A Phenomenological Inquiry Examining the Lived Experiences
of African-American Male Senior Executive
Service Members in the United States Federal Government

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of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

To all of the senior executives who shared their experiences with me and who daily

demonstrate their commitment to the intellectual development and the economic

empowerment of our nation's African-American community by respecting family,

spirituality, justice and integrity.

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ABSTRACT

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Federal agencies have made significant efforts to implement equal employment opportunities and workplace diversity through the development and implementation of diversity programs and policies. However, the evidence indicates that Senior Executive Service (SES) glass ceilings still exist for certain minorities, thereby hindering the overall achievement of workplace diversity. African-American males make up only 5.3% of total employees in the SES, one of the lowest percentage of all racial groups. This suggests that African–American males may be at a disadvantage in evaluations for leadership positions due to their race. However, no previous research has focused on this issue. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore African-American males' lived experiences of progressing to and holding federal SES positions. It was designed to investigate the organizational and individual-level factors that have shaped these experiences and the strategies used to ascend to and remain relevant in SES roles. A qualitative, phenomenological research design enabled the researcher to achieve deep insights into the lived experiences of a sample of African-American males in SES positions. The findings indicate that the African-American males in this sample have struggled in various ways to achieve and succeed in their roles. This appears to be due to a lack of organizational support in their paths to success, as well as the negative impact of stereotypes and misconceptions relating to African-American men. Despite this, the research participants have successfully overcome the challenges and have drawn on

personal strengths and skills as well as specific strategies in achieving success. As a result, they are delivering high levels of value to their respective organizations and positive role models to other African-American males. By providing greater organizational support and enforcing compliance with diversity policies, federal agencies are likely to benefit from a more diverse racial representation in the SES while improving social equity in employment.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The idea of workplace diversity has gained importance due to a significant

increase in immigrant workers, international competition, and globalization forces

(Hansen, 2002). Diversity and diversity supporting programs are especially necessary in

areas outside the United States (U.S.) where American companies are present (Hansen,

2002). Pressure increasingly is being exerted on human resource personnel in

organizations to hire diverse groups of employees (White, 2009). United States federal

agencies have made significant efforts towards enhancing workplace diversity and equal

employment opportunities. However, current employment statistics reveal

underrepresentation of minorities in senior government positions. The percentage of

minorities in civilian employment or low-level civil service positions is larger than the

percentage of minorities in senior federal positions (White, 2009). According to

Witherspoon (2009), African-American males make up 5% of the federal Senior

Executive Service (SES), while African-American women hold 3.5% of the SES

positions. Hispanic males make up 2.7% of the SES while Hispanic women hold 0.9% of

the positions. Caucasian males and women hold 60.7% and 23.3% of SES positions,

respectively. The racial composition of federal agencies mirrors the nation's population

composition only at the low employment levels. Furthermore, race is among the top

reasons for equal employment opportunity charges filed by aggrieved federal employees

(Stark, 2009).

The 2010 census indicated that African Americans comprised 13% of the U.S.

population, while Hispanics made up 12.6%, and American Indians and Alaskan Natives

made up 0.9%. Asians made up 5% of the population. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders made up 0.2 % while 6 % consisted of individuals from two different races. Seventy-two percent of the population was made up of whites (United States Census Bureau, 2010). In the same year, Asians made up 2.7% of the SES, African-Americans (9.3%) and Hispanic (3.7%) while other minorities made up 1.7% (Kohli, Gans & Hairston, 2011).

Yoder (2012) emphasized that, though the American federal and civilian workforce has changed significantly over the last decade, ethnic minorities remained underrepresented in federal employment as of 2011. The representation of African Americans in the federal workforce has remained constant over the years. Presently, African Americans make up 17.8% of the federal workforce, the same rate as in 2007. This number represents an increase of only 0.2% since 2002. In the general American workforce, African Americans accounted for 10.1%, again the same as in 2007. In 2002, the number was 10.4% (Yoder, 2012). These are indications that there may be a glass ceiling effect which represents hindrances and barriers faced by African-American males and other minorities in career progression (Witherspoon, 2009). The glass ceiling effect is related to discrimination and negatively affects upward mobility as the inequality manifests at a later point in an individual's career as opposed to the entry point (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011). This is supported by the minimal number of ethnic minorities in the senior positions within the SES. Despite research on the glass ceiling dating back 25 years ago, researchers have not exclusively examined the underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES. This study aims to close this literature gap by examining the experiences of African-American males in the SES.

Affirmative action and equal employment opportunity policies are intended to promote the hiring of ethnic minorities. These policies, however, achieve minimal results. The policies deal with intricate personnel practices, which influence compensation, promotion, and advancement of ethnic minorities into higher positions in federal agencies (Yoder, 2012). For instance, Executive Order 11478, signed on August 8, 1996 by then-President Bill Clinton, was aimed at ensuring diversity and lack of discrimination in federal employment. The Executive Order also established a continuing affirmative program in executive departments and agencies. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 set a policy on the need for the federal workforce to reflect nationwide diversity. Further, President Bill Clinton, in a move to ensure inclusion of women and ethnic minorities, called for a government that reflects America and installed more women and minorities in executive government positions (Stark, 2009). Available studies focus on underrepresentation of all ethnic minorities. The studies focusing on underrepresentation of African Americans focus on both African-American males and females. There is a paucity of studies focusing on the underrepresentation of the African-American males in the SES. The study therefore exclusively focused on the underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES.

Background of the Study

The United States federal government currently faces long-term fiscal constraints and changing population demographics (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2008). Senior level leadership in federal agencies are responsible for giving responsible, dedicated, reliable, and unrelenting attention to human capital and related organizational transformation issues. The SES is in charge of ensuring continued governmental

transformation. The SES was established through the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and was designed to be composed of individuals selected on the basis of exemplary leadership skills. The federal government senior corps symbolizes the most qualified section of the federal career workforce. Enhancing diversity in the SES could contribute to organizational strength by providing broader perspectives on policy development and implementation, strategic planning, problem solving, and decision making (GAO, 2008). There was an increase in the number of women and ethnic minorities in SES between 2000 - 2007. However, the increase was not recorded across all federal agencies. The agencies with the best SES minority representation include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (43%), Interior (28%), and Agriculture (23%), while the agencies with worst minority representation in the SES include the Departments of Defense (10%), Navy (10%), Air Force (10%) and State (8%) (Stark, 2009). Though the SES has workplace diversity programs, minorities, especially African-American males, remain underrepresented as of 2007, with data indicating that African-American males account for only 5.0% in SES careers (GAO, 2008), compared to 12.1% of the national population (Stark, 2009).

A recent study by Kohli et al. (2011) indicated that 5.3% of senior positions were occupied by African-American males. This indicates that, despite existing workplace diversity programs, the condition of African-American males has not changed significantly with regard to senior executive employment. The situation is projected to remain the same. Data projections indicate that the percentage of African-American males in senior executive positions may not increase at all by the year 2030 (Kohli et al., 2011). Carton and Rosette (2011) argued that African-American organizational members

are disadvantaged during evaluations for leadership positions, resulting in poor career advancement prospects. Poor evaluation acts as a barrier for the African-American male's upward mobility, especially in recognition-based processing, where preexisting cognitive cataloging of prototypical and non-prototypical leaders is used to determine whether an individual has strong leadership capabilities. This leads to favorable evaluation of prototypical leaders and biased evaluation of non-prototypical leaders, including African-American males (Carton & Rosette, 2011).

Stark (2009) argued that minorities will make up 50% of the total U.S. population by 2050, shifting workplace diversity from a civic responsibility to a survival requirement. Minority underrepresentation at executive levels raises concerns that federal agencies are not ready to meet the needs of all U.S. citizens. Top-level executives are instrumental in formulating agencies' missions, major policies, and goals. Failure of agency leadership to mirror diversity in the general population may lead to a lack of proper representation for minority groups. Federal agencies must, therefore, adopt diversity at the executive level.

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Overview of the Senior Executive Service

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The Senior Executive Service was established in 1978 after President Jimmy Carter passed the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) (P.L. 95-454, 92 Stat 111). Appointments to the SES, especially for career appointees, are based on Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs), which represent required leadership skills. The ECQs were first developed in 1994 by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and were overhauled in 1997 due to changes in the management environment. The current ECQ requirements focus on active change management capabilities, such as change leadership, people

leadership, result orientation, business acumen, and networking skill (OPM, 2001).

Career appointees are reviewed by the Qualifications Review Board (QRB), which serves

as the last stage in the SES selection process and focuses on ensuring a balance between

technical skills and executive qualifications (OPM, 2001). The competitive staffing

process is not adopted in selecting non-career appointees, as their qualifications are

certified by the leader of the hiring agency. The positions of limited term appointees are

established as dictated by unexpected agency requirements (Carey, 2012).

Non-career appointments are limited to 10% of the entire SES, while the

maximum number of non-career executives in a single agency cannot exceed 25%.

Further, certain positions within the SES are reserved for career executives (Bonosaro,

2000). Mobility within the SES is enhanced by the establishment of rank in individuals as

opposed to positions (Bonosaro, 2000; Carey, 2012). The SES pay system level is

composed of six levels of basic pay, ES-1 to ES-6, General Schedule (GS) pay levels and

Executive Schedule (EX) pay levels (Carey, 2012). The SES eliminated procedural and

organizational barriers that had hindered mobility to the top executive level. Mobility in

the SES is promoted by interagency and intra-agency transfers, as well as OPM initiatives

such as the Senior Opportunity and Resume System (SOARS), an Internet-based center

where members can post resumes and view available job opportunities (Halchin, 2001).

Current composition of the SES. The SES has been criticized for a lack of

diversity (Carey, 2012; Witherspoon, 2009). Minorities are underrepresented in the SES.

In 2007, African-American males composed 5% of the SES, while African-American

women held 3.5% of positions. Hispanic males held 2.7% of the positions, and Hispanic

women held 0.9%. Caucasian males and women held 60.7% and 23.3% of SES positions,

respectively (Witherspoon, 2009). American Indian/Alaska made up 0.4% while

Asian/Pacific Islander men and women made up 1.5% and 0.5% respectively

(Witherspoon, 2009).

By 2012, women accounted for 31.8% of SES positions, while men made up

68.2%. Native American Indians accounted for 1.2%, while Asians made up 3.0%.

African Americans made up 9.8% of the SES by 2012, and Asian/Pacific Islanders made

up 3.4% (Carey, 2012). This conclusively indicates that minorities and women are

underrepresented in the SES as compared to the general federal workforce and the

general United States population (Carey, 2012; Witherspoon, 2009). This

underrepresentation serves as the foundation for affirmative action and other strategies

for improving minority representation in the SES.

Research Gap

Despite the underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES, there is a

paucity of studies focusing on the exclusion of African-American males from top federal

roles. Most studies on exclusion in federal employment focus on minorities in general,

including Hispanics and African Americans, among others (Erdreich, Slavet, & Amador,

1996; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011; Offices of Personnel Management; 2010;

Witherspoon, 2009). Moreover, most studies focusing on exclusion of minorities in the

SES focus on both minority males and females. Others, such as Womack-Gregg (2010)

and Jackson (2009), focus on the exclusion of minority women. The current study helped

to close the literature gap by focusing exclusively on the experiences of African-

American males in the SES. This study was designed to address the underrepresentation

of African-American males by focusing on the personal experiences of African-American

male senior executives. The study exclusively focused on underrepresentation African-American males since existing data on the representation of African-American males in the SES has not improved significantly, despite the adoption of workplace diversity programs. Moreover, estimates indicate that the representation of African-American males is not expected to improve significantly by 2030 (Kohli et al., 2011). Results of the study may also inform federal employment decision making on inclusiveness and increasing diversity in the SES.

Problem Statement

In the present qualitative study, I aimed to provide significant insights into the underrepresentation of African-American males in SES by focusing on their personal experiences in the SES. African-American males are especially affected by the imbalances in the SES. The representation of African-American males has improved from 5% in 2007 (Witherspoon, 2009) to 5.3% in 2010 (Kohli et al., 2011). The representation of African-American males is projected to remain at 5.3% by 2020 and 2030, while that of African-American females is expected to increase from 4.0% in 2010 to 6.7% by 2020 and 9.5% by 2030 (Kohli et al., 2011). Though the representation of African-American males in 2010 was higher than that of other minority males including Asians (1.6%) and Hispanic males (2.7%), the representation of Asian males was expected to increase to 2.7% by 2020 and 3.4% by 2030. The representation of Hispanic males was expected to increase to 3.2% by 2020 and 4.4% by 2030, while African-American male representation was expected to stagnate over the period. Moreover, despite the underrepresentation of African-American males as compared to that of White males, whose representation in the SES was 58.9% in 2010, no studies have focused on

the underrepresentation of African-American males. There is, therefore, a need to investigate and understand underrepresentation of African-American males in senior leadership positions in federal agencies, in order to recommend possible ways of addressing this problem.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to explore African-American male federal SES members' experiences. The doctoral dissertation was designed to investigate and describe the actual experiences of African-American male federal SES members while addressing the gap in the literature pertaining to underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African-American male Senior Executives understand their lived experiences in reaching the federal Senior Executive Service?
   a) What are the experiences which shape the achievements of African-American men in the Senior Executive Service?
   b) What strategies do African-American men believe they used to reach the Senior Executive Service?
   c) What meanings do African-American male executives make of their achievements in the SES?

Research Methodology

The goal of this research was to understand, through phenomenological inquiry, the experiences of African-American males in the SES. The study adopted Husserl's

(1859-1938) descriptive phenomenological approach, which focuses on elucidating the human experiences of a research phenomenon. This phenomenological approach allows insight and lends voice to the essence of experience in the form of a narrative description. With this study, the researcher attempted to bring to the fore voices of African-American males and, as such, utilized a phenomenological research design. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Creswell, 2005) drawn from the population of African-American males presently serving as executives in the Senior Executive Service.

Study Rationale

This exploration may provide data to leaders and individuals interested in the career paths of African-American male senior federal executives. The findings may contribute to the knowledge base by providing insights into the experiences of African-American male executives in the SES. The study may also provide insights useful for federal employment decision making with regards to improvement of African-American males' representation in the SES.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter contains a review of available literature on the exclusion of African-American males in the federal workforce. The researcher used various databases including Emerald, ProQuest, Ebscohost, and Google search engine to search for related studies. The key words used included "African-American males in the SES," "minorities in the SES," and "factors promoting career development among minorities in the SES," among others. The chapter is organized into several subsections. The chapter opens with a section on the glass ceiling effect, and progresses to the need for diversity in the SES. The chapter advances to present perception of African-American males in the SES and the factors that influence promotion to the SES. The chapter also presents the strategies utilized by minorities to achieve SES status. The last section summarizes the chapter.

Glass Ceiling in Federal Senior Executive Service

In the federal SES, compliance with equal employment laws is monitored by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). However, minorities are still underrepresented in the SES. According to Naff and Kellough (2001), federal agencies have been slow to adopt diversity management or commit any significant resources to diversity. No significant changes have been noted in personnel programs in the agencies despite the changes in demographic projections in the country. Most federal agencies are characterized with attitudinal and organizational barriers that hinder career advancement among minorities. Kellough and Naff (2004) maintained that though federal agencies are increasingly implementing diversity management programs, such programs have not been

adopted in all agencies. Kellough and Naff (2004) established that the diversity programs adopted in approximately 15% of federal agencies do not focus on racial differences. This explains why minorities are still underrepresented despite efforts to improve their numbers in the SES and federal agencies in general.

The number of ethnic minorities especially in job grades GS-13 through GS-15 since year 2003 has not increased. However, little progress has been noted among African-American males (GAO, 2008). Data on the federal workforce indicates a slow progress in attainment of SES positions among minorities. As of September 2007, the SES workforce was 71% male and 29% female. Moreover, Caucasian males dominated SES leadership positions, with 61.4% representation, compared to 41% representation in the federal workforce as a whole (Witherspoon, 2009).

Recent reports have indicated an underrepresentation of African-American males in senior government positions; 5.3% of positions are held by members of that demographic. The glass ceiling effect mirrors the racial barriers experienced by African Americans, such as attitudinal organizational barriers, which lead to slower promotion rates and hinder their ascendance to the top leadership positions in the SES (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011; Jollevet, 2008). Kohli et al. (2011) predicted that this situation will not improve rapidly. There is need to promote African Americans to top executive positions in order to mirror their growing numbers at the occupational, professional, and managerial levels (White, 2009).

Kohli et al. (2011) cited OPM projections of the SES composition by 2030 indicating that the ethnic minorities would still be underrepresented and would make up only 29% of the SES positions. The researchers highlighted that representation of African

Americans would improve slightly. However, this improvement would be based entirely on increment in the number of African American women who will double their current representation in the SES. The number of African-American males will largely remain constant over the period. Representation of African- American women will increase gradually while that of African-American males will largely remain constant (see Appendix 1).

Researchers commonly agree that African-American males are underrepresented in the SES (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011; Jollevet, 2008; Kohli et al., 2011; White, 2009; Witherspoon, 2009). The studies, however, do not focus on the personal experiences of the glass ceiling effect among African-American males in the SES. This study added to the literature on the glass ceiling effect by focusing on the personal experiences of African-American males in the SES.

Case for Increasing Representation of African-American Males in SES

It is accepted that federal agencies should reflect the diversity of the U.S population in order to ensure that minorities are involved in policy development and allocating benefits. Affirmative action is required to improve minority representation in federal agencies. The government should be actively engaged in providing equal opportunities to all American citizens and dismantling barriers that hinder advancement among minorities and inhibit their ability to exercise influence (Kellough & Naff, 2004).

According to GAO (2005), incorporating strategic management in federal agencies' strategic plan creates culture changes that promote, support, and value differences within the federal workforce. Federal agencies are encouraged to link diversity goals to their overall strategic plans and ensure that diversity initiatives are

viewed as an important aspect of the agencies. Focusing on diversity management can assist federal agencies to improve individual and organizational performance and improving productivity and innovation. Diversity can assist federal agencies in meeting the needs of minorities and enable the agencies to meet the needs of minority employees at low and high tiers of the organizational structures (GAO, 2005; Kellough & Naff, 2004; Naff & Kellough, 2001).

Federal agencies should reflect the attitudes and conditions of the American society in its entirety. Federal agencies play a critical role in overcoming the glass ceiling and providing African-American males and other minorities with leadership opportunities (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The federal workforce is expected to serve as a model reflecting the diversity in modern American society (Jackson, 2009). This is achievable through commitment to workplace diversity, not only in federal employment positions generally, but specifically in top leadership positions. Federal agencies can demonstrate such a commitment by adopting policies and actively promoting workplace diversity programs and policies as a means of eliminating glass ceiling barriers at all levels (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

The Obama administration called for increased diversity in the federal workforce, as demonstrated by Executive Order 13538, issued on August 18, 2011. This Executive Order required a government-wide program promoting diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce (Kohli et al., 2011). Federal agencies were encouraged to adopt policies for modeling equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion. This requires federal agencies to scrutinize existing employment policies and work environments to determine whether they are conducive to equal employment opportunity and fairness to existing

employees (Federal Labor Relations Authority, 2012). In its call for increased diversity in the SES, the GAO (2003) only emphasized an increase in the number of Caucasian women and a decrease in Caucasian males by the year 2007. This indicates a need for programs designed to enhance diversity and improve representation among minorities, especially African-American males.

The OPM strategic plan supports recruitment drives aimed at enhancing the employment of underrepresented groups. OPM has also called for improvement in tracking of demographic data within federal agencies (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2008; Jackson, 2009). Data capturing could provide the means to determine the success of diversity initiatives in federal agencies. Management personnel in federal agencies are held accountable for ensuring workplace diversity and inclusion of minorities (Jackson, 2009). OPM has highlighted a need for increasing outreach initiatives to coordinate with minority representative groups, and for adopting government-wide solutions to minority underrepresentation (Jackson, 2009). The EEOC is charged with the unique role of enforcing Title VII and related civil rights statutes. In particular, the EEOC enforces employment civil rights. The EEOC's projects have included initiatives aimed at educating young federal workers on workplace rights and responsibilities in a bid to enhance professional development (Occhialino & Vail, 2005).

