credits her mentor’s social capital as one of the main reasons she sought out that mentoring relationship. Her mentor is the president of a very prestigious women’s only organization and her connection with her mentor allowed her to gain membership into the organization. The membership in the organization has opened several doors and helped with this participant’s
rising social capital. This mentoring connection fulfills the age old stereotype of “it’s not what you know but who you know.”

Penetrating networks helps build valuable connections for Black women that they would otherwise never see. As a method of helping with advancement, gaining access to informal networks helps to increase the women’s social capital which in turn leads to a greater level of success.

**Formal Mentoring versus Informal Mentoring**

One of the areas of the study that did not yield the results that I anticipated was the use of formal mentoring programs. The literature (DeWine, 2001; Jablin, 2001) tells us that formal mentoring programs are the best ways to ensure that mentoring relationships are formed. In the case of the participants, none of the women had ever been involved in a formal mentoring program in which they were the mentee. Several were mentors in formal programs sponsored through their workplace organization, but they explained their experiences as feeling like the mentoring relationship was more of a chore rather than a fulfilling learning experience. Formal programs, in their case meant, that they were placed with someone who, on the surface shared similar traits and characteristics, but once they met and began forming a relationship, the mentor/mentee relationship did not work. One participant was the creator of a formal mentoring program and could only report on the success of the program from a logistical standpoint. It was my hope that this group of women would have been able to shed more light on the use of formal mentoring programs in large corporations; however, their stories and experiences did not mirror the literature or my expectations.
Summary

This section discussed the importance of mentoring relationships to Black executive women, the importance of penetrating informal networks, and the participant’s use of informal mentoring relationships versus formal mentoring relationships. The participants all agreed that in general, mentoring relationships helped them to achieve the level of organizational success that they each had reached. Penetrating informal networks, regardless of the type of network, leads to a better grasp on advancing in the workplace. For the women in this study, formal mentoring programs were not helpful. All in all, mentoring relationships receive the credit for helping the participants obtain organizational advancement.

Making the Connections: Implications

The research conducted for this study is important for the advancement of organizational communication and interpersonal communication literature. Through the stories told by the participants there are several theoretical implications that can be made to support the validity of this project. The following section will expound upon the connections to theory through a brief exploration of muted group theory and co-cultural theory and how they all relate to studying African American executive female leaders. I will then turn to the practical implications gathered from this study and how it can be used in today’s organizations.

Muted Group Theory

This study addresses how important voice is for Black executive women when communicating with dominant-culture members in the workplace. By examining how the participants perceived communication with dominant-culture members, this study is able to address the use of voice for Black executive women. This study makes a few contributions to the larger body of muted group theory by acknowledging how Black female executives confront and
challenge their lack of voice in workplace organizations. Muted group theory (E, Ardener, 1978; S, Ardener, 1978) contends that some people have power through their cultural identity while others do not and in this study the women acknowledge that idea. In this study the participants describe their communication encounters with workplace colleagues in power.

By looking at muted group theory (E, Ardener, 1978; S, Ardener, 1978) as a frame to examine the muting of voice by dominant-culture groups, the theory advances the direction of studying victims of silencing. The participants are the victims of silencing due to the fact that they have to alter their voice while communicating with dominant-culture members. The participants mention through their interviews that they have to plan communication encounters with dominant culture-members. Those actions illustrate an altering of voice due to the power status of the individual that they are engaged in communication with. This study focuses on an elite group of African American women who have power and control based on social status in their respective organizations. When compared to the average Black female employed in the workforce, these women have access to organizational relationships and financial resources that are not available to the general working woman. Even with social resources available and membership in an elite and rare society, these women are still victims. Through their stories, the participants reify the tenets of muted group theory that outline how members of non-dominant culture groups are traditionally silenced from expressing voice in the workplace. The participants are in an organizational position that allows them to have power and control. These women have access to voice due to their positions and profession. However, they still do not have full control of the larger organizational and societal discourse and their role in the communication realm.