African-American males present an important section of the American population. Increasing employment opportunities for African-American males could provide the SES and federal agencies in general with unique talents. Researchers commonly agree on the need to enhance diversity and increase the representation of ethnic minorities in the SES through diversity policies. However, there is a paucity of studies exclusively focusing on

the underrepresentation of African Americans in the SES. By establishing the experiences of African-American males in the SES and the strategies which inform their career development, the study will provide significant insights to policy development at the federal agency level for increasing diversity and representation of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in the SES.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher chose social equity as the theoretical framework guiding this study on the underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES. Social equity is conceptualized in terms of fairness, equality, and justice in the distribution of federal jobs across racial, ethnic, and gender lines (Riccucci, 2009). Justice involves the guarantee of basic liberties to all individuals and the management of social and economic resources to promote disadvantaged groups (Moore & Morris, 2009). The procedures of representative democracy currently operate in a manner that fails to adequately end systematic discrimination towards disadvantaged minorities (Riccucci, 2009).

The concept of social equity may be as old as the emergence of social studies. However, social equality in public administration is related to the theory of justice by John Rawls. In the theory, Rawls indicated that the principle of justice is fairness where each individual has the right to equality in obtaining basic liberty. "Ballot box democracy" is what is recognized as fairness, but Rawls argued that fairness should go beyond that to equity in provision of public services (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). This argument places social equity as a core principle in public administration.

The concept of social equity centers on the tenets of fairness, justice, impartiality, and equitable distribution of benefits to all members of the society (Frederickson, 2010).

Social equity is discussed under three segments or dimensions: individual equalities, segmented equalities, and block equalities. Individual equalities are based on provision of equality among individuals. The "one person, one vote" principle is an example of this dimension (Frederickson, 2010).

Segmented equality is a fundamental requirement in hierarchical systems, including in federal employment. Segmented equality manifests as an internal alignment in which any structure of inequality between individuals must correspond to changing conditions (Moore & Morris, 2009). Segmented equality is necessary in public policy and administration because public service is delivered on a segmented basis according to hierarchies based on the principle of individuals being equally unequal (Frederickson, 2010).

In contrast to segmented equality, block equalities call for equality between groups and subclasses, for example equal treatment for all racial groups (Frederickson, 2010; Moore & Morris, 2010). Moore and Morris (2009) emphasized the significance of social equity in the 21st century and the American culture, which embeds the values of freedom, democracy, and equality. Social equity serves as a guiding tenet or an ethical or moral imperative, and, in public service, it is based on the administrative requirement for responding to the needs of a diverse American population (Gooden & Portillo, 2011).

Social equity theory is largely constructed within the tenets of principles and values of social justice and improvement of social fabric. The ideal of social equity is judged mostly by its shortcomings rather than its achievements (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). Administrative theory and praxis is centered in social equity in the global context. History and domestic concerns take center stage in discussions regarding social equality

in in public policy administration. Analysis of social equity is instructive and a global concern. Exploration of theory in relation to provision of employment in SES in the United States for African Americans is an endeavor that will shed more light into the global involvement in social equity especially because the research involves racial demographic paradigms (Weir, 2004). Government interaction with the people its citizens and the way the will of the people is executed is a major concern of social equity in public administration.

Policy development including the employment policies in the public domain constitute greatly to social equity in any country. Inclusion of all groups in key policy areas that include employment opportunity, fair housing, and affirmative action form the basis of social equity theory in public administration. The theory evolves out of public policies in any country. However, the policies aimed at promoting social equity are not substitute to the broader concept. Social equity theory in public administration has a pillar essence of characterization, measurement, and achievement of justice and fairness in government policies and services (Johnson & Borrego, 2009). Moreover, it is an outcome concerned with fairness in distribution of available resources. In theory, social equity exists as a basis for a democratic and just society and is aimed at influencing the human behavior in the organizational context.

Disconcerting cycle is what researchers in social equity often find themselves in due to the fixed responses in analysis of equality of races in public policies. Agencies, policy makers, and parallel academic researchers ask for proof in its highest standards to accept the results of any research in social equity not to mention the double standards in protection of individual interests. The burden of proofing social equity research therefore

becomes unattainable and the research becomes repetitive. De facto requirement of more evidence enhances the avoidance of invoking necessary solutions. Social equity theory application in the research for racial equality is very phenomenal in the social dynamism and demographic paradigmatic shift being experienced in every country. Research on social equity is hindered by a delay tactic of the installation of informal dual standard systems (Weir, 2004). Social equity theory is a legal foundation for distribution of public resources and it is operationalized in federalism and research and analysis challenge. Hence, without research, the inequalities cannot be realized and analyzed. Inclusion of such a theory in investigation of public administration employment policies as it is in this study will enable analysis of the inefficiencies and deficiencies in the subject governance system.

There are historical remnants that affect the social equity state in any country. Weir (2004) indicated that segregation and exclusion practiced in the past pose practical, equity, and ethical dilemmas in the analysis of social equity paradigms and to the local governments. Environmental injustices to the residents of particular areas have government struggle to ensure equity in public administration. In the application of the theory of social equity, past injustices and the various changes that have occurred must be clearly outlined in order to conduct a feasible analysis of the current state, its causes, and impacts. Social equity theory has a normative essence of providing a learning and analysis tool for policy makers and agencies as it outlines and aids in the design of rigorous social models (Wooldridge, & Gooden, 2009). Achievement of social equity in a sphere of influence aids in the spreading of social equity research findings. However,

there is a pre-condition for social equity's normative essence that requires

acknowledgment of structural equity context that is embedded in policy operations.

According to Gooden (2008), bodies of concepts that are unique have been

developed in the theory of social equity in public administration. These principles have

influenced public administration in the last four decades to the greater integration of

cultures, races, religions, gender, and sexual orientations. Social equity principles have

challenged public administration to ensure it achieves its goals and satisfy its obligations

to society. Theory and practice of public administration has found it essential to enhance

social equity concepts and principles in all administrative aspects. In ethnic and racial

relationships, affirmative action has taken place of the traditional antidiscrimination laws

and enhanced the equal representation of all groups. However, the required equality has

not yet been achieved fully as various groups continue to rally for the adherence to

concepts of social equality policies in all public administration aspects.

Social equity is tied to ethical practices by public administrators and reinforced by

change in public attitudes. Any study in social equity is therefore considered important

for the growth of a community if the findings have sufficient evidence and are adopted by

the policy-makers (Gooden, 2008). Managers in public administration are expected to

make sure that social equity principles are practiced in their spheres of influence. In a

more explanatory manner, there has been major shift to authentically multi-cultural and

multi-racial models in various competencies. Social equity theory and principles are in

contention in ensuring the sustainability of multiple competencies in each group and their

subsequent inclusion in the public domain (Johnson & Borrego, 2009). Public

administration is a field that cannot avoid dynamic points of social equity and hence a

phenomenal determinant in social studies regarding distribution of resources by the government. Study of cultural competencies would greatly benefit public administration in the process of re-organization of the demographics in institutions to ensure equality.

Complex issues are encompassed in the theory of social equity, and it is very important to identify the various aspects of the issues in any research. Justice, fairness, and equality in public administration are an obligation of the current regime in any state. Social equity theory requires fair administration of the laws. A varied workforce is another way of interpretation of the obligations of a government in social equity practices. An attitude of social equality implies that it is not enough to search for qualified individuals in the minority group, but rather one needs to find them and develop their capacity to become qualified (Gooden, 2008). Government cannot force social equity, but it is supposed to encourage the individuals and organizations in the country to uphold the principles of social equity in their areas of operation. Social equity theory is aimed at propagating decency, honor, and equal opportunity for all groups regardless of their number in the population. Social equity subject and language have changed in the last decade. Variations in economic circumstances, language, conditions, and sexual orientation have been included in the concept owing to the rapid dynamism of social values. Social equity is used interchangeably with diversity and multiculturalism to include other groups.

Inclusion of various social groups has made social equity a multi-faceted social issue but with the same concepts and principles used in the past (Johnson & Borrego, 2009). It is important that the social equity theory be applied in specific social studies and leadership research for better understanding of equality concepts and demographic shift

in cultural practices. Competencies in various groups should be a factor to be considered in public administration to ensure quality of service, but social equity is pivotal to the success of a state. Hence, public administrators should ensure capacity development for all groups to ensure competent individuals to take up positions are available. This ensures that social equity theory concept and principles are upheld and subsequent existence of healthy social relations.

The concept of social equity is significant for the current study because it promotes equal employment opportunities for individuals with equal talents and qualifications. The tenet of individual equalities was captured by describing the diverse experiences utilized to promote the representation of African Americans in federal employment. The block equality component aligns with the argument for improvement of the numbers of underrepresented ethnic minorities in the SES. The current study covered the block equality component as the study's purpose was to understand the underrepresentation of African-American males, who form a significant component of American society. These tenets were captured in the interview schedule used for data collection purposes.

Public Sector Leadership

Leadership in the public sector is associated with some challenges and high expectations. There exists a range of similarities and differences between public sector leadership and other sectors. Some of the aspects where the difference occurs include political context, scrutiny, accountability, and public visibility. Executive and political leaders face difficult choices each time they deal with public matters in their dockets (Tizard, 2012).

General trends in any leadership development in the recent years have been mostly affected by change in the social composition of most countries. There are emerging trends that have resulted to change in social existence in various regions. Development of comprehensive strategy is a general trend in the public sector leadership. In the United States, leadership development models have been set up to guide public sector leadership in various states. This involves inclusion of all social groups in the public service and executive positions. In Norway, the Norwegian government went further in renewing its strategic plan for reflection of public sector change (Goldsmith & Donald, 2009). Another trend in leadership is the setting up of institutions for development of leadership traits. In the US, there are institutions for identification and development of future leaders in the public sector.

Linking management training to leadership development is the major aim of these institutions. A model that has been identified with absolute effectiveness in the development of future leaders is lacking. This owes to the difference between public sectors in various countries and the system of governance. Defining a profile of competence for future leaders is regarded as instrumental in ensuring that future leaders in the public sectors will uphold the concepts and principles of social equality (Crosby & Bryson, 2005). In the United States and the United Kingdom, competence profile definition is the first step in the process of development. The main idea here is that certain social competencies will be required in the future and hence prediction of such competencies is done and the relevant models created. Challenges change from time to time in leadership and hence future leaders must be developed through training in how to handle pressures from different fronts.

Identification and selection of potential leaders in the process of development is part of nurturing the leadership skills in the public sector. Selection helps in putting more emphasis on the leadership skills such that the individual develops the competence and necessary attitudes. Training and mentoring of the selected lot follows through specialized learning or through incorporation of leadership skill lessons in the existing curriculum. Sustainability of leadership development in the public sector is important so that all the training does not go to waste and to make sure the country is sufficiently equipped with leadership skills. Development of comprehensive programs for all government perspectives is important (Crosby & Bryson, 2005). Incentives should be linked to performance and mangers of different institution should be empowered to develop leaders through allocation of relevant resources. Leadership requirements for the public sector necessitate mentoring and management training prior to taking up the leadership roles. Expectations are high and the criticism associated with such positions can be very demeaning (Goldsmith & Donald, 2009). Moreover, an individual has to deal with diverse and people with different beliefs and convictions.

Three distinct elements characterize individuals in the political executive environment. It is almost certain that the individuals in the public sector will lack experience in one of the three key areas in public leadership, which include organization substantive area, departmental operations, and state or Federal politics. Hence, a prerequisite for any individual aspiring to be a leader in the public sector is to gain operational and intellectual control over political and organizational environment. Balancing of long-term and short-term goals is a skill needed in executive learning as it enables smooth running of either short or long tenures. The second element is board

discretion accorded to leadership in the public sector. Most leaders in the public sector execute the developed policies as they see fit because the performance of their area of influence is used to evaluate their personal performance (Kirk & Smutco, 2011). This involves development of strategic model to guide development activities in an area or organization. The third element indicates that leaders in public sector operate with two definitions of politics: partisan electoral politics and partisan issue politics. Partisan electoral politics is a conscious strategy motivated by the urge to influence the opinion of the public using attention-gaining tactics. On the other hand, partisan issue politics is a problem-solving activity motivated by the urge to provide solutions to issues affecting the public.

Crosby and Bryson (2005) indicated that in the practice of public leadership in the U.S., an area that needs improvement is the management of talent in SES. Cohesive programs are required among federal agencies to empower minority groups to move into SES positions. This involves identifying, selecting, developing, and recruiting the individuals to ensure social equity in the distribution of public resources. A central federal authority for management of leadership talents is lacking. Lack of effective strategies in the development of talents leads to hiring of SES members from the subcomponents of various federal agencies. Talent monitoring and development of leadership skills is instrumental in ensuring that all groups are represented in the SES positions, thereby ensuring equality.

Challenges of leadership in the current form of public governance require broader perspectives and new skills. Therefore, lack of talent development among federal agencies may be a crutch with time. Most of the institutions developed for training

leadership skills are not focused on management of federal agencies and equal

representation (Garey, 2011). Despite significant turnover in government roles, the right

people are needed in the right positions to steer the development agenda effectively.

Future public sector leadership needs broader perspectives, strategic thinking, and wise

reaction to situations and this can only be developed through customized training of

operation of federal agencies.

Various states have initiated public sector leadership training through

development of projects to ensure the incorporation of minority groups in SES. The

African-American Men development Project was initiated in Minneapolis. The project

supporters encountered various challenges along the way, including hostility by some

people from the North Hennepin county government (Bryson, Cunningham, &

Lokkesmoe, 2002), caused mainly by the bureaucracy in the county government. The

project aimed at identifying the shortcomings of the county government in working with

African-American young men. The county administrator at the time protected internal

sniping of the project. With time, the project demonstrated its effectiveness as it

supported the empowerment of African-American males in schools through talent

development take up executive positions (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). This indicated the

kind of hurdles that leaders trying to initiate equality programs sometimes go through

while making tough decisions. It forced the supporters of the project to work hard to

maintain the funding after the economic recession that hit the world in late 2002.

However, this project had some drawbacks that included lack of focus on key

stakeholders such as business executives, educators, managers, and African-American

leaders of federal organizations. Most of the participants in the imitative were not

African-Americans (Bryson et al., 2002). This was a major component in the failure of the project. However, the project served as an important foundation for other projects to that came later.

A strategic approach is needed in addressing potential cuts and pressures on the leadership in public sector. Understanding is also very important to be able to handle different and contrasting opinions of various seniors and juniors. Excellent leaders in the public sector consider the various opinions of all the stakeholders and require customized training. Public sector leaders that achieve excellence make decisions on critical issues based on opinions, choices and views of key stakeholders, evidence and careful analysis emanating from their experience elsewhere and upholding of the vision, objectives and values of the agency or organization (Garey, 2011).

In addition, personal intelligence and intuition is required for achievement of excellent results, and performance will be judged from the results. Decisions must not be based on short-term tactical approaches as too many of these are made across the public sector. Feasible decisions should be made each day and consistency of the success of various decisions should be maintained for an excellent leader in the public sector to stand out from the rest (Kirk & Smutco, 2011). However this may be hindered by various challenges as political convictions and impatience among the subjects especially if the results are long term. Social sectors, organization, service users, and the organization should be actively involved in the leadership to ensure equality and effective resource management.

Perceptions of American Males in Federal Senior Executive Service

There is a paucity of research specifically focusing on the perspectives of African-American males in the SES. Studies have focused on minorities in general, including African-American males (Erdreich, Slavet, & Amador, 1996; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011; White, 2009; Witherspoon, 2009). Erdreich et al. (1996), in a study of minorities including African Americans, established issues such as unfair or inequitable treatment among minorities in the federal civil service. Minorities reported subjection to covert and overt discriminatory practices. African Americans especially highlighted brazen or noticeable discriminatory practices such as subtle racism and prejudices manifested through stereotypes and attitudes about minority managers.

According to Erdreich et al. (1996), males from minority groups have made minimal progress in elevating their proportional representation in high pay grade positions, in comparison to Caucasian males. Moreover, minority males, with the exception of Asian Pacific American males, hold positions that are, on average, half a pay grade lower than non-minority males (Erdreich et al., 1996). Minorities are perceived as lacking requisite skills. Minorities in federal agencies cite this perception as a foundation of discriminatory practices, which bar minorities from top executive positions (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011; Witherspoon, 2012). This is emphasized by minority perceptions, which indicate that though leaders in federal agencies have made efforts to improve diversity through recruitment as well as mentoring and training programs, there is still a need to promote diversity at the top leadership positions (Butts, 2012).

Ethnic minorities especially value training and development programs and career-building assignments, which enhance career exposure and professional development for

leadership skills (Simard, 2009; Witherspoon, 2009). Butts (2012) emphasized that managers in the public service or governmental labor force have failed to accomplish inclusiveness and maximization of talents from diverse leaders in significant leadership positions. This is attributed to lack of professional development programs for progression to the SES. Therefore, there is a need to overcome divisive social dynamics which leading to the behaviors and decisions preventing proportional representation in the SES.

Stereotypes and preconceptions are associated with increased pressure on minorities (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Witherspoon, 2009). Henry-Brown and Campbell-Lewis (2005) viewed stereotypes and preconceptions on race as a double jeopardy whereby ethnic minorities are doubly disadvantaged due to racial discrimination and subtle preconceptions and stereotypes. According to Catalyst (2004), stereotypes and preconceptions related to the abilities of minorities to execute higher responsibilities are among the significant factors hindering career advancement among minorities. This applies to the present study in that minorities may be viewed as lacking the requisite skills and experience for top positions in federal agencies.

Age is a significant factor in human capital matters, with serious implications for succession planning. However, age stereotypes, whereby minorities are perceived as too young, could hinder chances of career development in the SES. Negative preconceptions related to age--for example, preconceptions that young employees lack the requisite experience for certain top positions--may lead to a belief that age diversity has a negative impact on organizations and thereby hinder promotion of young individuals to top positions (Pitts, 2006). According to Pitts (2006), age diversity is associated with lower social integration, poor communication, and turnover in organizations. These negative

perceptions affect the SES because most of its workforce is at or near retirement age (Jackson, 2009; Witherspoon, 2009). Where such preconceptions exist, young African-American males with the requisite skills in lower job grades may be locked out of promotion opportunities to the SES since they may be considered too young for such positions.

Minorities in general have to work harder and acquire higher competencies as compared to their Caucasian counterparts. This is manifested in the "work harder, be better" attitude expressed by most executives from minority groups (Witherspoon, 2009). Minorities feel that they have to prove they are better not only to others, but also to themselves. This indicates a deep entrenchment of self-doubt among minorities as a consequence of the glass ceiling. Minorities view entering the SES as impossible where supervisory support and commitment to diversity is lacking in federal agencies. A lack of initiative among leaders is demonstrated by the minimal mentoring programs aimed at developing minority senior leaders (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1996).

Previous researchers have argued that stereotypes and preconceptions are among the factors hindering career development of ethnic minorities in the SES. The current study has added to the literature by focusing exclusively on the experiences of African-American males in the SES and establishing their perceptions toward the glass ceiling and the underrepresentation of African-American males.

Factors that Influence Achievement among Male African American Senior Executives

The factors that shape the achievement of ethnic minorities at the senior executive level are grouped into structural and organizational barriers to diversity, social factors,

and personal factors. Structural or organizational barriers to diversity in the SES include advanced degree requirements, lack of career development programs, lack of mentoring and networking opportunities, performance-based competencies, lack of challenging assignments, and absent supervisory support (Witherspoon, 2009; Womack-Gregg, 2010).

Social factors are explained through social science theories highlighting the influence of social identification and social networks on behavior and decisions. Social identification refers to the identification of individuals with certain groups including the failures and successes of such groups (Butts, 2012). Upward career mobility among minorities in the SES is hindered by social factors such as discrimination, preconceptions and stereotypes, double and multiple jeopardy leading to tokenism and invisibility, bicultural stress, and inter-sectionality. Tokenism refers to the low presence of ethnic minorities, who constitute less than 15% of the total SES. Invisibility refers to lack of career visibility, which hinders career progression. Bicultural stress results from discrimination, stereotypes, and preconceptions, while inter-sectionality involves issues on gender, ethnicity, race, and class (Witherspoon, 2009). These factors are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

Organizational Barriers

This section discusses some of the organizational barriers that hinder African-American males from acquiring top leadership positions in the SES. The section highlights factors such as education requirements, career development programs, performance-based competencies, and organizational and managerial commitment to workplace diversity.

Advanced degree requirements.

Educational achievement is among the critical requirements for promotion to the SES. African-American males are encouraged to invest in their education by not only acquiring some college or associate degrees, but also by seeking bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Jollevet (2008) established that investment in higher education highly increased the chances of minorities achieving top leadership positions in federal agencies. Cross and Slater (2000) noted disconcerting trends in minority engagement in higher education, as evidenced by the fact that two-thirds of African Americans with higher education are female. In the year 2000, the percentage of African-American males with college degrees was 13.1%, as compared to 28.2% among Caucasians and 15.2% among African-American females. The underachievement of African-American males in the education sector is also evident in doctoral programs (Jenkins, 2006). Shears, Lewis, and Furman (2004) noted that African-American males fall behind in the doctoral arena as compared to Caucasians. According to these authors, African Americans receive only 6% of all doctoral degrees issued in the country, and most of those degrees are received by African-American women.

Higher education achievement has the greatest potential to promote social advancement among African-American males and to help them compete in a society which requires high intellectual and technological capabilities. Higher education also assists African-American males in attaining social and political equity. Lack of competitive education background could bar African-American males from SES leadership positions, which require enhanced perspectives, leadership capabilities, and firm executive skills (Womack-Gregg, 2010).

A study by Erdreich et al. (1996) established education as one of the significant factors in determining the pay grade and career progression for individuals in professional and administrative jobs in federal agencies. Though the studies emphasize the importance of higher education, the studies do not illuminate how lack of higher education limits representation of African-American males in the SES. It is possible that the lack of higher education may be compensated for by experience and training programs provided by federal agencies. The current study, through a phenomenological approach, provided insights on such issues by establishing the personal experiences of the African-American males in the SES.

Acquiring higher formal education also enhances the career progression prospects among minority groups aspiring to the SES. Jollevet (2008) established that investment in education among African-American police officers increased the officers' chances of achieving a command-level position. Similarly, Jackson (2009) emphasized the importance of acquiring higher education as a method of enhancing the chances for career progression among minorities in the SES. Higher education provides federal employees with the requisite formal qualifications for top leadership positions. Higher education also boosts self-confidence among minority federal employees (Jackson, 2009; Wilkerson, 2008). Education has the most direct influence on African Americans' upward mobility, achievement of self-sufficiency, and intellectual growth.

Lack of career progression or development programs.

Career advancement programs such as mentoring, developmental training opportunities and networking programs enhance career visibility among minorities by creating exposure and work opportunities (Womack-Gregg, 2010). Such programs

provide minorities with different skills and create a platform for displaying those skills (Witherspoon, 2009). Kohli et al. (2011) emphasized the need for training and development opportunities for minorities and encouraged federal agencies to adopt programs for nurturing and supporting minorities. The authors pointed out that the use of mentoring programs, training and development programs, and networking opportunities are some of the most appropriate forms of supporting talented minorities. Federal agencies should provide employees with training and ensure they understand the importance of diversity goals and the competencies required for functioning effectively in a diverse workforce. Mentoring programs should be developed to serve the role of communicating organizational expectations to employees seeking to advance their careers within the agencies (Kellough & Naff, 2004).

Jollevet (2008), in a study on African-American police executive careers, established that training and mentoring opportunities assisted in preparing junior African-American officers for command-level positions. Mentoring programs pair junior officers with senior professionals in higher authority positions. The senior officers serve as role models and provide the junior officers with hands-on job experience (Kohli et al., 2011). McDonald and Westphalia (2013) associated lack of mentoring with the continued underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities in top positions in corporate America. These researchers established that directors from ethnic minorities receive comparatively less mentoring as compared with White directors. The researchers also established that lack of mentoring affected career progression among ethnic minorities as characterized by fewer subsequent board appointments despite possessing higher strategic knowledge and insight and top management experience as compared to White

directors. However, McDonald and Westphalia (2013) argued the amount of mentoring received by ethnic minorities is relatively higher where individuals from ethnic minority groups form some element of the executives.

Mentoring programs form a crucial aspect of organizational efforts to promote inclusion of individuals from protected groups such as ethnic minorities and women. Mentoring assists employees adjust to the work environment and enables organizations to identify high-potential employees. Mentoring relationships also assist organizations in improving productivity and performance while promoting employee retention and diversity (GAO, 2005).

The mentoring relationship can be viewed either as a long term relationship for assisting mentees with career decisions and reflective analysis, or as a short term, specific developmental process aimed at offering direct coaching, training, and support (Elmuti et al., 2003). Mentors prepare mentees for the challenges and problems that they may encounter in the workplace by providing mentees with requisite knowledge and wisdom (Collins, 2006). This enables mentees to move from their comfort zones and explore new career paths through high visibility and exclusive assignments (Elmuti et al., 2003). Mentors build mentees' confidence, increase their self-esteem, and provide support and friendship (Elmuti et al., 2003). Mentors also play a significant role in assisting mentees through the different career developmental stages, thus enhancing successful upward mobility (Gibson, 2005; Johnson-Drake, 2010).

Participants in the study by Witherspoon (2009) highlighted the use of mentors as among the key strategies used by minority SES executives in reaching top positions. The participants indicated that mentors assisted them in preparing for interviews by predicting

interview questions and helping mentees acquire a broad corporate sense. Leadership

development programs such as management training also assisted minority SES members

to gain leadership skills and progress to top leadership positions. Mentoring programs

facilitate career progression due to the impact of emotional support, coaching, direction,

and ideals derived from the mentoring relationship (Jollevet, 2008; Williams & Smet,

2007). Seeking supervisory and management support is a significant strategy for

minorities who hope to achieve SES status. Mentoring, training programs, and

supervisory support increase the visibility of minorities in federal employment.

Training programs assist in equipping employees with skills and competencies for

leadership positions. Organizations also offer diversity training to improve awareness and

understanding of diversity among management and employees. Diversity training

promotes cultural awareness in organizations and understanding of the importance of

diversity to organizational performance (GAO, 2005). Training programs enhances the

opportunities for minority inclusion in leadership positions especially where training

programs are tailored to instill required leadership skills and competencies in minority

employees (Hicks-Clarke & Iles, 2000).

Researchers commonly agree that mentorship is a factor that enhances career

development in the SES. However, the studies focus on mentoring from a general

perspective (Collins, 2006; Emulti et al., 2003; Gibson, 2005) or from the perspective of

all minorities in the SES (Witherspoon, 2009). These studies did not address mentoring

from the perspective of African-American males. The present study closes these gaps by

adopting Husserl's descriptive approach to understand the mentoring experiences of

African-American males as part of their personal experiences in the SES.

Performance-based competencies and skills.

Federal agencies go beyond a replacement approach for identifying successors for top-ranking leadership positions. The agencies seek for employees with the appropriate competencies required for the positions. Federal senior executives are required to have different skills and competencies for meeting intricate challenges of the 21st century operating environment. The SES particularly requires individuals of the right management cadre (GAO, 2005). The SES requires excellent performance-based competencies. The executive core competencies required from senior executives by the OPM include excellent change management skills, leadership skills, business acumen, and political shrewdness (OPM, 2003; Witherspoon, 2009).

Political skills enable federal employees to identify internal and external politics that influence agencies. These skills are requisite for developing coalitions through partnerships and negotiations (OPM, 2012). Leading change, a core qualification for the SES, involves creativity, innovation, flexibility, resilience, vision, strategic thinking, and awareness of factors that affect federal agencies, such as local, national, and international trends and policies (OPM, 2012). According to the OPM (2012), leadership skills include conflict management, whereby leaders are able to prevent dysfunctional confrontations by leveraging diversity through inclusiveness; providing development opportunities to others; and encouraging and facilitating teamwork. Performance-based competencies such as problem solving, accountability, decisiveness, entrepreneurship, customer service, and technical credibility set individuals apart, enhancing their career progression chances (OPM, 2012; Witherspoon, 2009).

Business acumen is also essential for promotion to the SES. This includes financial management, human resource management, and technology management (OPM, 2012). Progression into the SES also requires development of strong communication skills, both oral and written, which assist in professional and social networking. African-American male's communication skills facilitate the development of social capital through personal connections and networks. According to social capital theory, individuals' social relationships form a resource base that enhances career opportunities. Social capital assists organizational members in acquiring information regarding promotion decisions and the necessary connections for influencing promotion decisions (Jollevet, 2008).

However, Lai and Babcock (2012) argued that though having the desired skills and competencies is crucial in securing employment, the influence of the skills on acquisition of employment is moderated by the employer's perception of the job candidate's skills. The researchers maintained that employers' perceptions are not always based on objective evaluation of the skills of the job candidate but are sometimes informed by the employers' subjective evaluation of the skills. Clark, Ochs, and Frazier (2013) maintained that subjectivity and discretion were among the strategies adopted by administrators to discriminate against people of color, especially Hispanic and African-American males, which prevents the latter from progressing to executive positions.

The current study, by illuminating the personal experiences of African-American males, provides insights on whether the African-American males develop the required performance competencies and skills and whether the skills promote their representation in the SES.

Organizational and managerial commitment to diversity.

Organizational and managerial commitment to diversity is among the critical

factors influencing the achievement of minorities in federal agencies. Organizational

leaders are responsible for defining the need for diversity and the benefits derived from

diversifying the workforce. The available approaches include perception of diversity as a

means of complying with federal requirements, rewarding heterogeneity, and adoption of

diversity as a strategic resource. The value of workforce diversity must be clearly

articulated, as it serves as the frame of reference for organizational diversity initiatives

(Kreitz, 2008). Naff and Kellough (2001) emphasized that promotion of diversity can

either be mandatory in the form of affirmative action or voluntary where organizations

adopt diversity management. Affirmative action is founded on social, moral, and legal

justifications, while diversity management demonstrates organizational commitment to

improving productivity, efficiency, and quality. This commitment is long-term compared

to commitment to affirmative action, which may be short-lived and limited.

Organizational initiatives which indicate a commitment to diversity include

policies on workforce diversity, which could take the form of federal statutes on

diversity, training and development programs minorities, mentoring programs, and

networking opportunities (Kohli et al., 2011: Witherspoon, 2009). Indicators of

management commitment to workplace diversity include the presence of mentoring,

organizational justice, and support for diversity. These initiatives enable organizations to

create an organizational culture and climate that promotes workplace diversity.

Organizational climate is significantly influenced by organizational policies while

training programs and diversity programs communicate the importance accorded to

diversity by leaders. This leads to development of a diversity tolerant organizational culture (Hicks-Clarke & Iles, 2000).

Johns (2013), in a study investigating how the cultural, structural, and organizational barriers hindering accession of women to the SES, called for organizational commitment to overcoming the barriers experienced by women. The researcher argued that overcoming these barriers is a complicated endeavor that requires collaboration between federal and state governments and the involvement of the minority groups experiencing the barriers. The researcher emphasized the need for organizational support and enactment of government policies towards dismantling discriminatory practices and structural barriers to the SES. Johns (2013) also cited the need for comprehensive, organization-specific programs for addressing the barriers including the creation of voluntary targets for promoting inclusion of women on boards, executive committees, senior management, and active outreach to hire women. The researcher called for creation of effective pipelines for identifying, developing, and promoting women to the SES such as mentoring programs, leadership development approaches and implementation of incremental changes to ensure assimilation, accommodation of more women in the SES.

Incremental changes also present an opportunity for systematic identification and destruction of entrenched roots of discrimination based on cultural patterns and which undermine equality and lead to development of assumptions on competencies among individuals federal organization members. Kohli et al. (2011) also recommended development of initiatives for strengthening the applicant pool for SES posts by attracting most talented minorities from federal agencies and the corporate world for SES. Kohli et

al. (2011) also recommended filling key vacancies at the lower pay grades such as GS-14 and GS-15 with individuals from minority groups as a means of creating an effective pipeline to the SES.

Organizational commitment to diversity must be demonstrated and communicated from the top-level management to other levels in an organization (Kreitz, 2008). Supervisors in federal agencies, by hiring employees from minority groups, facilitate the development of self-efficacy and provide opportunities for advancement among minorities. Supervisory commitment to diversity could be indicated through mentoring relationships between supervisors and African-American males, provision and guidance through challenging assignments, and opportunities for highlighting individual skills.

Participants in the study by Witherspoon (2009) considered organizational and supervisory commitment as a factor determining promotion to the SES among minorities. Supervisory support can be fostered by federal agencies by formally assigning good mentors to talented African-American males in lower pay grades. Formal appointment of mentors develops the social support necessary for boosting the achievements of minority federal employees (Jollevet, 2008). Kohli et al. (2011) encouraged federal agencies to develop specific objectives and strongly commit to closing the diversity gap in the SES. This effort should include developing periodic interim milestones accounting for representation levels and turnover in senior ranks over the coming years. Commitment to diversity in federal agencies can also be developed through recruitment of underrepresented groups and related pathway programs such as recruiting minorities at the entry-level job in the federal service. Recruitment of young talent through internships,

graduate programs, and the Presidential Management Fellows program could contribute to increased minority representation in the SES (Kohli et al., 2011).

Clark et al. (2013) associated representative bureaucracy with representation in the federal service. The researchers hypothesized that bureaucracy responds to the partisan and ideological demands of political principals rather than representing the public interest. The study adopted data derived from the federal workforce reports and the U.S OPM central personnel data file to indicate the influence of partisanship and political ideology on the demographic structure of the SES. The researchers established that presidents in different administrations nominated different individuals to the SES based on similarity in ideological views.

Clark et al. (2013) associated representative bureaucracy with low representation of minorities in the SES during Republican administrations as compared with Democratic administrations. The findings also indicated that the political control of the composition of the SES is capable of perpetuating divisiveness over polarizing issues. Moreover, the continued influence of partisan and ideology politics on access to policy-making positions leads to an increase in patterned disparity in the demographic composition of the SES. This not only undermines government diversity goals but also undermines performance in the SES. The researchers recommended enactment of the SES Diversity Assurance Act or related legislation for strengthening the SES merit staffing process and enhancing the representation of minorities in policymaking positions.

Kellough and Naff (2004) emphasized the need for diversity management programs as a means of reflecting organizational and management commitment to employ, retain, and promote individuals from minority groups. The researchers

maintained that federal agencies must adopt specific efforts to ensure minority inclusion in leadership positions. Federal agencies are encouraged to reexamine their organizational structures, cultures, and management systems with the aim of auditing selection criteria, promotion criteria, performance appraisal criteria, and career development programs in order to ensure they accommodate minorities. Federal agency management are encouraged to closely monitor representation of different groups in terms of numbers and pay attention to employees' insights regarding the organizational environment. Kellough and Naff (2004) also advocated for development of internal identity or advocacy groups as an indication of organizational and management commitment to diversity. The groups represent the interests of non-traditional employees including ethnic minorities and other minorities in order to prevent isolation of such employees and development of a more inclusive work environment.

The highlighted studies do not establish whether ethnic minorities associate organizational and managerial commitment with career development in the SES. The study by examining the personal experiences of the African-American males in the SES may illuminate significant issues on organizational and managerial commitment towards improving the representation of African-American males in the SES.

Social Factors

The social factors affecting the achievement of African-American males and underrepresented minorities in general include discrimination, preconceptions, and stereotypes (Womack-Gregg, 2010), along with double and multiple jeopardy, which lead to invisibility and tokenism. Finally, managerial stress among minorities has a detrimental effect on advancement (Witherspoon, 2009). These factors hinder African-

American males' career achievements, and are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

Discrimination, preconceptions, and stereotypes

Stereotypes and preconceptions about race, gender, ethnicity, age, and culture are major causes of discrimination in federal agencies (Womack-Gregg, 2010). Jollevet (2008) established that increase in number of minorities in lower positions in federal agencies play an important positive role career progression to executive positions among minorities. Discrimination results in a situation where minorities in the federal workforce must work harder for promotions than their Caucasian male counterparts need to (Witherspoon, 2009). Butts (2012) emphasized the strong relationship between social identification, social networks, and decision making in the workplace as an explanation of demographic disparity in the SES. Organization-level perceptions and policies are shaped by leaders' socialization, ethnicity, and gender (Butts, 2012).

Preconceptions, stereotypes, and discrimination in the SES manifest as conscious or unconscious barriers the influence of which creates blind spots for leaders with regard to human resource management decisions (Butts, 2012; Mong & Roscigno, 2009). Li (2014), in a study focusing on the barriers experienced by Asian-American women, argued that stereotypes contribute to discrimination against Asian-American women. The researcher opined that, at times, "positive stereotypes" induce negative stereotypes about groups of minorities such as the Asian Americans. The researcher presented an example in which Asian Americans are viewed as lacking social skills; being passive, submissive, and apolitical; and lacking the assertiveness required for high-ranking executive positions. The researcher argued that the negative stereotypes parallel positive ones such

as the perceptions that Asian Americans are hardworking, ambitious, intelligent, and goal-oriented. Negative stereotypes confine minority groups within the glass ceiling and hinder progression into executive positions.

Racial stereotypes have a negative impact on the leadership prospects of African Americans and other minorities. African Americans are characterized as antagonistic and lacking competence. African-American culture is perceived as more demonstrative compared to the White culture. African Americans may therefore demonstrate more passion, and enhanced use of hand gestures and body movements when making their point. Such behavior may inform the antagonism stereotype among members of other races. These stereotypes minimize the perceptions of leadership capacities of minorities and perfunctorily disqualify minorities from consideration for leadership roles in federal agencies. Perceived and covert stereotypes regarding minority leadership potential minimizes minority access to leadership roles (James, 2014).

Eagly and Chin (2010) emphasized that commonly held and circulated beliefs regarding the characteristics of social groups bias our personal judgment of individuals from the social groups. The threat of discrimination and prejudice manifests where the stereotypes regarding a particular social group are incongruent with the personal characteristics required for leadership roles. This results into individuals from the social group being overlooked for promotions to leadership roles, regardless of whether the individuals fit the social stereotypes. Lack of inclusion in leadership roles is informed by people's subjective construal of individuals from the social groups, resulting in the belief that the individuals lack the competencies required for leadership roles.

According to the similarity attraction theory, individuals are attracted to those who share similar characteristics, including ethnicity and intelligence. This theory underscores the importance of racial identity. Because most leaders in the SES are Caucasian, they may overlook minorities, preferring other Caucasians in succession decisions (Butts, 2012). Discriminatory practices are also explained by the Positive Political Theory, whereby promotion and hiring decisions are based on self-preservation. Pre-established organizational norms unconsciously propel discriminatory practices whereby minorities are overlooked due to lack of internal policies and programs promoting inclusiveness (Butts, 2009). Mong and Roscigno (2009) agreed that such discriminatory practices are self-perpetuating based on existing norms.

Due to discriminatory processes, African Americans are often given tasks that require lower credentials or provide minimal on-the-job training (Kaufman, 2002). This hinders career development and the development of human and social capital, further hindering career upward mobility (Mong & Roscigno, 2009). Similarly, Jollevet (2008) established that African-American police executives had experienced racism in their career progression. A majority of participants in their study indicated that racial discrimination had influenced their career development. McBrier and Wilson (2004) emphasized that African-American males are promoted at lower rates compared to males of other races, providing evidence for the existence of discrimination in promotional practices as a result of bias in the evaluation process. The authors viewed the overrepresentation of African-American males in lower pay grades as inexplicable, and noted that Caucasian males enjoy a higher rate of promotion to the SES. In their study, Mong and Roscigno (2009) confirmed that racial harassment and discriminatory

promotional and hiring practices are highly prevalent. In agreement, Witherspoon (2009)

emphasized the importance of minority inclusion in organizations as a means of dealing

with discrimination, prejudice, and preconceptions.

Racial discrimination, stereotypes, and preconceptions contribute to invisibility in

top executive positions. This creates a scenario of tokenism and underrepresentation,

whereby individuals from minority hold fewer than 15% of top executive positions

(McDonald, Schweiger, & Toussaint, 2004). Tokenism can be addressed by increasing

the representation of minority groups in top executive positions to more than 35%,

empowering minorities so that they are able to voice their concerns, and overcoming

stereotypes and performance pressures that make leadership burdensome among

minorities (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Witherspoon, 2009). Lack of inclusion, invisibility, and

tokenism create managerial stress among minorities. Managerial stress is characterized

by feelings of inadequacy, failure, and guilt among individuals in supervisory positions.

Managerial stress emphasizes the need for mentoring programs and formal and informal

social networking programs that enhance career progression and assist minorities in

dealing with the glass-ceiling phenomenon (Witherspoon, 2009).

Leaders and individuals in federal agencies are encouraged to appreciate diversity

and differences in leadership styles across different racial groups. Moreover, it is possible

that leaders from minority groups can perform well if given opportunities to attain

leadership roles. Leaders from minority groups may also exhibit good leadership skills

due to their multicultural experiences and experiences attained from negotiating minority

and majority cultures. These experiences ensure that such leaders are more open-minded,

flexible, and open to change. Multi-cultural experience also enhances problem-solving capabilities among minorities and their cognitive processes (Eagly & Chin, 2010).