The participants have several audiences in which they have power over and they have the dominant voice. But due to having the identities of being African American and a woman, they
must be careful of how they are perceived. This study calls out the muting of voice and provides a way that the participants can challenge the dominant culture. The participants are in the position to challenge and resist organizational silencing to invoke organizational change. By first acknowledging that they are silenced by dominant-culture members, they can work to negate the dominant voice with other members of silenced groups. The participants are in the position to change organizational culture at their respective organizations by slowly changing communication patterns. Instead of conversations being contrived and short, these women have the power to allow subordinates and peers to express themselves in a non-threatening manner. Through the creation of a more open environment where voice and opinion are appreciated, the participants can change the feelings of anxiety that people may feel when engaging in dialogue with members of upper management. The participants can be change agents by insisting that communication encounters with dominant-culture members are not always rushed, are face to face, and more expressive. By taking on an active role in resisting dominant communication patterns the participants can gain power.

**Co-Cultural Theory**

The Black executive women in this study explained how they assimilated and accommodated during communication situations with dominant culture members in the workplace. Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1996) highlights how people adopt certain communication strategies to negotiate the oppressive dominant structures. Through the planning of communication situations with dominant culture members the participants are taking on an active role in assessing their desired communication outcomes. In general interactions with colleagues, depending on the topic of the encounter, Black female executives can measure out the cost and rewards of handling communication with their colleagues.
For Black women learning how to negotiate and navigate communication, strategies can help with workplace communication situations. Orbe (1998) provides a list of 12 strategies that are helpful for positive communication outcomes. Of the 12 items on Orbe’s list strategies such as extensive preparation, countering stereotypes, accomplishing tasks, and respectful censorship all fit into this study. As an extension of his list, I would add the strategy of identity control. Supported by the analysis in this study, identity control would explain how Black women understand the multiple layers of their identity and use different tenets depending on the communication interaction. All of the strategies identified by Orbe, as well as a potential strategy of identity control, are all supportive of the participants ability to fight for voice.

**Black Feminism**

This project has focused on the workplace experiences of African American female executives. By centering the research on the lived experiences of Black women, this project serves as a voice for Black female consciousness. For Black women, feminism posits itself on the ideology that Black women resist multiple forms of oppression and marginalization placed on their lives (Collins, 2000). The experiences highlighted by the Black executive females in this study examine how this elite group of Black women has been subjected to workplace oppression. Experiencing oppression based on race, gender, class, and socio-economic status provides Black women with a unique set of experiences that are not monolithic to all women. These experiences construct a distinctive set of perspectives about culture, life, and living that help Black women to navigate through the encounters of oppression. For the Black women in this study, they have all experienced being marginalized in some form. However, the ability to recognize and call out instances of unfair treatment moves this group of women one step closer to ending their own personal domination.
This study highlights a different form of work for Black women in the U.S. and calls attention away from the historical domestic server roles that Black women have held in the U.S. This project supports produces knowledge and awareness about the lived experiences of a diverse group of Black women. As a call to Black feminist scholars, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asked how Black feminist thinkers will analyze the changing social structures of oppression that affect Black women. This project allowed the lived experiences of Black female executives to have a voice while celebrating and addressing the changing structure of today’s work force. By focusing on a new wave of Black women and work in the U.S., this project highlighted uncharted workplace territories for Black women while empowering a new generation of Black female workers.

**Practical Implications**

The nature of studying elite Black women and how they communicate in organizations, measure success, and use mentoring relationships for advancement breaks new ground in organizational communication and interpersonal communication literature. This study has several practical implications for Black females in the work force, managers, and organizations. It is my hope that stories from this project can serve as a guide for Black women and other women of color that struggle with workplace advancement. It is also my hope that managers will use this data as a tool to understand and assist Black women who aspire to serve in leadership capacities.