Researchers agree that discrimination, stereotypes, and preconceptions hamper upward mobility among minorities in the SES (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Butts, 2012; Jollevet, 2008; McDonald et al., 2004; Mong & Roscigno, 2009). However, none of these studies exclusively focused on the experiences of African-American males. The current study, by adopting a phenomenological approach, elucidates the personal experiences of African-American males. The results may provide important insights on the preconceptions, discriminatory practices, or stereotypes experienced by African-American males and which may contribute to their underrepresentation in the SES.

Double and multiple jeopardy

Early research on the glass ceiling phenomenon indicated that minorities are doubly disadvantaged (Catalyst, 2004), doubly discriminated against (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004), or in a double bind (Bartol, Martin, & Kromkowski, 2003). This is known as double or multiple jeopardy, in which ethnic minorities are doubly disadvantaged due to racial discrimination and subtle preconceptions and stereotypes. This leads to minorities being relegated to a restricted sphere of authority, reducing their chances of holding higher positions. In cases where they are promoted, their level of responsibility is often limited, and they are seldom given authority over dominant races (Sidanius, 2000).

The gap in authority is especially large between Caucasian and African-American males, which, according to Sidanius (2000), indicates an increase in subtle forms of discrimination resulting from a perception of African-American males as lacking requisite characteristics for management positions. Others have argued, however, that the

double jeopardy phenomenon may be a result of a mismatch between African-American males' expectations and available opportunities (Erdreich et al., 1996). High competition for scarce promotion opportunities creates perceptions of discrimination among minorities, as they may assume opportunities are assigned to non-minority candidates. The scarcity of opportunities hinders upward mobility as minorities continue to hold positions with low or no visibility, especially at the lower end of the labor market (Witherspoon, 2009). Others have concurred that a lack of opportunities prevents minorities from acquiring the experience and skills requisite for leadership positions (Catalyst, 2004; Womack-Gregg, 2010).

Personal Characteristics

The personal characteristics of individuals from minority groups significantly affect career progression. Flores and Matkin (2014) encouraged individuals from minority groups to take personal initiative toward overcoming the cultural, organizational, and structural barriers hindering them from ascending to leadership positions. This aligns with the argument of Johns (2013) that persons from minority groups have a role to play in overcoming the barriers inhibiting their representation in the SES. According to Marsh and Manzo (2004), certain personal attributes are required for working with a diverse workforce. These attributes include flexibility, respect, and empathy. To succeed in federal agencies, minorities should be able to adapt to changes in the work structures. African-American executives are required to demonstrate effective leadership skills and deliver excellent results. This can only be achieved if the executives are able to think strategically, take charge, lead, and demonstrate effective team skills (James, 2014).

Flores and Matkin (2014) conducted a study among leaders of cultural community centers in a Midwestern city to establish how the leaders overcame barriers hindering their accession to leadership positions. The researchers established six major themes including finding inspiration, developing thick skin, stereotypes, damage from within, taking your own path, and maintaining hope. Finding inspiration was associated with pursuing personal passions and goals and developing reciprocal relationships with mentors. The researchers viewed "developing a thick skin" as a way of overcoming racial barriers by depersonalizing racial attacks, maintaining focus on personal goals, and acknowledging the obvious (p. 9). The researchers argued that at times individuals from minority groups receive stereotypical treatment from other minorities based on personal capabilities due to internalizing of the society's negative perceptions. Flores and Matkin (2014) argued that individuals from minority groups have to change this mindset in order to advance and achieve higher levels of excellence. The researchers encouraged persons from minority groups to take their own paths to leadership positions by developing self-confidence, developing a strong sense of mission, and maintaining hope.

Career decision-making self-efficacy is defined as an individual's confidence in her or his personal capability successfully to execute tasks related to the career decision-making process (Bullock-Yowell, Andrews, & Buzzetta, 2011). Career decision-making self-efficacy is affected by personality variables, for instance, confidence, fear of commitment, introversion, and preciseness (Hartman & Betz, 2007). Research related to the Big Five personality variables has indicted that extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism are related to the career progression process (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011). Neuroticism is positively correlated with dysfunctional career thinking, career problem-

solving, and decision-making. Kleiman et al. (2004) associated negative career thoughts with irrational career decisions that hinder career progression. Negative career thoughts minimize self-efficacy and confidence, reducing decision-making capabilities and leading to ineffective career decisions (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011). Self-efficacy is essential since minorities have to take risks and pursue activities that enhance exposure to different experiences outside their core competencies. Minorities also have to demonstrate self-efficacy by taking decision-making risks when in leadership roles. Minority leaders acknowledge that self-efficacy is required as they have to demonstrate high levels of competency in their leadership roles (James, 2014).

Extraversion and openness positively affect career progression (Hartman & Betz, 2007). Extraverts often have the ability to effectively utilize networking opportunities to gain promotions (Womack-Gregg, 2010). Self-efficacy improves individual confidence in personal capabilities and problem-solving skills. Other personal characteristics, such as hard work and emotional intelligence, also influence career progression among African-American males (Jackson, 2009). Hard work is required to position oneself strategically in federal employment through acquisition of leadership, communication, or interpersonal skills, as well as other SES requirements (Womack-Gregg, 2010). Erdreich et al. (1996) pointed out that it is the responsibility of African-American males to manage their career visibility through social and professional networking during meetings and other interaction opportunities. Career visibility involves maximizing exposure to the right persons and career opportunities. Social competencies enable individuals to relate to others and range from fundamental interpersonal skills to more expert abilities such as negotiation skills (Grundmann, 2011).

Networking serves as an important strategy for tapping into informal power structures. Networking is facilitated by interpersonal and communication skills, as well as availability of structured opportunities for professional and social networking. In order for minorities to take advantage of networking opportunities, they need to develop not only interpersonal and communication skills, but also personal competencies such as problem solving skills (Womack-Gregg, 2010). Womack-Gregg (2010), argued that developing and nurturing interpersonal and communication skills is essential for successful leadership. Parks-Yancy (2011), in agreement with this argument, emphasized that these skills assist leaders to maintain open communication and healthy working relationships within the organization. Social capital resources help African Americans acquire training opportunities, key work assignments, and promote inclusion in important decisions in the organization. Melton, Walker, and Walker (2010) established that minority managers engage in networking behaviors as a means of managing upwards. Minority managers also engage other leaders within federal agencies. Minorities therefore use networking to tap into formal leadership structures in the SES. Networking behaviors among minority managers are capable of influencing individual and organizational performance while at the same time enhancing advancement of minority managers in the agencies.

Personal career aspirations act as a source of motivation for hard work, influencing career progression. Job location, flexibility, and family responsibilities are often viewed as factors that primarily affect women, but they may also influence career progression among African-American family men (Bagati & Catalyst, 2008; Jackson, 2009). However, men are hesitant to challenge the status quo even when discontented

with working long hours (Cornelius & Skinner, 2005). Hard work, preparation, and performance are necessary for career progression among minorities in the SES. Although affirmative action is intended to correct the underrepresentation of minorities, it alone cannot solve the problem, because minorities are still required to have the qualifications and performance records necessary for top positions (Witherspoon, 2009). Minorities are encouraged to demonstrate skills, behaviors, and competencies required to succeed in federal agencies, including communication skills, listening skills, and team work (Marsh & Manzo, 2004).

Promotion to the SES requires hard work and exemplary performance with an emphasis on performance-based competencies and a result-oriented perspective (OPM, 2012). Excellence is a requirement for promotion to the SES (OPM, 2012; Witherspoon, 2009; Womack-Gregg, 2010). When filling top positions, employers seek progressive individuals who are capable of running organizations and driving them to achieve the organization's mission (Cornileus, 2010). Apart from leadership, communication, result orientation, and problem solving skills, minority SES members utilize self-confidence and political awareness to climb the career ladder (Witherspoon, 2009).

African Americans adopt bicultural strategies for maintaining a balance between their primary culture and the American corporate culture, which, according to Cornileus (2010), is predominantly Caucasian. Cultural identity serves a significant role in the career development of minority professionals. Culture shapes expectations and relationships with people from other cultures. Organizational fit, upholding organizational values, and adopting expected behaviors enhance promotion opportunities (Cornileus, 2010). Regarding organizational fit, Ogbor (2001) argued that African

Americans must restructure their identities to fit with the culture of corporate America (Ogbor, 2001). The current study adds to the existing literature by exclusively establishing the personal experiences of African-American males considered important for progressing to top executive positions in the SES.

Chapter Summary

The glass ceiling effect is a reality in federal agencies, where employees from minority groups are overlooked during promotion decisions due to discrimination. This leads to underrepresentation of minorities in top leadership positions, creating the need for increasing diversity and promoting inclusion in federal agencies. The achievement of minorities in the SES is influenced by organizational, social, and personal factors. Organizational factors include higher educational requirements, training and development opportunities, mentoring and networking programs, and organizational or managerial commitment to diversity. The social factors include prejudices, stereotypes, and preconceptions, which lead to discriminatory practices in federal agencies. Personal characteristics such as hard work, extraversion, and self-confidence also affect career progression. Minorities in the SES utilize strategies including mentoring programs, networking, acquisition of higher education, result orientation, and problem solving skills for career progression. Minorities value SES status and have a positive perception of the service as a platform for promoting inclusiveness in federal agencies.

Chapter III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Overview

This qualitative, phenomenological study focused on the experiences of African-American male SES members. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of African-American male executives in the SES. The study gave a voice to the lived experiences of African-American male federal senior executives and addressed the gap in literature on the glass-ceiling phenomenon among African-American males in the SES. To this end, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African-American male executives understand their lived experiences in reaching the federal Senior Executive Service?

2. What are the experiences that shape the achievements of African-American men in the Senior Executive Service?

3. What strategies do African-American men believe they used to reach the Senior Executive Service?

4. What meanings do African-American male executives in the SES make of their achievements?

The methodology chapter starts with the introduction in which the purpose of the study and the research questions are set out. The second section discusses the sampling methods used, and this is followed in subsequent sections with an overview of the information required from the study; the research design; data collection methods; data analysis and synthesis methods, ethical considerations; issues relating to trustworthiness

of the research; limitations of the study, and finally a chapter summary. In total the chapter contains 10 sections.

Research Sample

The research population for this study consisted of currently serving African-American male federal executives, based on OPM 2012 year-end statistics. A research sample is a small sub-section of research participants drawn from the total study population (Johnson & Christen, 2011). The use of a relatively small sample of 15 African-American male executives enabled the researcher to explore participants' experiences deeply and provided ample time to analyze the large amounts of qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews with these participants.

Purposive sampling techniques are used in qualitative studies when a specifically constituted research sample is necessary to address research questions adequately (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Purposive sampling technique is not concerned with achieving a representative sample of a wider population, but with generating a sample of individuals that have particular characteristics (Wilmot, 2005). It is suitable for use in qualitative research to seek information from a group with unique characteristics or experiences that are not widespread in the general population. In the case of the current study, the use of purposive sampling enabled the researcher to generate a sample of 15 participants that shared the characteristics of being African American, male, and serving in the Senior Executive Service.

Purposive sampling was combined with both convenience sampling and snowball-sampling techniques to facilitate access to potential research participants and help ensure that participation would be voluntary. Convenience sampling enabled the

researcher to involve African-American senior executives in the study based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the research (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Snowball sampling is a technique used when participants are difficult to locate, and uses a social network to locate individuals with the same characteristics. Participants who meet the research eligibility criteria are asked to encourage other eligible individuals to contact the researcher about participation in the study (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 2002). In the current study, after contacting a few potential participants the researcher encouraged them to invite other African-American male senior executives to participate. The researcher also requested participation from the membership of the African American Federal Executives Association by inviting African-American male senior executives to participate in the study.

Overview of Information Needed

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, a number of different kinds of information was needed to answer the research questions. This included a range of secondary data to provide context for the primary research findings arising from the study. For example, demographic information relating to the age of the current African Americans in SES was collected in order to determine whether this group is likely to have been in service for a long time before attaining their current positions. In addition, the researcher examined trends in federal agency employment over the past 10 years and the representation of African-American males, to provide additional context for analysis and interpretation of the qualitative research findings. Other secondary data collected as part of the study included numbers of African-American males in various agencies; age requirements in SES recruitment; the number of educated African-Americans who

qualify for positions in the SES; numbers of males and females in the SES; representation

of males from different races in the SES; length of service of SES employees, and SES

salary trends. The collection of this quantitative data from secondary sources was very

important in providing contextual information on trends in SES employment. Having

information on the overall number of African-American males in the United States and

the numbers who meet the education and qualifications requirements for SES positions is

crucial for understanding actual levels of representation of this group. Data on federal

employment trends and age of SES members provided background information for use in

understanding the effectiveness of various workplace diversity programs intended to

promote equality of access to SES positions and the need for changes to improve their

effectiveness.

Social equity theory formed the basis of this phenomenological study, which was

set within the tenets of justice and fairness. These principles are regarded as fundamental

to public sector leadership (Pitts, 2006). The use of a social equity theoretical framework

shaped the types of information collected in the research. Equal representation in

employment is an important factor that contributes to the overall social welfare of a

group. Information about equality in terms of representation of different ethnic, racial,

gender, and age groups in federal employment and in the SES was sought in the literature

review to provide background information for the primary research, particularly with

respect to African-American males' overall representation in the SES. In the primary

research, the experiences and perceptions of the directors and managers of federal

agencies offered further insights into the treatment of African-American males in the SES

corporate and social context. Their achievements depend on support and fair treatment by

senior managers, while discrimination and negligence in relation to these African-American men may indicate a lack of social equity in the public service. Unfavorable experiences of group members may discourage others from applying to or taking up positions, with a negative impact on equality even when appropriate social equity policies are in place.

How individuals are perceived is very important to their success in any setting. Insights into the lived experiences of African-American males and how their various experiences have shaped their achievements is important in contributing to a better understanding of current levels of representation of this group in the SES and any barriers to greater equality of representation.

Information on the strategies used to obtain employment in the SES was also sought during the study. The SES can be perceived as very bureaucratic, thereby locking out members of certain ethnic backgrounds from top-echelon positions. In the study, the participants were asked about the meanings they attributed to their achievements in the SES. Responses to such a question may be significantly affected by a participant's personal characteristics, perceptions of their role and the wider context within which they operate. Hence information was collected on number of years in the SES; perceptions of their SES job; perceptions about the treatment of African-American males by senior administrators; and any harsh experiences perceived to have either shaped or negatively influenced the participants' potential as members of the SES. Using open-ended questions in the interview enabled the participants to express various perceptions that the researcher had not anticipated or included in the interview guide, thus generating more

information about how their experiences had influenced or changed the perceptions of these African-American males.

In a socially diverse workplace, the socio-demographic composition is likely to influence the lived experiences and perceptions of individual employees. Success in a diverse workplace requires psychological stability and harnessing of social motivation (Parks-Yancy, 2010). In the SES setting, there are people from different races, cultural backgrounds, genders, and ethnic groups. Contextual information regarding the setting, number of employees from each group, highest position held by African-American males, reported strategies used in achieving SES status, and the factors contributing to various achievements, is important for understanding the lived experiences of the research participants and in examining the issue of equality in relation to SES appointments. Additional important contextual information included overall trends in the representation of African-American males and whether the different levels of education held by the participants influenced their experiences of the SES. Reported perceptions of other races about African-American males as well as information on various programs initiated to empower African-Americans to contest for positions in SES, offered further insights into the types of policies likely to be effective in promoting equal treatment of all individuals in public sector administration.

Research Design Overview

This study utilized a qualitative research design, which is best suited for exploring the feelings and attitudes of research participants (Kothari, 2004). The qualitative design was appropriate because the study sought to describe the experiences of African-American male executives in the SES. A qualitative research design enabled the

researcher to elicit narrative responses, providing greater and deeper insights into the research questions. The quantitative research methodology was rejected because this is less suitable for a study that does not involve comparing or contrasting numbers, establishing numerical relationships, or describing trends (Creswell, 2009). Utilization of a variety of sources including records, interviews, documents, physical artifacts, studies, and observations enabled the researcher to conduct a thorough analysis of the research phenomenon.

A qualitative design based on Husserl's (1859-1938) descriptive phenomenological approach was used to guide the study. Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, is considered the founder of phenomenology. Husserl argued that subjective perceptions and objective experiences are intertwined, thus eradicating mind-body dualism. Further, Husserl argued that human consciousness is composed of dialogues between the outside world and the person, and that access to the structures of consciousness requires a direct grasp of a particular phenomenon as opposed to generalization and induction (Laverty, 2003). Husserl viewed intentionality and essences as significant to human understanding of a phenomenon. Through intentionality, the mind is directed toward the study phenomenon, while human knowledge of the particular reality is constructed through conscious awareness (Laverty, 2003). Wojnar and Swanson (2007) emphasized the "science of essence of consciousness," which accentuated the concept of intentionality and the meaning of human experiences. Husserl promoted experiential epistemology, which involves reduction or bracketing, attained through stripping of the researcher's preconceptions regarding the research phenomenon (Converse, 2012). He proposed that reduction or bracketing enables researchers to

identify the essences of a research phenomenon and clearly perceive it by blocking their own personal biases and the influence of the outer world. The process is achieved through exemplary intuition, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Exemplary intuition involves selecting the phenomenon and holding it in the imagination. Imaginative variation involves developing examples of similar experiences. Integration of the variations is achieved through synthesis of the essences of interest. Intentional analysis enables researchers to describe the significant structures without which the research phenomenon would not exist, and to focus on concrete experiences and the construction of such experiences (Laverty, 2003).

Application of the phenomenological approach in the study was justified as the study was designed to acquire information on the lived experiences of African-American male executives in the SES and to derive significant insights about these personal experiences. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology is based on the premise that all beliefs are associated with human consciousness and founded on the meaning of an individual's experience (Reiners, 2012). The experience of insights, remembrance, ideas, emotion, and imagination involve intentionality, which is the individual's awareness of a phenomenon. The approach therefore involves describing conscious human experiences while keeping aside preconceived opinions through bracketing (Reiners, 2012). The use of Husserl's descriptive strategy has assisted the researcher to describe the lived experiences of African-American male senior executives in the SES. The use of bracketing has heightened the researcher's ability to gain insights into the experiences of African-American male executives by minimizing any bias arising from personal preconceptions of the research phenomenon.

Data Collection Methods

Research studies may use primary or secondary data. Primary data consists of firsthand information or accounts of participants' firsthand experiences. Secondary data consists of existing information, including findings published by other researchers in books, journals, periodicals, and magazines (Mertens, 2010). The use of secondary data simplifies the research process, as it is easier to acquire, but it may be biased or inaccurate (Hamilton, 2005). Primary data collection based on face-to-face interviews was adopted as the main data collection for this study, as the researcher aimed to acquire firsthand information on the experiences of African-American male federal executives.

Primary data collection was preceded by a collection and review of relevant literature from secondary sources. This literature covered public sector leadership, social equity theory, SES recruitment trends, and data on the representation of African-American males in SES, factors that can be expected to influence the achievements and perceptions of African-American males in the SES. This literature review did not form part of the main data collection, but provided critical information on trends in SES employment and the success rates for African-American males, for use in interpreting the findings of the study. In addition, data on trends in public sector administration, and literature relating to the expectations of different stakeholders offered additional insights into social equality and how it is being promoted in different federal service departments.

Consent forms and introduction letters (Appendix 2) were sent to prospective participants via e-mail to inform them of the purpose of the study and to gain written consent to participate. The introduction letter informed the participants about the research and notified them that they could withdraw from the research process at any stage. In the

introduction letter, the researcher assured the participants that participation in the

research process would not expose them to any harm, explained the potential benefits of

participation in the study and provided assurance that collected information would be

treated in confidence. The participants were also assured that identifying information

would not be collected from them in the research process (Salkind, 2003). The researcher

called each of the study participants to schedule a convenient date and time for their

interview.

Semi-structured interview guides were used for data collection purposes, with the

interviews conducted and recorded in person (Appendix 3). Before conducting the

interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot study on two African-American Male senior

executives to test the preliminary interview protocols. Pilot testing involves conducting a

small-scale version of the research to test the research instrument and determine its

suitability. Pilot studies enhance an adopted research design and provide significant

insights to researchers on the research process (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). The

pilot interviews took 90 minutes and necessary changes were made to the protocol based

on pilot participants' responses and feedback regarding the questions.

The use of a semi-structured interview guide provided flexibility for the

researcher to ask additional questions during the interview process and allowed

participants to answer the researcher's questions in their own words, expressing their true

feelings and attitudes towards the research topics (Cozby, 2001; Groenewald, 2004). The

interview guide contained semi-structured, open-ended interview questions addressing

issues related to the research topic. It also used closed questions, with a range of pre-

coded possible responses, to capture the participants' demographic information. This

included length of service in the federal service, length of time in the SES, age, and education level.

The face-to-face interviews were guided by Seidman's (2006) model of phenomenological interviewing, which requires researchers to conduct three interviews with each participant. Seidman (2006) argued that human behaviors become meaningful and understandable when positioned within the framework of their lives and the lives of those around them. The first interview focused on the participants' life history in order to place the participants' experiences within context. This involved illuminating the participants' history in light of the research topic up to the present time. The second interview concentrated on the concrete details of the participants' current lived experiences in the senior executive service. In the third interview, the participating African-American male executives were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. This enabled the participants to consider how different factors have interacted to shape their experiences in the senior executive service based on both the past and present experiences. Each interview lasted between 60 - 90 minutes.

Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis

The data analysis process is structured to provide information that answers the research questions. The primary goal of this process is to present the lived experiences of the African-American male executives as accurately and comprehensively as possible (Starks &Trinidad, 2007). In order to achieve this, the researcher applied Colaizzi's recommended steps of descriptive phenomenological data analysis steps combined with thematic analysis (Burnard, 1991), in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of African-American male executives in the SES.

Colaizzi's recommended steps consist of "bracketing", "analyzing", "intuiting" and "describing". Bracketing involves a researcher's efforts to maintain transcendental subjectivity or neutrality by blocking presumptions of the study phenomenon (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This was achieved in the current study by keeping a reflective diary in which the researcher noted personal observations, conceptions and confusions, and maintained an awareness of these when analyzing the interview data. In this way, the researcher's existing knowledge and perceptions based on the literature review as well as personal experience could be drawn on as objectively as possible for their value in understanding and interpreting the interview data, without unduly introducing biases into this process from preconceived views or ideas. Analysis in descriptive phenomenology involves reading the study participants' descriptions of the research phenomenon, extracting important accounts that relate to this phenomenon and generating meanings from these accounts, organized into themes and integrated into exhaustive descriptions. Closely related to this is the process of intuiting, which might also be referred to as interpretation. Intuiting involves comprehension of the participants' responses through attentive listening and deep reflection; therefore, preventing premature foreclosure on the researcher's conceptions of the study phenomenon. In the "describing" stage, the meanings or themes identified from analysis and intuiting are set out in a comprehensive narrative or description of the phenomenon of interest (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). A final analysis stage is often also conducted in which the study participants are involved in validating the descriptions of their experiences and any necessary changes are incorporated into the final narrative (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Within Colaizzi's broad framework for descriptive phenomenological data analysis, the specific process of analysis and interpretation used in the current study has been based on "thematic analysis" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As described by Guest, MacQueen, and Narney (2012) this process is concerned with identifying "both implicit and explicit ideas" or "themes" within the data and developing codes to represent these themes. Through a process of systematically examining the research data, relevant material is allocated to each identified code and relevant "sub codes" for further examination and interpretation. This may involve, for example, examining numbers of participants associated with a particular code or exploring the ways in which codes appear to be linked or inter-related.

In this study, codes were identified using a combination of a priori and inductive methods. A priori coding involves identifying relevant codes in advance, based for example on key themes arising from a review of literature, and allocating relevant material to these. Inductive coding involves allowing themes to emerge from the research material and developing codes based on these (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The advantage of using a priori coding in the early stages of analysis is that it enables the researcher to organize their research material by themes that previous researchers have shown to be relevant and important to the phenomenon being investigated. It also provides structure in the early stages of an analysis process. Combining this with a process of inductive coding allows additional or new themes and findings to be identified and documented as codes, and helps ensure that the unique experiences of research participants are accurately represented. During the process of analysis, initial codes are often subsequently broken

down into sub-codes as a more detailed understanding of the research material develops (Appendix 4).

In the current study, the qualitative analysis software program NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2014) was used for the purpose of coding the interview transcripts using thematic analysis, based on Collaizi's descriptive phenomenological analysis framework. The analysis process consisted of the following stages.

First, the researcher thoroughly read the research transcripts twice to provide a general overview of the participants' accounts of their views and experiences and to begin making sense of these, taking into account the themes identified in the literature that relate to the under-representation of minorities in senior government positions in the United States. An initial a priori coding structure was developed based on the research questions, the literature review findings and the researcher's preliminary identification of key themes emerging from the initial read-through of transcripts.

The researcher then worked systematically through each transcript in detail, allocating material to the initial codes and adding further codes and sub-codes as necessary to reflect the interview material in a more inductive way. In some cases the extracted material allocated to the codes was just a sentence or a few words, in other cases a longer narrative account, depending on how much of the interview material was needed to accurately convey the theme from the perspective of the interviewee.

Following this, the material allocated against each code was examined to obtain a fuller understanding of the participants' views and experiences in each area, with the researcher interpreting the importance and significance of these findings based on the narratives of the interviewees and the context provided by the literature review. The

NVivo coding tree was further revised and refined, and material was reallocated accordingly in a final stage of analysis. This process helped to provide an accurate and comprehensive body of research data for use in understanding the phenomenon of being an African American member of the federal SES, and resulted in the identification of the final key themes reported in the results chapter. "Significant statements" were then extracted in the form of verbatim quotations from the research participants for use in illustrating these themes. Since phenomenological research is concerned with investigating a phenomenon from the lived experience of individuals, the use of personal narratives in the words of the research participants is one of the most effective ways of conveying these experiences.

Based on the identified key themes and significant statements the researcher formulated meanings that reflected an understanding of the phenomenon of interest based on the participants' reported experiences and views as well as the contextual information provided by the literature review. These meanings were articulated in the form of a commentary on the research findings, used to structure the results chapter. In this way, the identified themes, narrative accounts (significant statements) and attributed meanings together provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon of being an African-American male member of the federal SES.

Workplace diversity is very important especially with the increased migration, competition and globalization. Program supporting diversity and inclusion of all social groups in various sectors and in federal and private organizations is being encouraged. There are about 5.3% of African-American males in SES positions and this raises issues of equality and effectiveness of workplace diversity programs. Investigating the

experiences of African-American males in SES offered more insight into their under representation. The study findings synthesized information of diversity programs and offered possible solutions to policy makers. The synthesis sought to ensure that Africa-American males are equally involved in formulation of federal policies as they will be integrated in senior leadership positions. In addition, the deficiency of workplace diversity programs was understood and would be revised to a more holistic program models with strategic plans, mid-course corrections, and strict implementation.

Interpretation of the findings is based on the comparison of the data collected with the literature review. Literature on the employment trends in the SES and the various education levels, perceptions, and experiences was very important in analysis. This is because the trends include comparison of what has been happening and the information from the research. Data interpretation in this case, involved a comparison of the representation of Africa-American males in SES over the last 10 years and the different perceptions they have for their success or attainment of positions in public sector administration. Moreover, the theory of social equity is very important in this phenomenological study. Representation of different groups in United States SES and in various departments is pivotal to achievement of equality and fair distribution of resources. Various themes identified in the analysis were discussed in the data interpretation section and compared with demographic information, perceptions, and social equity theory. Coding of transcripts in this study, enhanced the data interpretation section as various themes had already been identified and hence direct quotes and perception could be drawn from the transcripts and compared with issues and aspects identified in the literature review section.

Ethical Considerations

Data and information generated by this study provided crucial insights into

African-American males in SES and the various factors that could hinder achievement.

This may be detrimental to African-American males who want to take up positions in

federal agencies in the future. Therefore, in presenting data and making inferences from

the results, consideration was given to the potential negative impacts on the participants

as well as other individuals. Demographic information about the participants was a

concern as findings from the study might be used to incriminate or discriminate against

the participants after the research findings are published.

A number of measures were therefore taken to protect the anonymity of the

participants and the confidentiality of the information they provided in the interviews.

First, the researcher sent consent forms to the participants through email to inform them

of the arrangements for interview, explain the importance of participating, seek their

voluntary consent to participate, and assure them that their information would be treated

in confidence. Further, the interviews were each conducted at a time that was convenient

to the participant and only one person was interviewed at a time. This ensured that all

information collected from the participant was only heard and recorded by the researcher.

Demographic data was recorded in a separate form and was not consulted during coding

of the transcripts.

Another ethical consideration in this research was the setting of the interviews. It

is not ethical to conduct interviews in office settings when dealing with federal service

employees as it will disrupt normal activities and invade working privacy. In addition,

participants have to be assured of the confidentiality of the settings in which the interview

is to take place. This research ensured that prior to the interview; participants chose their preferred location for the interview for maximum confidentiality. This was also beneficial to the research as the participants could express themselves freely and openly.

It is also ethical to avoid limiting qualitative research participants to structured research questions, to ensure that they were able to freely contribute information that they personally considered relevant. The study therefore used open-ended questions to meet this ethical standard as well as to enhance the quality of data and success of the study. In collecting data about various experiences in the workforce and regarding different races, it is important to consider that there exist different perceptions and personal biases, particularly different social groups. It would be unethical to present biased results from any study, as it could destroy the reputation of certain groups in the SES. In seeking information and interpreting the responses in the analysis process, therefore, the research was careful to identify potential biases and report the relevant data with care and sensitivity. In analyzing the interview data, the researcher ensured for example that the overall key themes and findings were clearly identified. This process of categorization of the responses into themes and sub-themes made sure that biased responses could be identified and incorporated into broader themes such that they were not directly reported.

Another ethical issue related to the use of federal agency information. Certain kinds of data about federal agencies are sensitive and not suitable for reporting in social research. These were investigated and documented before the research began, so that such information could be avoided in the presentation of results.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is extremely critical especially in social studies. Qualitative research is often questioned or criticized by positivist scholars based on aspects of reliability, dependability, and validity. Qualitative research does not involve numbers and the results can be influenced by personal feelings, organizational factors, and the opinions of the researcher. Trustworthiness in qualitative research cannot be achieved in the same way as in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004), instead is based on three important concepts: credibility, dependability and transferability.

Credibility refers to the internal validity of research. In ensuring credibility researchers seek to ensure that the study measures what is intended. Congruency of the findings with reality is sought in the investigation of a study's credibility (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). In this study, credibility has addressed by adopting high quality methods in qualitative research interviewing. Interviewing techniques are well recognized and sufficiently established in qualitative research and the use of semi-structured interview questions helps ensure that specific types of information are collected. Early familiarity with federal organizations was established through visiting the African American Federal Executives Association to obtain insights into the culture of participating agencies.

In addition, the review of relevant literature regarding employment trends and achievements of African-American males in SES enhanced the researcher's understanding of the research topic. Consent forms were administered to the research participants and preliminary meetings with them helped ensure they were comfortable with the research and is believed to have enhanced credibility of the results. The use of

these consent forms and of the African American Federal Executives Association in encouraging participation, helped ensure that participation was voluntary, thereby enhancing honesty during the interview. The project was scrutinized by colleagues and my project supervisor and critical changes were made before the commencement of the study.

Dependability focuses on the reliability of a study. Positivist researchers use statistical techniques to indicate whether, if the work was repeated using the same strategy and in the same context, results would be similar to the ones they obtained (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). In order to address the issue of dependability in this study, the detailed process used to obtain the results was documented, so that this could be replicated or evaluated by other researchers. Detailed information has been provided on sampling, numbers and characteristics of participants, data collection processes, and the SES context in which the research was conducted, as well as means of ensuring the confidentiality of responses. Details of the research design, how it was implemented, meetings with participants, use of the African American Federal Executives Association and methods of coding the data collected are important details that would needed in order to replicate the research or carry out a similar study. An account of the researcher's reflective appraisal of the data and its categorization into various themes and sub-themes provide more information that could be used to test the dependability of the study.

Transferability refers to the applicability of the study findings to other situations or phenomena. This is referred to as the external validity of the research. In a qualitative study, the phenomenon being investigated must be understood within a given context

with unique characteristics (Shenton, 2004). The context may be an organization, geographical location or social group. In the literature review, studies were sought that employed similar methods to investigate the factors and perceptions that impact on the success of different races in diverse work settings. These provided a pathway for conducting this qualitative study, and helped ensure that the findings could be transferable to future social studies regarding African-American males and their achievements in the SES.

Limitations of the Study

The use of open-ended questions in qualitative research may quickly lead to redundancy of information since all the participants hail from similar working environments. This may result in weak analysis and ineffectiveness of the study. In addition, open-ended questions in qualitative research may result in unwanted or irrelevant information. This will take a lot of time to analyze and when complete the objectives of the study may not be met. On the other hand, the use of structured interview questions is likely to hinder the collection of information considered important by the research participants themselves. All data collected in this research was checked for appropriateness and each of the transcripts was analyzed to identify key themes. Categorization of information into themes ensured that redundant information was not over-emphasized in the findings and that irrelevant information could be quickly identified, interpreted as such, and discarded from the ongoing analysis process.

The use of semi-structured interview guides does not provide any assurance of the truthfulness of responses, and information generated in this way can have problems of reliability. In addition, there is a risk that some questions may not be clearly understood

by the respondents, who might give inaccurate answers for the sake of completing the interview. Comparison of collected information with relevant literature enhanced the selection of relevant themes and analysis to help ensure the accuracy and reliability of the research data.

In the investigation of the different perceptions and experiences of individuals in federal agencies, some information may be concealed due to the confidentiality clause signed by the SES workforce. This was a limitation to the study that may have hindered the identification of important aspects of appointment and treatment within the agencies. By conducting interviews in locations away from the work settings, the researcher aimed to give participants a strong sense of confidentiality that would help overcome any limitations relating to the confidentiality clause. In addition, by stressing the importance of participating in the research and administering consent forms before the interviews, the researcher helped to ensure that the participants were ready and willing to offer the required information.

Another limitation is that the relatively small sample size of 15 may have resulted in a biased representation of the experiences and perceptions of African-Americans males in the SES. In this research, data has been presented relating to around 15 cabinet level and over 50 independent federal departments, employing a total of more than 800 African-American Senior Executives. It is possible that data based on a sample of 15 may have been insufficient to allow meaningful analysis of the range of experiences of African-American males in the SES. However, this limitation is countered through the involvement of the African American Federal Executives Association. By encouraging

their members to participate in the research, this helped to ensure that participants represented a range of different departments and experiences.

In the data analysis, many different themes were identified due to the use of open-ended questions. This presented challenges in the analysis process and the risk that some important themes might be left out. Some responses did not easily fit into any of the main themes identified, but could not be ignored as they were part of the research findings and the participants' personal experiences. Responses that did not clearly fit into any of the main themes were carefully examined for any importance in relation to the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants. Inclusion of relevant sub-themes in the analysis of data ensured that all the responses were included except any that were likely to taint the reputations of individuals or social groups.

Chapter Summary

This Methodology chapter commenced with an introduction and overview of the content of the chapter, and a reiteration of the research objectives and the research questions. The chapter has comprehensively described the sampling procedure, data requirements, research design, data collection methods and the data analysis and synthesis method. The study is based on a qualitative approach to investigate and describe the experiences of African-American males in the SES. It is based on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, which contends that human beliefs are based on the meaning of an individual's experience. Therefore, the study focused on the personal experiences of African-American male executives in the SES and derived insights from these experiences. The use of descriptive phenomenology also reduced the risk of researcher bias by the use of bracketing. Only 5.3% of African Americans are represented in SES

positions; a focus on the personal experiences of some of these executives has shed light on this issue.

The population of study was African-American male federal executives as per the Office of Personnel Management year-end statistics. The study focused on a purposively selected small sample so that that in-depth data could be collected for the purpose of sufficiently answering the research questions. The sample consisted of 15 African-American male executives in the SES. A convenience sampling approach was also used since the sample was based on those African American executives who were willing to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was used to locate individuals with the same characteristics through social networks. After contacting some of the participants, I asked them to invite other eligible people who were willing to participate.

The data collected was mainly primary in nature since the study required firsthand information on the personal experiences of African-American male executives in the SES. This data was collected over a series of three face-to-face personal interviews that were each 60-90 minutes long as recommended by Seidman (2006). The interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants. The interview guide was semi-structured so as to allow for additional questions and allow the participants to answer in their own words. The questions were open-ended so as to provide in-depth insight into the research. Before conducting the interview a pilot test was carried out based on two subjects to test the preliminary interview protocols. This procedure enhanced the research design, provided further insights into the types of interview questions required and helped to inform the analysis. Secondary data was also used in the literature review and the analysis methods.

Data collected in this study mainly focused on demographic factors, social equity, perceptions and contextual information. Background demographic data was collected on the age of current African-American males in SES, the trends in SES employment, the trends in African-American males' representation, age requirements in SES recruitment, salary trends and so on. Information on social equity within the various federal agencies was necessary to understand the plight of African-American males. Perceptions of African-American males has also been established as a factor influencing the numbers of this group joining the SES. It was also important to understand the nature of workplace diversity to get clear insights into the topic.

The data analysis process was structured in such a way as to provide sufficient and valuable answers to the research questions. For data management and organizational purposes, the researcher used NViVo10 to code transcripts using thematic analysis. The analysis was aimed at comprehensively presenting the experiences of African-American male executives. Therefore the study applied Collaizzi's steps of descriptive phenomenology in the analysis i.e. bracketing, analyzing, intuiting and describing. Interpretation of findings involved comparing the data collected with the literature review findings.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study the following ethical considerations were addressed; confidentiality, privacy, willingness of the participants in the study and ways of presenting the findings. Each of the participants signed a consent form to agree to participate in the study, and was allowed to drop out of the study at any time if they wished to do so. The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants and individually. The interview was semi-structured and the questions were open ended

so as to allow the participants to express themselves. Demographic data was recorded in different forms and was not used in coding transcripts. Data that is restricted by Federal agencies was not presented in the results. The study will be instrumental to policymaking regarding employment in federal agencies and the empowerment of diverse groups in federal workplaces.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS and FINDINGS

Introduction

Current employment statistics reveal significant underrepresentation of minorities in senior government positions in the United States. In-depth research into the experiences and views of African-American males in the Senior Executive Service (SES) can be expected to reveal useful insights into strategies for successfully achieving these positions, the types of barriers faced and how they were overcome and how other African-American males might follow the example of these successful individuals. By under-covering ways in which these individuals add value to the SES, the study is also likely to highlight the potential benefits of increasing diversity in senior levels of Government, particularly in the current age of changing demographics and constrained human resource budgets. There is a severe shortage of previous research into under-representation of African Americans in senior federal roles, and on the experiences of the few who achieve these positions.

This chapter sets out the findings of a qualitative, phenomenological research designed to explore the experiences and views of a sample of African-American males who have attained SES positions, in order to help fill these research gaps. By using a phenomenological approach, the study gives voice to the lived experiences of African-American male federal senior executives and addresses the gap in literature on the glass-ceiling phenomenon among African-American males in the SES. The study has been guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African-American male executives understand their lived experiences in reaching the federal Senior Executive Service?

   a) What are the experiences which shape the achievements of African-American men in the Senior Executive Service?

   b) What strategies do African-American men believe they used to reach the senior executive service?

   c) What meanings do African-American male executives make of their achievements in the SES?

A qualitative design, based on Husserl's (1859-1938) descriptive phenomenological approach has been used to guide the study. This is appropriate because the study seeks to describe the experiences of African-American male executives in the SES. The descriptive phenomenological approach, based on in-depth interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire, has enabled the researcher to elicit narrative responses, providing deep insights for use in answering the research questions. This phenomenological approach allows insight and lends voice to the essence of experience in the form of narrative descriptions. The approach involves describing conscious human experiences while putting aside the researcher's own preconceived opinions through a process of bracketing (Reiners, 2012).

Description of the Sample

The research is based on a sample of 15 African-American male members of the federal SES. The use of a small sample has enabled the researcher to investigate each participant's experiences in great depth. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, a method used in qualitative research when a specifically constituted

research sample is necessary to adequately address research questions (Teddlie & Yu,

2007). Within this approach, convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used

to identify eligible individuals. By using convenience sampling, the researcher was able

to include African-American senior executives based on their accessibility and

willingness to participate in the research (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Participants were then

asked to encourage other eligible individuals to contact the researcher for possible

participation in the study in a process of snowball sampling (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber,

2002). The researcher also requested participation from the membership of the African

American Federal Executives Association by inviting African-American male senior

executives to participate in the study. The demographic characteristics of the sample are

shown in Table 1, followed by mini vignettes with additional background information.