**Implications for Black Females**

First, this study illustrates that even though the numbers are fairly small, Black women can be leaders in national and international organizations. If not just a mere sounding board, this project helps Black women to see that executive leadership positions are possible and can be
obtained through hard work and networking relationships. The participants share some stories that are not unique just for Black executive women but more so stories that all Black women that work can relate to. A constant criticism supported by the women in this study is the lack of visibility of Black female leaders in organizations. This project serves as an aide to illustrate that workplace success can be obtained by Black women. Even though the women in the study are not physically visible, their stories give them life and a voice beyond the pages of this dissertation.

Second, this study serves as a communication reality check for Black women. Black women have a unique style in communicating that may not always translate well when engaging in discourse with members of different cultural groups. This study sheds light on how Black women can be more aware of their voice and social and cultural positions while in the workplace. Being aware of the workplace silencing and muting helps to alleviate confusion, anxiety, and even pressure when communicating in the workplace with dominant-culture members. Based on the participants stories, Black women can learn how to be more prepared for communication situations that involve dominant-culture members without giving up all communication power.

The third implication for Black women lies in the formation of mentoring relationships. Not only do Black women need to find one mentor but they need to seek out relationships with multiple mentors. This study supports mentoring relationships 100%, and as an aide for advancement for Black females, mentoring relationships should be used to ensure workplace advancement. This study supports seeking mentoring relationships in current workplace organizations as well seeking relationships from women and men that are members of other
organizations. All in all, Black women need mentors and mentoring relationships to help deal with the numerous relationships and situations that can affect them while in the workplace.

The final implication for Black women lies in maintaining relationships with family members and friends. Social support from parents, a spouse, and close friends proved to be crucial for Black women leaders obtaining workplace success. Those relationships proved to be extremely imperative in helping Black women navigate the emotionally tolling situations that arise in organizations.

**Implications for Managers**

This project has two implications for managers. The first implication lies in the notion that managers should seek out women and minorities for training to hold leadership positions in the organization. With analogies such as the “glass ceiling” that references women not being able to have a seat in the board room and the analogy of the “concrete ceiling” that references Black women not being able to see that they have a spot in the boardroom, it is imperative for managers to assist in the cultivation of women leaders. This study has illustrated that without some guidance and assistance, it may be difficult for women to advance to management positions. This study shows that educational credentials or workplace experiences does not hinder advancement, but more so the lack of relationships that foster organizational growth hinders advancement.

The second implication for managers is that they must learn how to communicate with African American women in the workplace. It is imperative for managers to develop skills that will help them be better listeners for minority women as well as better advocates for minority women. The study also highlights that managers should be more aware of the assimilation and socialization periods for women of color once they arrive in the organization.
Implications for Organizations

This study provides a few implications for organizations to use. It would be imperative for organizations to take note in the importance of mentoring relationships. If I were to make a recommendation to an organization, based on this study, about the benefits of providing mentoring assistance to African American women in their organizations, I would highlight three main points. The first benefit would be an increase in organizational connection, the second would highlight an increase in personal morale, and the third benefit would be a new tier of workplace leaders.

Organizations can learn from this study that mentoring relationships help with the cultivation of an individual’s dedication to an organization. The participants in this study highlight that once a mentoring relationship was formed with a member of their organization they were more apt to move up the corporate ladder in that organization. Participants that formed mentoring bonds with members outside of their workplace organization were more likely to move from organization to organization in order to reach executive management positions. Even though this phenomenon may be unique to this group of participants, it is definitely an occurrence to take note of. The participants that had mentors to seek them out in their respective companies held a closer allegiance to their organization and stayed in that organization. The women who formed mentoring relationships outside of the company were more open to leaving their organization to find opportunities elsewhere.