They each have been assigned a pseudonym for reasons of confidentiality. At the time of

the interviews, the participants ranged in age from their mid-40's to mid-50's. The

participants were similar in their educational backgrounds in that all had at least a

bachelor's degree, with the preponderance of them having a Master's degree. Four

participants had earned Doctorate degrees. The participants represented 11 different

Federal agencies.

　　　Wes: Has been Federal service for 25 years, having joined as an intern after

leaving college with a degree in Math. He has worked in five different federal agencies

and a number of different geographical locations, moving with his family to take up new

job opportunities over the years. Wes worked his way up to become a deputy at Grade 15

level before being appointed to his first SES job. He is married and has a daughter aged

12 years.

Elgin: a retired United States Army colonel, having served 26 years as an Infantry

Officer leading soldiers and organizations. During his service in the U.S. Army, he

served in a number of progressively responsible positions located across the United States

and abroad, to include California, New York, Alaska, Saudi Arabia, Panama, and Korea.

He has two Masters' degrees, one an MBA and the other in Strategic Resource

Management.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Participant Name	Age	Number of Years in SES	Career Field	Highest Education Level
Wes	45	5	Information Technology	Bachelors
Elgin	57	6	Intelligence	Masters
Julius	54	8	Finance	Masters
Jordan	57	10	Security/Intelligence	Masters
Oscar	55	5	Logistics	Masters
Isiah	51	3	Security	Doctorate
Clyde	56	6	Education and Training	Masters
Moses	52	5	Finance	Doctorate
Jamaal	56	2	Legal	Doctorate
Charles	56	6	Security	Masters
Russell	50	4	Law Enforcement	Masters
Walt	49	3	Personnel	Masters
Scottie	46	2	Finance	Masters
George	52	4	Engineering	Masters
James	48	3	Legal	Doctorate

Julius: Was previously in military service and was retired at the age of 24 after

losing a leg due to bone cancer. The Veterans Agency arranged for his participation in

their Rehabilitation Program, under which he returned to school and obtained higher

academic qualifications. He worked briefly in the private sector before entering federal

employment in 1988, conducting workforce analysis. Having participated in various

federal training initiatives to expand his skills, Julius transferred into the field of financial

management, and after ten years relocated to Chicago to take up a management job (GG-14). Encouraged by senior executives, he applied and was accepted into the SES development program and secured an SES post about a year later. He has since then been employed in the SES for around nine years. Julius reports that his father was a World War II Veteran with high expectations of his son and a strong work ethic. Julius has five children, three girls and two boys, with ages ranging from 10 to 31, and three grandchildren.

Jordan: Formerly in military service, Jordan planned to work in the private sector on his retirement from the military. Instead, he entered federal employment in 2005 when invited to apply for a GS-15 post by a Deputy Under Secretary with whom he had worked closely in the military. After less than six months' he was promoted to an SES post. In total, he has served the Department of Defense for 35 years.

Oscar: After working as an architect for several years after graduation, Oscar joined federal employment as a GS-7, following in the footsteps of his father who worked for the CIA. In subsequent years, he worked in a number of different areas and agencies before becoming Deputy Director of an agency. He was then appointed to the SES in recognition of his work leading various Taskforces in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Isiah: After graduating from college in 1983, Isiah joined the US Air Force and rose through the ranks to Colonel by carrying out several leadership positions. After retiring from the military and working for a year as a government contractor, he applied for and was promoted to an SES position. He has served in senior level positions for ten years in various agencies.

Clyde: After graduating from college, Clyde entered federal employment in 1979 in a personnel security job (GS-5). Over the years he moved into a number of different areas of work and after a few years gained a supervisory position and was then appointed to a managerial role. He was able to shape this role to his own approach and skills and as a result rose to become program manager, before applying and being appointed to SES. He has worked in a single agency for his entire federal employment career, while occupying a variety of positions within this agency. Clyde is married with children. Outside of his federal career, he is closely involved with a number of charitable organizations.

Moses: He began his federal career in 1991 under the Spousal Preference Act while accompanying his wife on military service in Europe. Two years' later they returned to U.S. and Moses subsequently worked in a range of different areas and agencies and worked his way up from a Budget Analyst role to Chief of Accounting Operations, before being appointed to the SES in 2013. He is married and has children and grandchildren. He reports having strong Christian faith.

Jamaal: Entered federal employment as a Grade-7 Auditor in 1988, after a spell of private sector employment in banking. He moved to a different agency as a Grade-11 before returning to his previous agency around two years later on promotion and gradually moved into more senior grades, culminating in his SES appointment. Jamaal is married and outside work occupies a role as a church Treasurer. He has strong religious faith as a Christian.

Charles: Was employed for 30 years in the U.S. Air Force, and applied for civilian jobs in federal government on his retirement. He worked briefly for a civilian

company and then applied for and was appointed to his current SES role within two years of leaving the military. He is married with a son of high school age. Charles reports a tough background, having grown up in a poor single-parent home. Like several of the other participants, Charles has strong Christian faith.

Russell: Was employed in the U.S. Navy for 25 years as a surface warfare officer. After retiring from the U.S. Navy, he applied for positons in private industry and the federal government. While he had offers from the private industry that paid more, he chose to work in the federal government because he wanted to make a difference. He indicated the work of government employees affects the lives of every American, and the lives of people around the world. He wanted to play a vital role in addressing pressing issues that only government workers could help solve. He reflected in his entire educational career where he was often one of very minority students during his grade school years and college. He believes this prepared him for senior level positions.

Walt: Entered federal employment as a Grade-7 Personnel Specialist in a career intern program. The intern program provided Walt with on-the-job training in all aspects of Human Resources and rotational opportunities in various filed and headquarters organizations within his agency. Walt is married with two kids and is active in his church.

Scottie: He began his federal career in 1990 after leaving college. He has a worked at a variety of agencies within the Department of Defense including two tours in Europe. He is a financial management expert with over 27 years of experience obtained through financial and accounting positions held within the federal government, public accounting, and private industry. He is married and 3 children and grandchildren. He

considers there to be no better place to give back than through government service. Throughout the interview, he mentioned his Christian faith.

George: Has 30 years' experience acquiring funding and leading a multi-disciplined staff of engineers and specialists to deliver innovative, comprehensive multi-million dollar global energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions. He has significant career experience in facilities management, construction management, program management, financial management, and leadership at all levels in an organization. George has 26 years of government service all within one agency. George indicated what attracted him to government service were the Federal benefits, including health insurance, retirement and vacation, which are extremely competitive with, if not superior to, other sectors. He cites what keeps him in government service is work he performs affects all of Americans and feels he is making a difference.

James: Entered federal employment as a Grade-9 Attorney in 1990, after considering a few job offers in private law firms after receiving his law degree. While the initial pay was much higher in the law firms, he chose to work in the federal sector due job security and the benefits. James rose through the ranks fairly quickly and attained his initial appointment in the SES on his first application. He credits sponsorship and taking jobs with visibility and impact to the agency's operations as part of his success. James is married, has to 3 kids and is an avid runner. He has strong religious faith as a Christian and is active in his church.

<div align="center">**Analysis**</div>

Colaizzi's (1978) method for the analysis of phenomenological data was used in the analysis process, and facilitated by the NVivo10 qualitative analysis software (QSR,

2014). Collaizzi's stages of descriptive phenomenological data analysis consist of bracketing, analyzing, intuiting and describing. Bracketing involves the researcher's efforts to maintain transcendental subjectivity or neutrality by blocking presumptions of the study phenomenon (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Analysis in descriptive phenomenology involves reading the study participants' descriptions of the research phenomenon, extracting important accounts that direct relate to the research phenomenon, generating meanings from the accounts, coding the meanings into themes and integrating the themes into exhaustive descriptions of the study phenomenon (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Intuiting involves comprehending the participants' responses through attentive listening and deep reflection. Describing involves presenting the most important aspects of the experiences of the research participants in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

In the current study, Colaizzi's (1978) method was used in the following way. First, the researcher thoroughly read the research transcripts twice to provide a general overview of the participants' accounts of their views and experiences and to begin making sense of these. Then, the NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software was used to develop an initial coding tree based on the main areas of interest to the study, as set out in the interview protocol, and relevant material from each transcript was systematically allocated to these top level codes. Following this, the material allocated against each code was examined to obtain a fuller understanding of the participants' views and experiences in each area, the coding tree was revised and refined, and material was reallocated accordingly. This provided a more accurate and comprehensive body of research data for use in formulating meanings about and understanding the phenomenon of being an

African American member of the federal SES, and resulted in the identification of key

themes. "Significant statements" were then extracted in the form of direct quotations

from the research participants that best illustrated the key themes and other findings

arising from the analysis process, for use in reporting the results. Based on the emerging

key themes and significant statements the researcher formulated meanings that reflected

an emerging understanding of the phenomenon of interest based on the participants'

reported experiences and views. These meanings were articulated in the form of a

commentary on the research findings, used to structure the results sections in this chapter.

In this way, the identified themes, narrative accounts (significant statements) and

attributed meanings together provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon of

being an African-American male member of the federal SES. The main themes as

reported in the following sections correspond broadly to the three research questions, or

the experiences of being a member of the SES, the strategies used to ascend to and

maintain this position and the meanings attributed by the participants to their experiences.

Experiences That Have Shaped the Achievements of Participants in the SES

This section presents the findings of the research regarding the practical

experiences of participants as they ascended to the SES and in their current role. It

focuses mainly on identifying the external factors largely that shaped these experiences,

rather than their own deliberate actions or strategies. The intention in analyzing the

research data was to identify any common themes in the experiences of participants that

either contributed to or hindered their ascension to SES and which shape their current

role, as well as factors that were more unique to the experience of individual participants.

Factors Influencing the Choice to Seek Federal Employment

The research data indicated that around half of the fifteen participants had entered

federal employment largely by chance, had a history of family employment in this sector,

or joined the government because it was convenient to do so at the time they were

looking for work. Several had initially taken a federal government position because this

was the first job offered to them when they were seeking employment. One was a

military spouse and indicted that this was the only type of employment that would fit in

with his wife's military postings.

> I didn't really pick it opposed to private industry, but it was the first thing
> that came through a test that I took, the PACE exam, at the time, and I was
> offered a job with the federal government. (Clyde)

> This job chose me, you know federal employment. It was literally when I
> was in college, I needed a summer job, and I did not have any money. Once I
> started working there, they said you should look into this as a career and I started
> working for the Federal Government and I've never stopped. (Wes)

> Basically being a military spouse, it is very difficult to maintain a career
> and move with your spouse based upon their active duty commitments and a lot of
> times employers are reluctant to hire military spouses ... So federal employment
> under the Spousal Preference Act became a necessity in order to maintain
> consistent employment throughout my spouse's active duty military career.
> (Moses)

In contrast, the others had been inspired by a career in government because of

higher-level factors such as the desire to serve their nation or be a role model for other

African American men. These had deliberately sought out federal employment because of

the perception that it would match their personal or career aspirations. In one case the

participant was inspired by the glamorous TV image of what it would be like to work in

the intelligence service.

> After completing a career in the Air Force, I decided to continue my
> tenure by serving the nation that has done so much for me and my family. I

believe there is a need for Black Leaders to serve as an example, mentor, and role-model for younger people trying to navigate their careers. (Isiah)

I would say the fact of service. I'm not motivated by money. Don't get me wrong, I like my steaks and I like my nice cars, but that didn't motivate me. Purpose motivated me. Mission motivated me. (Julius)

I've heard a lot about Federal Employment being more secure, the advances that you could move up fairly quickly and those kind of issues. So I was really interested in getting in Federal Government and sort of branching out and enhancing my career goals and so forth. (Jamaal)

The TV show I Spy, and seeing that a person that looked like me could be a spy. Now, all the movies and the TV versions of being a spy are always great. James Bond. I like going to the movies as good as everyone. Of course, we all know the reality is not like the movie and TV. I'd like to think it was better. The reality of what you really do and supporting and serving the country was even cooler. (Oscar)

Federal Employment History

Five of the fifteen participants shared the common background of having worked in the military forces before they entered civilian employment in the Federal Government. Their military career progression appears to have been an important stepping-stone to SES jobs for these individuals. They had generally attained high-ranking military positions, and when transitioning to federal employment had been appointed in senior grades and reached SES within relatively short timescales.

In my 30-year career … this is my first SES job, my first federal government job, in fact … Basically, I think my history's just the military. Two years later, I was in this job. (Charles)

My story began after graduating from college in 1983 and earning my commission as an officer in the US Air Force. I rose through the ranks to Colonel by accepting and successfully completing various leadership positions then, when I retired from the military after a brief time as a government contractor, I applied and was promoted to an SES position. (Isiah)

Twenty-six years as an army officer, ten years as a contractor, even though that wasn't federal, it was defense contracting to support the federal agency, in

particular OSD, and now ten years of federal government starting as a GS-15. (Elgin)

> I think my military background gave me the basis of getting the necessary qualifications and credibility to enter into the Executive Service … I don't think that there is any better institution in our society that prepares leaders better than the military environment. (Jordan)

> My military training afforded me opportunities to lead people right out of college. This gave me an advantage compared to those that grew in the GS system. The military environment prepares you to lead people. (Russell)

Among those without a military background, only one (Clyde) reported that he had entered federal employment at a young age and had only worked in one agency throughout his federal career. The others had mostly worked in a considerable number of different agencies and areas of work during the course of their career, and some had also experienced short spells of private sector employment either before joining the government or between federal government jobs.

Factors Contributing to the Attainment of SES

A later section of the results chapter examines the deliberate actions and strategies taken by the research participants to further their careers. In contrast, this section reports the findings relating to external factors, largely outside their own control, that had an influence on their career progression. The important role that external factors played in propelling at least some of these individuals to their SES roles is shown by their admissions that they did not originally plan or envisage this career path for themselves.

> I wish I could say that it was always my plan to end up as an SES, but as I began my career, I never had a vision of getting to that level. (Clyde)

> When I left the military, I was just looking for job in my career field. I explore opportunities in private sector and the government. My goal was only to do interesting work. I never really thought about the SES level. (Russell)

At first, I didn't want to be in the SES. I didn't think it interested me … This job just happened to me, basically … I got a call from somebody saying, "I'm going to send you the job application. You need to apply for this job." It was this job. Okay. I got a job …That's really how it happened to me, getting to SES. It wasn't really on my radarscope. (Charles)

It was all by accident. I really didn't understand what an SES was … A boss at the time fired an SES doing the job … she asked me to go down there to fill in the gap until they can find somebody else … I did that job longer than the last five SESs as a 15 … I think that taking that job, even though I didn't want it, was really a test. It also was an interview to be an SES at the Chief of Staff level. (Elgin)

The experience and skills gained in their previous positions, either in the military or in other federal posts were clearly important in contributing to the career progression of all the research participants. However in most cases the actual opportunity to apply to the SES only arose when particular circumstances gave them the participant the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities, or when others identified their potential and brought the opportunity to their attention. For example, in the wake of the 9-11 tragedy when in his previous grade 15 post, Oscar had been given responsibility for chairing numerous taskforces, with the member's mostly senior personnel. Having successfully demonstrated the ability to play this leading role he was soon after appointed to the SES. Another participant similarly expressed the view that their unexpected appointment had been due to being "in the right place at the right time".

It was the unfortunate events of 9-11, and the coincidence of time and preparation that put me in the spotlight that I had, I guess, been preparing my whole career, up to that time, for. I was able to shine and become elevated. (Oscar)

There was a Director of Investigations job that was never inhabited by a non-special agent before. I applied, and it just so happened, at that time, a new set of skills was required. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time, and I was selected for that job. (Clyde)

A consistent theme was the strong influence of key individuals in facilitating or promoting most of the research participants' career achievements. In some cases these was indirect, by providing them with opportunities to experience different areas of work and develop new skills.

> I've been lucky in terms of having great support and management that allowed me to try different things, try different projects … all of that helped me to say whether I like things or not. Those are the experiences that kept me in Federal Government and then you get through a point where you're so vested. (Wes)

> In each job in the federal service, I was fortunate to have supportive managers that allowed me to do interesting projects. (Russell)

In other cases, participants reported a more direct influence by other people on their career trajectories. For example, Oscar had participated in a career trainee program that required passing a physical examination and additional tests, higher than those required for entry to the agency. He successfully passed the tests but was not accepted in to the program until a senior manager, two levels above his own managers, intervened. As a result, Oscar was moved from facilities into intelligence and ultimately into his current SES post with global responsibilities. While still a relatively junior officer, Oscar had met and had a positive impact on this senior manager by chance when they were sitting close together at a work event. Oscar had been casually expressing his views about the lack of competence of the speakers; not realizing the person to his left was the new organizational Director. Although he was initially concerned that he had spoken out of turn, Oscar was later invited to join the Director for lunch, and reports "He saw me differently because he realized that the thoughts that I had were valid. He realized that I wasn't sharing 'em with him to try to impress him because I didn't know who he was."

Although this type of incident was not common, virtually all of the research

participants noted that their line managers or other individuals had recognized their

potential, given them advice that would help their career progression or encouraged them

to apply for particular job opportunities. Indeed, one stressed that any Senior Executive,

regardless of ethnicity, has relied on the help of others to reach their position: "If you see

a Senior Exec - it doesn't matter whether you're an African American or you are any

Senior Executive—the chances are you didn't get there by yourself" (Jordan). Other

participants highlighted the importance of particular managers or other individuals as

follows:

> Throughout my career I have had leaders whisper a word here, push me to do a certain thing, move me from my comfort zone, and allow me to grow. I have good and bad leaders throughout my career, and each has served in shaping my career. I believe the leaders in my career have given me the staying power by equipping me with examples of how to think critically about important matters, and the patience to pause and listen when necessary. (Isiah)

> Three or four key individuals noticed over time … what kind of job opportunities I would be most suited for … I wish I could say I made the choices, but those managers saw enough that they selected me for opportunities and told me that I should apply for jobs that were open. In retrospect, those were very helpful to me because I guess I would call myself more of a settler than a pioneer. I needed a little push, and they gave me that push. (Clyde)

> I think many of my mentors, leaders, and managers, and supervisors, they saw something in me … They pushed me to do jobs that I thought I couldn't do (Elgin)

> I had great mentors and leaders. They pushed me into leading projects or jobs I didn't think I was qualified to do. They saw things in me that I didn't see in myself. They told me to take risk. (Russell)

> Most of the senior managers that I have worked for, have always supported my initiatives to work outside of my position description or job description. They've always allowed me an opportunity to excel. (Moses)

Strategies Used to Reach the SES and Fulfill their Responsibilities

This section focuses on the more deliberate actions and strategies of individual participants, rather than external factors, which have had a perceived influence on their achievement of and ability to successfully maintain SES positions. The main research question relating to this area refers to the use of particular "strategies", for example in preparing themselves to for SES jobs, ensuring that they are able to remain relevant in their roles, and how they managed to avoid the middle management career "plateau" experienced by many ethnic minorities. In addition, the competencies and skills that the research participants believed to be instrumental in their career progression were explored.

Deliberate Strategies and Activities

Education and training. When asked how they had prepared themselves to become SES, at least half of all the participants referred to their education, training and learning in general. Mental preparation and acquiring knowledge and particular types of skills both through formal education and training and informal reading, were felt to be important for enabling them to achieve their SES positions and continue to successfully fulfill the responsibilities associated with these.

> The one thing that I do is read continually … Reading allows you to discover new ideas, see matters in a different light, and move yourself beyond traditional boundaries. Reading is what I do to move myself forward. (Isiah)

> Training, training, training …. Continual learning is a must, whether you're teaching yourself, going to a school. If you're not continuing learning, you can't be effective … You have to be continually growing. Because if you don't grow, the organization can't grow. (Charles)

> I'm a firm believer of sharpening your tools. I'm learning going Steven Covey now. Seven Habits. … Once you have the knowledge, nobody could take it from you. I have always maintained going to training, conferences, collaborating

with others. (Julius)

> I don't think you perform well unless you prepare and educate yourself well. The two go hand in hand … The same motivation that energizes you to educate and prepare yourself, is the same motivation that gets you to compete well and perform well. I don't think they're separate. It's who that person is. (Jordan)

> In order to perform well, you must place great emphasis on preparation. You also must believe in continuing education. You must have motivation for both. (Walt)

Most of the participants indicated that they regard it crucial to continue developing themselves through learning to stay relevant in their current roles, through both formal and informal education. Two of the participants emphasized the importance or value of taking extended period away from work for the purpose of obtaining more education:

> I believe in continuous education. Sometimes you have to step back, take a pause, and a take a week of school, or take three weeks … Some of those programs allowed me to think about the geopolitical aspects, not just the military … Some of it allowed me to understand why we're not doing things because of the domestic environment. (Elgin)

> Continuous education is critical. In order to remain relevant, you must stay on top of the things that affect your career field. (Walt)

> I decided I'll go back and get my master's degree … I can remember one of my staff asked me, "Why are you going back when you're already SES and you got a great reputation here" … I told her, "I want to remain relevant." I said, "Things change, and I want to keep exercising this muscle up here called our brain. It was the best decision that I could have made in the sense of rejuvenating me. (Julius)

Once they have achieved SES, informal reading is a strategy used by many of the participants to ensure that they stay relevant in their role and are in a good position to fulfill the responsibilities associated with it, and some indicated that they are highly self-disciplined in maintaining this practice:

I read 1-2 books every week and listen to a motivational/inspirational speaker every day. I believe that preparing myself mentally will help me successfully navigate my daily activities. (Isiah)

I read 4-5 books per month. They range from leadership, technology, spiritual, to health. Have to stay on top and remain relevant. (Walt)

I'm always looking at periodicals, case law, reading news information … reading agency reports, GAO reports, congressional reports, reading testimonies, looking at hearings and so forth, just to stay relevant with the issues that affect government and the (agency) where I work. (Jamaal)

In particular, learning about and being trained in leadership skills was felt to be particularly importance in enabling them to achieve and fulfill their SES positions and responsibilities.

Their 18 month SES program is top notch. It consists of a lot of bringing in thought leaders in management, like Stephen Covey and others … By the time I got the nod … I felt that I was prepared, at least through my training and experience. (Julius)

If you can't lead, then it's going to be difficult for you to function. Leaders have visions. They have a vision. I think reading a variety of autobiographies of great leaders helped me. (Charles)

For several of the participants, education was seen to serve another important function in relation to their SES role, by giving them legitimacy and demonstrating that they are well prepared to be in that role.

In the D.C. area, if you don't have a Master's, you're not perceived a player. (Elgin)

You have to educate yourself. People have to recognize that you are where you are because you deserve to be where you are. (Jordan)

As a leader and decision making you have be knowledgeable about a variety of subjects and topics. Your staff looks to you to have answers and provide guidance. (Walt)

A lot of times when people have grass root experience, but they don't have a formal education … they are scrutinized by their peers, they are judged harder and sometimes it is very difficult to achieve the SES level. So I think the extra

effort in achieving a formal education has greatly assisted me in my career and to progress to the current level within the federal system. (Moses)

Self-care. Another common theme arising from analysis of the interview data was the ways in many of the research participants reported practicing a much disciplined daily routine of self-care and personal development before work, often rising very early in the morning to do so. Those who had such a routine generally regarded this as very important in contributing to their ability to carry out their roles successfully, for example by helping them to stay health and well organized. Although the routines varied somewhat between participants, they typically included exercise, some quiet reading time and for some, prayer or spiritual reading or catching up with the daily news.

> A typical day in my life is starts off with an hour of gratitude, where I read my Bible, collect my thoughts, by organizing my day. I then workout for one hour, and prepare to come to work. This is my routine Monday through Friday … I must take time out by collecting my own thoughts, before I engage with others. (Isiah)

> Typically I get up about 4:00, get ready to go to the gym at 5:00. Be in the gym from 5:00 till about 6:45. Go home, take a shower, and try to get into the office by 7:45 … I try to do some spiritual reading when I first get to office in the morning ... when it's quiet. I'll close the door. I don't want to be disturbed for the first 15 minutes. (Charles)

> For me, my routine is that I get up early in the morning, and I hit the gym. For me, that prepares myself mentally and otherwise because that's just part of who I am. I think I'm more alert when I get up and I hit the gym. (Jordan)

> I generally I get up early in the morning, and I hit the gym 3-4 days week depending on family commitments. It's important that I do this because it helps to prepare me for the challenges of the day. When I work out, I feel sharp and I can stay mentally focus throughout the day. (Walt)

> For me, it's starts at zero five when I get up. It starts with checking up on the overnight news. Starts at home, even before I leave home. In my business, I have to have currency. For me, because of what I do, at 5:00 Al Jazeera News is on. From there, I switch to BBC. From there, I switch to One America News … I have to know what's going on in the world because that's what I do. (Elgin)

Support from others. The participants reported various ways of eliciting the support of others or utilizing them in various ways to help their own career progression or to ensure that they are able to perform their roles to a high standard. These strategies included observation of what others had done to become successful and using them as role models, as well as more proactive or direct approaches in order to seek guidance or feedback on their own performance.

> It's about analyzing a culture and defining what's necessary or what is required to be that leader. And that's just through observing my manager, my senior manager and observing how they interact with other people and so forth. (Jamaal)

> I've had the opportunity to talk to some senior leaders, SESs, congressional folks, just to see how they've got with their works and some of things that they've done to get into position. And then I've tried to just take those lessons that's I've gotten from them and apply them, in terms of education, in terms of the ability to lead, empower people and in terms of making a change and impacting (the) environment, work environment. (Jamaal)

> I always been one to hold my supervisors accountable. They hold me accountable for articulating what I expect of them. As I went up the management level, I am always willing to sit down and say, "what should I be focusing on?" … I said to my supervisor, "Look, don't tell me how good I am. I don't want to hear that. Be honest with me. Tell me what I need to work on." (Julius)

Securing the support of others extended to learning from their own staff and others in the organization: several of the participants stressed that they can learn just as much from their juniors or co-workers in the organization as from more senior officials.

> You're not necessarily learning from the books. You're learning from other people. You're learning their experience, their history, their knowledge … they add a piece of the puzzle to my life that I might not have ever experienced or taken into account … I really learned it from the neighbor that I'm sitting next to who understands it, who understands why things are different, why things are happening. (Elgin)

> I listen to the people who do the work. I listen to people in the environment, and I don't ever presume that I have the answers, so spend a lot of

time just listening and then learning about the environment. (Clyde)

> I spend time listening to the staff to get their perspective. They are ones who are performing the work. I find that I learn a lot from listening. I found that in many cases I listen to people in the environment, and I don't ever presume that I have the answers, so spend a lot of time just listening and then learning about the environment. (Russell)

> I have previous supervisors that I stay in touch with. I have subordinates that I stay in touch with from previous jobs because they are part of the fabric that gives me the knowledge and skill base that I have. (Moses)

One way of finding out about the importance of others in enabling these senior

executives to remain relevant in their SES roles and fulfill their responsibilities was to

ask about the key people they rely on in their day-to-day work. The responses to this

question revealed the ways in which people in different roles are used by the participants

to provide them with information as well as various forms of support, from acting as a

personal confidant to challenging their views in order to help reinforce or modify their

decision-making.

> My management team … I need people that are going challenge my thinking, challenge me in the right way, in the right time, and feel that they can do that (Julius)

> In our business right now, we're not allowed to have deputies, but I will submit to you, you're going to have to make someone a personal deputy, even if it's not on paper. I've done that. That deputy's become a personal confidant. We can talk about work. We can talk about goals, objectives. We can also talk about life. (Elgin)

> I rely on my immediate supervisors and second layer supervisors in order to provide me guidance and counsel to make certain that we are on the same path (Moses)
> The other person is the boss's military assistant, the boss's secretary because they have the ear of the boss … you get knowledge from talking to that intermediate … It's a personal relationship. It's not a professional type relationship, but I can call her every morning. She tells me what's on the boss's calendar …she can tell me what the boss is thinking … who he's thinking about, positives and negatives (Elgin)

Five of the fifteen executives indicated that, aside from individuals in their organization or wider government network, they also rely heavily on their wife or other family members to discuss work-related matters with and seek their advice. These participants emphasized the benefits of having someone outside the work context to use as a sounding board and obtain objective advice from.

> The other person that I listen to and trust a lot is my wife. Because my wife can be harder on me and she sees things in me that I don't see because I can't get out of my way. (Elgin)

> The key people I rely on are a few senior leaders and I use as my personal mentors and my wife. I rely on their brutal honesty and support to bounce ideas, thoughts of progression, and life concerns. (Isiah)

> I have an inner circle.   I heavily rely on few trusted agents, mentors and I my wife. I rely on them because of their honesty. Sometimes, I feel the staff tell me things they think I want to hear. My inner circle is important so that I can and bounce ideas, and thoughts off of them and get honest answers without agenda. (Walt)

> I have a tendency to chat a lot with family members. They have been very key people that I rely on in my role as a leadership. I use them as sounding boards because even though situations may be specific to my day-to-day environment, I can give them the basic facts and they can allow the feedback in order to assist me in my role as a leader. (Moses)

> I listen to and rely a lot on my wife. She gives me a perspective on things that I often missed or didn't think about. (Scottie)

> The other person that I listen to and trust a lot is my wife. Because my wife can be harder on me and she sees things in me that I don't see because I can't get out of my way. (Elgin)

Just two participants mentioned that their own use of formal mentors or personal coaches, but both indicated that the use of this type of support had been invaluable in helping them to hone the skills needed to perform as a senior executive.

> That was the greatest thing ever … to have that one-on-one self-reflection, because the coach wasn't a person that sat across from me and said, "This is what you need to do." They asked me, "Who are you? What is it that you are to

become? What are you meant to do? Who are you meant to be?" Through that six-month experience meeting once a week, once every other week, self-reflection and writing, and really taking the time to get to know me at a higher level, I came out of that process so much more focused and clearer … Executive coaching is exceptional. (Oscar)

My mentors were not necessarily people that have excelled to the SES level but … provided me (with) guidance and advice. Sometimes it's not necessarily guidance and advice that I wanted to hear, they are echoing my thoughts. They are echoing the situation as they see it, and then allowing me to take that information based upon what I already knew about the situation in order to make key decisions (Moses)

Extra efforts. Throughout the interviews, the participants frequently stressed the importance of going beyond what was expected of them in order to demonstrate their value and have a positive impact on the way that others perceived them. Several of the participants made the point that this was not necessarily because of their African American ethnicity; contributing extra value to their organization and managers was seen by these individuals as an important strategy for anyone wishing to ascend to the SES. All of the research participants mentioned various ways in which they had made extra efforts or always strived to deliver optimum performance throughout their federal career, and indicated that this had been important in providing them with the recognition that was important in achieving their SES position.

I didn't just do my job … I was doing more. I was not being on time because being on time was late. I was being early. I wasn't just writing a report. I was giving enough information, so that the seniors above me looked good … I was always willing to help peers. I was always reaching back to help those who were behind me, to mentor them, to help bring them up. (Oscar)

I've always taken the position that I was currently occupying and just did the best job I could do in that job … I think that if you do a good job at whatever it is that you're doing, opportunities to excel or advance in your career will normally find you (Moses)

If your bosses see you as relevant to supporting his or her day, you're

going to always be seen as a very supportive individual. That's a career step. That's how you get there … I'm responsible for this organization, but I'm also responsible for making sure my boss's organization is successful (Jordan)

If management see that you're a valued person and that you are a person that can make an impact, you are considered person that can help them reach the ideals and goals and organization (Jamaal)

Your leadership has to see value in you. You have to make an impact on the organization. I strive always to improve the organization and work to achieve my leadership's vision for the organization. I'm team player always. You leadership must recognize this. (Scottie)

Working 60 hour weeks was a norm. I've always worked the weekends to get a jump on my peers … It definitely wasn't the best thing for work life balance. I had none. I'm not advocating that people follow that, but … that's what I needed to do to be successful. (Julius)

I'm usually the first in the office and last to leave. I average 60 hours per week. I spend time preparing and ensuring that the organizations work products meeting were meeting the agency's strategic and performance objectives. (Russell)

I always strive to understand the vision of leadership. Where are they trying to go.. I always offer suggestions on how we can get where they want to go. The results is that they see value in your. They see that you are committed to their goals and vision. (George)

It was emphasized that the perception of others, especially those in positions of power, can be even more important than an individual actual achievements in influencing their career progression. This extends to the way in which the individual dresses and their personal demeanor, which several of the participants stressed are particularly important in order to be taken seriously and to convey the right image at work.

If there are others that are in positions to make a determination about whether you continue up or you stay where you are, if they have preconceived notions that are not favorable about you, then that could hamper you … It could be because you are a black male. It could be because your hall file, what people say about you when you're not around, has given them some preconceived notions … The preconceived notions of those around you and those above you could hamper you or help you … You must scrupulously guard your persona, and

how people perceive you, because that will follow you … Perceptions, how people perceive you, is their reality. It may not be the truth, but that's all they have. (Oscar)

What's critical is perception. You have to paint the picture of a person who is results driven, who's a goal getter, who's a self-starter, who can bring in results, who can write clear, concise and convincing reports and those kind of things. Once that perception is painted I think it's easy for that person to become comfortable regardless of your race and color and so forth (Jamaal)

Unfortunately, people have preconceived notions about African American men. I try to dispel that and change the perspective to help those that follow me. I have to project an image that correlates in their mind on what they think an Executive should be. I just happen to be an African American Executive. (Russell)

I already dressed for success …. Even though there was no dress code, I wore a suit every day. That was my new uniform. (Julius)

You have to present yourself well. I always dress professionally. I get quality suits, shirts, ties and shoes. It doesn't have to be expensive or designer but you must look the part of a Senior Executive. Appearance is everything. I say that is half the battle. (George)

Your professional image is the set of qualities and characteristics that represent perceptions of your competence and character unfortunately. People judge your first by your appearance. I always dress for success. I wear suits every day to work in when its dress down day. (James)

It's difficult to know exactly how all of your stakeholders perceive you, or how they would describe you when you aren't around. (Walt)

You got to present yourself professionally all the time. It's okay to have fun with people, but people got to know you're a professional. (Charles)

The biggest challenge is holding yourself to a standard that is worthy of being called the Senior Executive. That is the biggest challenge I have … You live in a glass house if you're a Senior Executive. You're a standard bearer. You set the standard. Everybody's always looking at you. (Jordan)

I have to project an image that lines up in their mind with what they think an Executive is, which is some higher order kind of thing. Every day, it's like being on performance, and it's like you're living it, but you don't get to use words. It's less now about what I say than who I am and what I do … It only takes a second to lose your reputation, and you got to be careful about that, but you got to fully understand that you're living up to a dream that, in our human flesh, is

almost impossible to live up to. (Clyde)

Skills, Values, and Beliefs

When asked about any specific competencies or personal skills that had helped

propel them to their current SES positions, the participants' responses strongly indicated

that personal skills and attributes, such as the ability to engage with people,

communication skills and especially leadership had been by far the most important, with

all of the executives stressing the value of these and how they continued to be of utmost

importance in their current roles. Their responses illustrated the ways in which they

effectively utilized their people-related skills to motivate and secure the co-operation of

their employees and others on a day-to-day basis.

> I think the biggest thing for me in my skill set is the one that I think I put people at ease. I think I come across very authentic because I'm willing to share who I am, spend time to talk with people on a one on one personal level. (Julius)

> I genuinely like people, I'm a people person … I don't mind engaging people. I don't mind talking with people … then I think people don't mind being around me. They gravitate towards me. I would say that helped a lot because the leadership in being a Senior Executive is all about influencing people … The most important characteristic of a leader, the one that I think is irreplaceable, is to be a caring leader. (Jordan)

> I think you have to tune into those personal soft skills, communication, feelings, emotions, in order to be successful at achieving any career levels, and I think those are some of the things that have benefited me. (Moses)

> I strive to reach people where they are. I'm generally interested in their well-being. The people have to know you care. (Russell)

> I'm always looking for an opportunity to talk to my people, go down here and walk down through the hallways or in their shops … at the end of the day, as the Director here, I have to lead this organization and I got to motivate them. I can't do that if they don't see me. (Jordan)

> I think my personal skill creating an environment where people feel comfortable coming and talking to me ... Personally, I make fun of myself, with

them around … Then they feel comfortable and relaxed. (Charles)

> People are our greatest asset. People first is my motto. I try to make people feel comfortable. I try to get to know something special about them which creates a rapport. I generally care about their well-being. (James)

Apart from a genuine liking of people, and ability to connect and engage with them, the participants highlighted the importance of good communication as well as motivational skills in helping them succeed in securing their SES position and performing effectively at this level.

> I learned, over time, that it was my briefing skills and public speaking. Now, when I first started, I did not have that. I used to get physically ill at the thought of having to give a briefing …. For me, that competence that I developed over time and tried to hone, to be able to brief on any given subject, or to do public speaking, so as to engage people … that was the skill. That is what helped me achieve my status. (Oscar)

> You have to be a collaborator. You have to really know how to collaborate with people … I think you have to talk to people who understand nothing about your business, and say hey, this is what I'm trying to achieve. Bouncing my ideas off them, and they understand, then it makes sense. If you can't communicate the way they understand it, then it doesn't make sense. (Charles)

> I believe my personal skill of positive talk has benefited me most in my career. Our lives are surrounded by negative examples, and as leaders I believe we need to hit the pause button and get folks to focus on the positive things in life (Isiah)

> If everybody else is down, and everybody else is complaining about lack of resources, or lack of opportunity, or whatever, just the positive attitude and showing people - not necessarily through your words - but when the whole world is going crazy, and they're all ready to quit, that you're looking at this like "what a great opportunity". (Clyde)

A number of the participants referred to the ways in which they are able to utilize in their SES position skills and lessons learned from roles they hold outside work, particularly in relation to understanding their employees and working with different types of people.

I'm a husband and I'm the treasurer at my church. Both these enhance my roles as SES because for the family, being that husband I have to be receptive and open to the family life. And that's good in helping me to understand what my employees are going through. (Jamaal)

I play many roles. At work, at home, at church and at many charitable organizations. I have found that each environment is different and requires you to be multi-dimensional. These different roles shape who I am in my executive capacity. (Walt)

I think I play a lot of roles. I am a husband, I am a father, I am a grandfather. I am a brother, I am a son, and I am a friend. All of those roles that I play is part of my makeup. I have enhanced my achievement in my federal career. Every one of those roles have either taught me something, given me the support I needed in order to excel in being, becoming or achieving to my fullest. (Moses)

Closely related to the people-related skills that the executives hold are a number

of personal values and beliefs, which they also regard as highly important in enabling to

achieve SES status and be successful in this role. Those mentioned in the interviews

include integrity, trust, a sense of justice, humility and personal accountability.

I believe the single most important skill is "trust". As a leader, you must learn to trust people to do their job, and then reward them with respect and recognition. When this is done, you create an environment that is safe and enjoyable to work. I believe that my values have propelled my career trajectory (Isiah)

I have no problem owning up to my own mistakes and while also letting you know how I'm going to rectify it … I'm going to learn from it. That's with whether or not it's a subordinate that I'm dealing with, a peer, or a superior, that I'm—I could be very strong in my views, but if you show me the error of my way, I would accept it. (Julius)

Trust and credibility, and God knows, integrity. (Charles)

I think you need to be fair. I think you need to work within guidance and policies. I think you need to be a strong leader. Your subordinates need to know that you are there for them, that you believe in them, that you will help them to excel as long as there is no conflict between their personal desires and the mission. (Moses)

Around half of the participants explicitly referred to their strong Christian beliefs and faith at some point during their interview, and it was clear that these contributed to their perceived ability to do their job well, or provided them with a source of support in difficult times. At least one linked this with having a strong work ethic, while another noted how they had inherited this work ethic from their father. Several of the executives referred back to their own family backgrounds as influences on their own character and in turn on their ability to perform well in their SES role.