The second implication for organizations highlights an increase in personal morale for African American women. When reflecting on the stories that the co researchers discussed about organizational work life, the women seemed happier when they felt a connection to their organization. Stories told by the participants reflected a jovial time in their work life. The women
were more open to being involved in outside company activities as well as the women were more open to taking on different sets of responsibilities. When the participants felt a connection in the organization and there was a mutual respect the women were more likely to go above and beyond their normal workplace activities.

The third implication for managers to take from this project would be the awareness and understanding that they have a new tier of leaders ready to work. The project highlights that the participants really just want an opportunity to show that they can do any job placed in front of them. Organizations should take heed to this message. The participants all thrived in their respective organization because someone took a chance with promoting them to a higher level of management. Collins (2000) highlights that African American women have been the backbone to the US labor society and in this situation, the women in this study are no different. Organizations would be wise to tap into a different pool of talent and ideas. Due to the unique lived experiences and background of Black women, organizations can not only cultivate their own talent but also use the women in their organization to bring in new talent.

**Summary**

In this section, I reinforced the connections that this study made with muted group theory and co-cultural theory. I also highlighted the practical implications that Black women should take form this study. I also discussed how managers and organizations can use this study as an aide to working with Black women in their organization. This section highlights the importance of studying Black female executives and the contribution that this study has made to the communication literature.
Limitations

Overall I was extremely proud of the stories collected for this research. The research contributes valuable additional literature to the organizational communication and interpersonal communication scholarship with respect to a perspective from Black female executives. However, there are some limitations to this study. The findings in this study are based on interviews with seven Black female executives from four states in the U.S. and cannot be generalized to the population as a whole. The participants were either self selected or referred through relationships held with mutual acquaintances.

Second, it is my belief that a more rich set of data would have been available if there were more women available for participation. Due to time and financial constraints only seven women were interviewed. I perceive adding four to six more women would add an additional layer to the data. As members of traditionally muted groups, it cannot be assumed that the stories of these participants are monolithic to all Black females executives. The participants have come from different backgrounds and it cannot be assumed that all of their lived experiences are the same. Some of the participants were more open and willing to share their stories than other participants. As well as some participants had a more rich set of information to share that pertained to the information for this study than other participants had to share.

Third, the current study was based on the perceptions of organizational life held by the perceptions of the participants. Even though this is important and one of the goals for this project, I feel that being able to observe the acts of the participants and report on my personal observations would add another layer of data to the project.

In conducting a study of this nature, which highlights an elite group of Black women, availability and time becomes a major factor in collecting data. Even though the participants
were very excited and enthused about participating in this project, it was quite difficult scheduling interview times. Due to the busy nature of the participants’ professions, taking time away from work and family was very hard. These are high-powered women who rarely have time to sit down multiple times for hours at a time to share personal stories. In addition to the time limitation, location was also a limitation. The participants are spread throughout various parts of the South, Southeast, North, and Midwest. Distance hindered multiple long visits for interviews and observation. Due to travel for the organization, meetings, and accomplishing their job, the participants were very gracious with setting aside even one hour to speak with me about their stories.

**Future Research**

There are multiple directions for future research with this project. The research questions in this study only scratch the surface for the potential literature available to the communication discipline. Additional analysis can provide answers to more questions related to the communicative experiences of Black female executives. Potential projects could focus on identity construction for Black women leaders, the relationship between familial social support and organizational advancement for women of color, organizational culture and its association with advancement for Black women and educational background and its factors for Black women obtaining organizational success. Interviewing women from every region in the US or talking with women with specific organizational titles or professions can add another layer to the information collected. Speaking with not only African American women but extending the questions to other women of color in executive positions can also answers questions as to whether or not the communication issues discussed in this study is relative to Black women or all women of color.
Ethnographic study would also provide insightful knowledge about the perceptions of organizational communicative experiences discussed by the participants. Observing organizational behavior between the participants and their subordinates and peers could prove to be insightful into how the women perceive their communication and how they interact in the workplace. Observation could address unconscious strategies that hinder or advance communication practices. Additionally, interviewing subordinates and peers about the communication styles of the participants can also answer questions about workplace behavior of Black female executives from dominant- culture members.

Conclusion

Each connection that I made with each individual participant was a result of these women willing to help a friend help a mutual friend who agreed to help a family member’s neighbor. Even though each connection was not a result of the series of relationships described in the previous sentence, that example represents the type of relationships that led to me being able to interview my participants. I place a special emphasis on mentioning these connections in this section because without those connections and relationship, this project would not have been possible. Being able to interview the women in this project has given me a greater understanding of organizational life for Black women. When I reflect on my own experiences with work, the stories of the participants connect to my understanding of communicating with dominant members and relationships that have helped with success.

As I reflect on the study and its relationship to the power of voice for muted group members, I recall several instances throughout this project as well as experiences in my doctoral career that silenced me and my experiences. This project has been very cathartic, allowing me to reflect on workplace experiences that I never had the opportunity to fully grasp while preparing
me to handle my upcoming employment. I have used the information collected in this study to discuss how I can become a better person entering the workplace. Reflecting on the stories told by the participants also provides a different level of understanding about the workplace experiences held by my grandmothers and mother. Even though these women were never responsible for multi-million dollar budgets or global representatives in organizations, they shared several lived experiences as the participants. In addition, this project allowed for me to showcase, while showing respect and giving honor, to the different complexities surrounding the lived experiences of this group of Black women. Through this project I was able to challenge essentialist notions of Black womanhood, study domination and oppression in the workplace, while improving the lives of Black women. Through the stories told by the Black executive women in this project, I was able to chip away at some of the historical misrepresentation and mischaracterization of Black women.

I also wonder how my multiple identities affect my understanding of the workplace and the relationships that I have with people in them. As a starting point for my academic career, I think it has been imperative for me to work on research that held a special place in my heart. This project challenged me to think outside of the box and look for deeper meanings to surface issues. This project will serve as a starting point to gathering literature that makes a direct impact on the lives of Black women. My overall goal is to embark upon research endeavors that will contribute to an understanding and appreciation for Black women and their lived experiences in the workplace.
References


Appendix A: Interview 1 Protocol

Overview

I. As noted earlier, in-depth interviews do not follow a strict guide, but begin with questions that foster self-disclosure of the participants' stories of their personal experiences. The interviews will focus on African American executive women workplace communicative workplace experiences and how organizational and social support and relationships aid in advancement.

II. The interviews will last about 1 hour and will cover three major areas:
   A. The communication practices that African American executive women practice in organizations.
   B. The organizational and communication factors that help with workplace success.
   C. Mentoring programs and relationships that may assist with workplace advancement

Part I:

Let’s start by discussing your communication skills and strategies that you use in the workplace.

1. How do you communicate with your colleagues in the workplace?
   a. Subordinates?
   b. Clients?

2. How does that differ from the manner in which you communicate with members of your family?
   a. Friends
   b. Acquaintances?

3. Does your communication in the workplace alter due to your position in the company? If so, in what way?

4. Does your communication style differ from that of your peers?

5. What specific communication strategies do you employ in the workplace?
   a. At Home
   b. With Family
   c. With Friends

6. In what way does being the only African American women in an executive position influences your communication style in the workplace?

7. What specific behaviors and communication strategies do you use to influence others in the workplace?

8. Describe your interaction with other members of senior level management?
   a. How often do you communicate with other members of senior level management?

Part II:

Let us now discuss the factors that you believe contributed to your workplace success.

1. What is success?
a. Does that definition differ when you are not in your executive role?
2. How do you communicate success in the workplace?
3. In terms of your career track, what steps did you take to get to your current position?
   a. What specific obstacles did you have to overcome and deal with to progress in your career?
   b. What instances of discrimination or differential treatment have you encountered during your career progression?
      i. What happened? When did it occur? Who was involved?
      ii. Why do you think this incident happened
      iii. What was your response?
      iv. How did this incident contribute to your definition of success?
4. What lessons have you learned as a result of obtaining workplace success?
5. What relationships do you deem as most influential in helping you to get to the level of success that you are at now?
   a. Spouse? Family? Colleagues?
   b. What specific stories do you have to share about these relationships?
6. What do you consider to be the most influential relationship that you have had to influence your development in the workplace?
7. Of all of your workplace accomplishments, what do you deem as most important?
8. Why do you think there are so few African American women in executive positions in your organization?
   a. What advice would you give to Black women aspiring to advance to executive positions?

Part III
Now let us discuss mentoring relationships and programs that contribute to workplace advancement.
1. Have you been a part of any formal mentoring programs?
   a. When? Where? For how long?
   b. How did the program work?
2. Do you believe this program assisted in your workplace advancement?
3. Have you had any formal mentoring relationships?
   a. When? Where? For how long?
   b. Who was the mentor?
   c. What do you feel was gained from this relationship
4. Have you had any informal mentoring relationships?
   a. When? Where? For how long?
   b. Who was the mentor?
   c. What do you feel was gained from this relationship
5. Do you believe that mentoring relationships are a factor in workplace success and advancement for Black women?
   Why?
6. If there was not a formal mentoring program, do you think that a formal mentoring program would work for this organization?
To conclude the interview, can you tell me three rules that you feel are necessary for every African American women to know to be successful in workplace organizations?

1. What else would you add about your communicative workplace experiences and relationships as a Black executive woman that we may not have discussed?

This concludes our interview. Thank you for your participation in this study. I may be contacting you after I complete all of the interviews to conduct a brief follow up to ensure I have represented your ideas correctly, is that ok? You have the option of viewing a transcript and the analyzed data if you like. May I forward a copy to you? Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any other questions or information you would like to share.
Appendix B: Interview 2 Protocol

Overview

Thank you for agreeing to have a follow up conversation regarding our first interview. I have a few questions that I would like to ask to clarify some of the stories told during our first interview.

Questions:

1. How do you think your peers perceive your communication style?
2. How do you think senior management perceive your communication style?
3. What was the biggest factor in getting to your current position?
4. What specific obstacles have you faced in this position that may have influenced your communication style?
5. Have you ever felt like an imposter in your organization?
6. Can you give me specific examples of how you receive support in your current organization from subordinates and peers?
Appendix C: IRB Approval

December 14, 2010

Creshena Murray
Department of Communication Studies
College of Communication & Information Sciences
The University of Alabama

Re: IRB # 10-OR-396 “African American Women Executives’ Organizational Communicative Experiences: Managing Success, Support, and Workplace Relationship Satisfaction”

Dear Ms. Murray:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on December 13, 2011. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of FORM: Continuing Review and Closure.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Stuart Usdan, Ph.D.
Chair, Non-Medical Institutional Review Board
The University of Alabama
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS
REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

I. Identifying information
Principal Investigator
Name: Creshema Murray
Department:
College: College of Communication and Information Sciences
University: The University of Alabama
Address: 440 Reese Phifer Hall
Telephone: 205-339-3550
FAX:
E-mail: Creshema.Murray@gmail.com

Title of Research Project: African American Women Executives’ Organizational Communicative Experiences: Managing Success, Support, and Workplace Relationship Satisfaction

Funding Source: none

Type of Proposal: X New

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Attach a renewal application
Attach a continuing review of studies form
Please enter the original IRB # at the top of the page

UA faculty or staff member signature: ____________________________________________________________

II. NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION (to be completed by IRB):
Type of Review: ______ Full board ______ Expedited
IRB Action:

X Approved — this proposal complies with University and federal regulations for the protection of human subjects

Approval is effective until the following date: 12/31/13

Items approved:

- Research protocol: dated
- Informed consent:  dated
- Recruitment materials:  dated
- Other:  Dated

Approval signature __________________________ Date 12/14/10

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