> The Bible commands us to work as unto the Lord. So that translates … do the best job you can and don't be … a slacker … So my spiritual sense has given me – it's definitely needed - a relationship with God. And it's also helped reduce the stress and strain that comes with being in an SES position. So I would say that's the other thing that an African-American man should have in his back pocket, a strong relationship with God. (Jamaal)

> My father was a World War II vet ... No nonsense type of guy … He said, "Excuses are like eyeballs. Everybody's got them." … I can honestly say that the work ethic dad brought to the table, that desire to be the best at what I could do, has served me well. (Julius)

> Having a good spiritual background, and having to come through the struggles I came through as a young man and as a child in a single-parent home prepared me for the glorious days ahead. (Charles)

> I can remember when my mother couldn't even enter the front door of the place where she was working in when she was at a restaurant. My parents couldn't change clothes in a department store. They could buy the clothes but they had to take them home. Nevertheless, on Sunday, I can look at the old pictures, and they were always dressed to the nines, and their hair was cut right, and their pants weren't hanging off their bottoms, and all that stuff. When they left the house, they understood full well that you were representing not only yourself, but your family and your community ... To me, I benefitted from that because I never thought anybody needed to give me anything, and rather than rebel and say, "I'm here. You have to accept me," I wanted people to see that they—I brought value, that they needed me there … The extra efforts I had to adopt was not having a chip on my shoulder and not thinking that people got up in the morning just to make me miserable, but at the same time, knowing that whenever I did anything without anybody telling me, I wanted my name to only be associated with my best effort and doing the best I could … It's just a part of the fabric—that my parents brought me up to see … The extra effort is not thinking that anybody owed me

anything just for showing up. (Clyde)

Overcoming Barriers as African Americans

As noted above, the general consensus among the research participants was that anyway who wishes to reach the SES, regardless of their race or ethnicity, has to put in extra efforts and ensure that their value is recognized by the organization. However, the majority also agreed that this is especially the case for African-American males, because of the stereotypical views that many people hold about them, and the perception that they are continually being observed and tested against these stereotypes. A number of the executives indicated that they personally still feel that it is necessary for them to achieve higher standards than their white counterparts, to overcome negative perceptions and also provide an outstanding role model for other African Americans.

> I have to agree, wholeheartedly, that minorities do have to work harder. There's always exceptions to the rule but, in general, what I've noted is that minorities do have to work much harder to achieve senior status. (Oscar)

> I think as minority you do have to work twice as hard. You have to be twice as good at anything that you're doing because of the fact that the expectation is that you are going to fail and that you don't have all the tools in your toolkit in order to succeed. (Moses)

> I don't get the same opportunities to be average or to mess up things. The consequences for me would be higher for those kind of actions than other people. (Wes)

> I think what hinders us is people perceive us to be different. Somehow, they perceive us to have different aspirations, and it's hard to get by that sometimes. (Clyde)

> Things that you and I have done, young kids don't know that … They don't know that you and I have a master's, that we wear white shirts. We wear a suit every day. We have to. We can't just wear khakis and a polo shirt like others. We're measured on a much higher scale. We have to understand that. (Elgin)

> If you're an African American … you're on parade 24 hours a day, people watch you—I just think society has taught us to be more observant of African

Americans than others. … You got all the responsibilities of every … Senior Executive there is, but I also have that added burden of responsibility of how people will view my actions as the actions of an African American Senior Executive … They can't help it. Whether they want to or not, its how our society is made up. We have no choice … I don't ever want to do anything to embarrass my race. I don't want to hurt the generation behind me. I know that society has stereotypical thoughts about African Americans. I don't want to ever do anything to damage that reputation or make it hard on those folks behind me … I've got to uphold that trust that we, African Americans, we are just like everybody else, and we can uphold the standards of being a Senior Executive, and we deserve to be where we are, just like the President. (Jordan)

The participants reported using various strategies for overcoming these attitudes, which in many cases were viewed as being instrumental in their successful progression to SES. These mostly involved making additional efforts to demonstrate their value to the organization or to particular managers, or by engaging with people on a personal level to break down barriers, improve understanding of one another, and overcome any negative perceptions.

I firmly believe that you have to continually reinvent yourself every few years. You are not given the opportunity to stagnate career-wise as an African American. It is important to know who you are, and who you want to become. (Isiah)

People see me and they see this big dark skinned guy coming in there, and they have their own perception and biases. I always knew that it's up to me … to dispel those negative biases and perceptions. I do that by knowing my job, being on top of my game, and following through. As I sit down or converse with whoever I'm dealing with, I try to meet them on a human level. (Julius)

One of the specific questions explored how the participants overcome the career barriers often faced by African-American males by asking how they had overcome middle management career "plateaus". The findings indicated however that at least some of the participants had experienced not just one but several plateaus of this nature, indeed they were seen as normal stages in the career progression towards SES, and not necessarily associated just with being African American. The way they had been

overcome had been by using the time to work on their skills and experience and prepare

themselves for career opportunities when they did arise.

> It wasn't a straight climb up the mountain. It was, rather, a gradual climb up, a plateau, sometimes those plateaus had dips, and then climb up, a plateau, a dip, and a climb up, and a plateau … What I did on those plateaus is what I feel is important. I used those plateaus as opportunities to regroup, to take them—to take additional training. One time, much of that training was over a period of time wherein I was able to obtain my master's degree … when I came out of the plateau and was climbing up again, that master's degree was one of the things that helped distinguish me from the rest of the group that allowed me to continue to climb (Oscar).

> Plateaus are not always because you did something wrong. Sometimes they are. Sometimes it's just because the timing or the career track that you're in, or the people that are sitting around the table making the decision about who continues on and who doesn't … I recognize that the plateaus come sometimes because of forces outside of your control. You have to remain positive and just say, "Okay. I'm going to make it harder, the next time, for them to put me in the second group. I'm going to work harder, so that I'm not only in the first group, but I'm going to be number one of the first group considered for promotion, the next time around." That's what I did. (Oscar)

Meanings attributed by Participants to their SES Achievements

This final section of the results focuses on the ways in which participants'

interpret and place meaning on their experiences in the SES. It is organized into three

main sub-sections: the first examines what the participants see as the main benefits and

rewards of being a federal senior executive, and conversely what they regard as the

drawbacks and challenges of their role. The second draws on various data from the

interviews to try to encapsulate what it means to the participants to be a senior executive,

in general, and as an African-American male. The final sub-section summarizes the

findings regarding the advice that these executives offer to other African-American males

aspiring to become SES; this is believed to fit well in the current section because it is

only through attributing meaning and significance to their own experiences that

individuals can provide guidance and recommendations to others facing similar situations.

Benefits, Rewards and Challenges of being SES

When asked about the rewards and challenges of being SES, the most common responses among the participants were having influence and being a key decision-maker. This can be seen to reflect the earlier finding that many of these individuals entered federal employment because of a desire to serve their country or act as a role model. Several indicated that they valued the ability to have a personal impact on their organization and on society at this level of government, while also recognizing the high level of responsibility that comes with this position.

> People listen to you. I think it's our responsibility to say the things that our more junior people can't say. Because what we aren't encumbered by anymore is the whole focus on building a career, and keeping your mouth shut, and not making a mistake that somebody might penalize you for. … We do have influence, and we have an opportunity to shape what the future can be. (Clyde)

> It isn't how much money you make. It is being in charge, being responsible, but it's how you use that position to influence your government, your organization, your society. That is the benefit. (Jordan)

> You're a decision maker. The other benefit is in this level, you can be part of it, or you can hide at this level. If you're part of it, and truly part of the decision maker, you become known in this building. You become the go-to person in this building. You get a reputation or a level of credibility that for me is very important. (Elgin)

On the other side of the coin, the decision-making responsibilities of an SES role were also noted as being one of the main challenges of the job, and a very high-stakes activity, as described by two of the participants:

> Often, these decisions are hard because you saw something that you did that may be in The Washington Post or that you've been involved in … The challenge is also you're taking risks when you make those decisions because there's a level of trust in you. You'll find that you're the only one at the table

representing your undersecretary or your three-star boss. You have to make sure you understand their commander's intent, their director's intent … The other part of this is when you're at the table, you're speaking for the commander. You're not speaking for yourself, or you're speaking for the undersecretary. There's a lot of risk in that. You can't pull that back. The other thing because you're at a high enough level, often to me within OSD, especially with the services, you're playing poker. You don't know the cards in the other players' hands, what their real intent is. As we do this pyramid within this building, OSD's at the top … If you make a decision at the top that's not supportive what the secretary's interested in, the service will use that and run. Your name gets through this building real quick, particularly in a negative way, but a positive way because they got what they want. A negative way because you failed to understand. (Elgin)

The biggest challenge is upholding that reputation of being a Senior Executive and what all that means. That means your attitude, how you take care of people, your appearance, what you do, all of that is holding up that standard … It's also challenging to not fail those people in that organization and the Department of Defense. The Secretary of Defense has entrusted me to run this portion of the Department of Defense mission, and I'm in charge of that mission. It's challenging to not let the Secretary of Defense, the nation, and these folks in this organization down. That's the challenge I meet with every single day. (Jordan)

Another commonly mentioned reward from of being SES, which also relates to some participants' aspirations when entering federal employment, was the personal recognition they received for this achievements and representing a positive role model for other African-American males.

I think it's what I represented for others that were happy to see my ascension. Not so much for myself, but to be a symbol of what was possible. (Oscar)

Similarly, the third main benefit of being SES that was mentioned by several executives was the ability to serve and help other people: reflecting the earlier finding that most of these individuals are very people-centered and see this as an important aspect of their roles.

I get the most satisfaction from the stuff that we are doing, like helping people to … reach their potential. (Wes)

The thing I'm most proud of, as Senior Executive, is watching people succeed, period. (Charles)

When the participants were asked about the reported challenges and drawbacks of their roles, the factors mentioned mainly relating to organizational issues, or individuals within the organization, that hindered or frustrated their abilities to achieve particular goals. Several of the examples mentioned related to a perceived lack of full meritocracy or other organizational barriers to the recruitment or promotion of ethnic minorities.

My lowest point was when I couldn't succeed in helping the people that I was trying to help … I was Deputy Director for the Recruitment Center, specifically focused on minority hiring and recruitment … When I got there, I thought I would have the powers and authorities … but I was soon to learn that it was a nice title, but it didn't come with any budgetary controls, or controls over programs … that was many years ago … I had the opportunity to be called back and asked to help with some other ideas on how to do minority recruiting for high school students. Talking to the people who were the statisticians then, who are now in managerial roles today, and they shared with me that nothing has changed. The stats remain consistently low. (Oscar)

As much as we in government want to believe that a process is a meritocracy and all that … on the face of it, we had supposedly a government-sanctioned process that was supposed to be open to all and equal opportunity … and … they were preselected for a position that hadn't even been advertised. It was very disappointing. (Clyde)

Good boss, thought I was doing well. She wanted a change. It was difficult for me because … I was part of the change, and I think that the boss wanted to go a different direction, and no longer needed me as the Chief of Staff. It was very difficult because it was a situation I personally couldn't understand, nor did I have control over my destination. There was a lot of uncertainty. (Elgin)

What it Means to be an SES

The findings from various points of the interviews were synthesized in order to capture the key meanings that the participants personally attribute to their SES role.

Three main aspects of the role could be identified from this: leading the organization,

representing the organization and the Government, and developing and empowering

others.

First, the participants expressed an understanding that they were responsible for

driving the organization forward, in line with the requirements of its leadership. This is a

seen as a strategic role, which requires willingness to be proactive, decisive and

responsible for transforming the organization over time. Several of the executives defined

the very nature of their SES role in terms of strategically guiding their organization into

the future.

> The difference between change and transformation … change is where you have something that works and you tweak it, just like taking an old car. You might upgrade it, put on new wheels, or redo the interior, but you still got the same car. What we're doing now, what I give attention to, is designing what we want the future to be and lining up people; encouraging them; making sure that we're checking that we're integrated; managing a team; trying to get people to understand, collectively, what we tolerate as an organization and what we don't; and now, been given the opportunity to not work on what exists, but what we want in the future. (Clyde)

> I'm always trying to influence and advance the mission … I'm always trying to set the standard … I'm always trying to find ways to do the mission better and not just the status quo … That's what Senior Executives get paid to do. The subordinates will help you. They'll influence you. They'll make recommendations, but ultimately, it's that Senior, it's that leader, they got to pick up on that idea and force that change or move it in that direction. (Jordan)

> I think the other thing that I have to do is understand the strategic picture, not my tactical picture because if you step back and you start to understand a strategic picture, you'll understand why decisions are made that doesn't seem natural. In days of limited resources, hard decisions are being made … My levels about implementing. You got to understand that strategic decision. (Elgin)

Closely related to this, several of the participants described their SES role in terms

of representing their organization, its leadership or the Government as a whole. This

requires accepting responsibility and accountability, as well as ensuring that the

organization as a whole meets high standards of performance and transparency. This

representational aspect of their role helps to explain why participants feel that they must

continually convey a positive personal image; they are often seen as the "face" of their

organization or the government.

> I feel an obligation not to have excuses, not to place blame on people, and give, honestly, a good return, and be in an organization where if, under any circumstances, 24 hours a day, if there was a camera on our organization, that people who don't even come to the DC area or to Baltimore could be proud that this—we've got a federal government place that really works. They're not wasting money, and wasting resources, and are getting a good return with what the country and the people who make their taxpayers—the taxes that we need to operate so that the country could be proud. It's not just about us. It's about everything that we represent. (Clyde)

> Always being upbeat, and trying to live out being an example, and never dropping the baton, if you will, in instances where people could see me taking things that I don't deserve or taking credit when other people have done the work. Then, similarly, always being willing to take—accept responsibility for when we fail as an organization. (Clyde)

> Operate at a standard of excellence, and represent your institution the way the public expects it to be represented. We do this for the public. We serve at the interest of the public. (Charles)

> I think the expectation is that you serve the taxpayers. I think that's required … you've accepted the position to be a senior leader within whatever organization and therefore … there is an expectation that you fulfill that responsibility (Moses)

> I think what's expected is when people hear senior executive, they can understand that it's not only a confident person, but a person whose reputation— is not without mistakes, but certainly somebody who strives to be a role model … I have a public obligation, and I'm representing not only myself, not only my community, but my agency and the Federal Government, as well. (Clyde)

The third most important aspect of their senior executive roles, as conveyed by

many of the participants, is a focus on developing and empowering other people. For

several, this was regarded as the central purpose of their role, in the sense of using their

abilities, authority and knowledge as an enabler or facilitator of organizational

achievements through the actions and achievements of others.

> I consider the real responsibility is the development of people, and then the work gets done through that. (Clyde)

> You're no longer a problem solver. What you are, I believe, is an enabler for those under you to empower them to solve a problem … If problems are brought to you, to empower those in your charge to come up with solutions and to follow through with those solutions, and to always be there to support your people and be that shield … even if the people made a mistake, help them understand what they could've done different, better, and then go back and have this is how we're going to resolve it. (Oscar)

> Listening, observing, and empowering those that work for me … we're all important …my predecessor operated that he was the smartest in the room. If he wanted you to talk, he'll let you know. Other than that, he wasn't asking for your opinion and didn't want it. That's unfortunate. It really limits the organization. (Julius)

> You empower people. You get out of their way. You trust 'em. You listen to 'em. Then, my job is to give and provide feedback. Also, part of my job is give them credit, but accept blame. That's pretty much it. (Elgin)

Again reflecting their people-focused nature, as discussed earlier in the chapter, a

number of the participants regarded this aspect of their role to be of particular personal or

ethical importance and as such, they placed a high emphasis in their day to day work on

finding ways to help and develop their staff or others in the organization. These

participants strongly conceptualized their SES role as being one of service: to their

employees, and to the wider community and society as a whole.

> I believe every senior leader has the responsibility to mentor, lead, and guide. These three are irrefutable and should never be taken for granted … There are several roles that every senior executive needs to play, whether they do or not. They need to be leaders, mentors, sounding boards, friends, advisors, and everything in between required to make folks successful. The only reason they are placed in these leadership positions is because of the subordinates they serve.

(Isiah)

I think we, as leaders, we in a position of service ... Service is hard. That's what expected of us. We didn't get here because we're that great. We have an obligation to serve others and get them to the next level, as well. (Charles)

I think that the further you go up the pyramid … your obligation is to give back, and to serve others, and make ways for them to replace you one day. (Clyde)

I have a mantra that, when I do speak … before I even reach the podium … as I'm approaching it, I say, "If I can help somebody as I travel along, if I can lift a spirit through a word or song, if I can show someone where they may be traveling wrong, then my living shall not be in vain." That is at the core of everything I do, as a senior, as a leader, to be as creative and positive as I can, to help people, to help a small company that's trying to get bigger, to help an individual that's having a problem with one of their managers. Not to intercede, but to give them some tools on how to understand why they're having their problem, and to work through it and get to the other side. It's who I am. (Oscar)

Being an African American SES

While the research participants clearly recognize that they share much in common with senior executives in general, their specific experiences and the meanings attributed to these are also strongly influenced by their African American ethnicity. Most of the participants expressed the view that, at least in some respects, they have had to make greater efforts than others in order to achieve their positions, or to overcome biased perceptions of African-American males. The types of experiences encountered, and the ways in which the participants deal with them, are explained in the following examples:

You go into a meeting with your subordinates and the contractor or the people that you're meeting with from another organization, they reach out to your subordinates, thinking that they're the one that's in charge. I would never correct them. I'd leave it to my subordinates to correct them. (Julius)

People think that my Action Officer is the SES. Or I'm his driver. It's just—I have to smile about it because it's happened many times ... Once that happens, and you're at the table, there's no time for playing around. You got to make hard decisions because now your credibility is being watched even more … (Elgin)

> When you walk through that door, you're Black first. You're an SES probably second … My perception from where I sit, the president, who is a Black man, a mixed man. I see people perceive him as a Black first and president second. If you can do that to the president, you can do that to me (Elgin)

> That might be their only opportunity to interact with someone of a different race - an African‑American in particular - that doesn't fit the stereotype of what they've been seeing all their life … That they could see that I could disagree with you without getting emotional, that I can be very good at what I do and strategic in my thinking and pleasantries. I could talk. I'm pretty well versed, well read. I could talk about a variety of subject matters. A lot of times, this shocks them. (Julius)

Having successfully achieved their SES positions in spite of these types of challenges and misperceptions, the research participants all place great importance on being a positive role model for other African-American males and see this as an important aspect of their SES status to them personally. In more practical terms, they offer a range of important advice and guidance to other African Americans who wish to become senior federal executives, based on their own experience and lessons learned over the course of their careers. The main types of advice can be summarized as: present the right image and communicate well, network with and learn from others, contribute as much value as possible, and be prepared to take chances.

First, presenting the right image is seen by several of the participants as central to the ability of African-American males to climb the federal career ladder, and crucial for overcoming any prejudices and preconceptions held by those they come in contact with. This includes dressing appropriately, communicating well and having the right personal demeanor.

> Distinguish yourself, both in your appearance and your demeanor. By appearance, if you can't afford a lot good suits, get one good suit and a tie and shirt … You have to distinguish yourself as one whose appearance and demeanor is that of a senior. …. Dressing for success and the demeanor and how you carry yourself and how you speak to people, how you interact with people. Dress like

the job that you want, not necessarily the one that you have. (Oscar)

You have to come into the organization looking in the part. That's not to give up your blackness but it's to look professional. (Jamaal)

Not in an artificial way, but showing people that you're just like them in a lot of ways. One little, simple thing that I've always thought is that making conversation with people more about them than about yourself, showing people, and that sometimes requires changing the mindset that you can dress however you want, you can talk however you want … People make decisions about you within five seconds and before, sometimes, you've even opened your mouth. If you want to play the game, some part of the game is looking like the game … In a world where most people are visual, most impressions are made before you even speak, just be purposeful about what you're choosing to do. You're not doing it for the other person. You're doing it for yourself. (Clyde)

Lots of white managers are apprehensive in talking to black managers … you have to be able to communicate in a way that's charming and in a way that shows management that you're competent and you know what you're doing. (Jamaal)

As discussed earlier, virtually all of the research participants identified key people

who have had a significant impact on their career progress. Making relevant contacts and

drawing on the advice and information of other successful people, both black and white,

was emphasized by many of these executives as something that should be done very

proactively by other African-American males in order to progress in their careers.

Go sit and talk with black executives. Get on their calendar. Force yourself on their calendars. Call them, when you figure who they are. Get on the Linkedin. Get on the bios … Hey, email this guy. I just saw you on Linkedin … here's who I am, and here's what I'm trying to do. I would like to know if there's some time that I can call you and maybe eventually sit and talk with you … Don't be afraid to talk to people who are where you want to be. It's one way to understand how to get there (Charles)

Look for a mentor. It doesn't have to be Black, but look for a mentor who you can talk with, who you trust. It could be Black, White, whatever. Too often, we've got the attitude we've made it, and everybody's our equal. I think you need to find that mentor that you can bounce things off so you're not going down a narrow tunnel (Elgin)

I believe people aspiring to the senior levels need to develop a career plan

and find mentors that believe in them and willing to open doors to allow them to move to the next level. It is not enough to try to venture into this level by yourself. It requires sponsorship. (Isiah)

You can get all the education you like. You can be a very, very smart guy. If you don't have an advocate pushing you through the glass ceiling, it's not going to happen. You may, by the grace of God, get through it, but somebody's got to be pushing. Somebody's got to be advocating for you. They really do (Charles)

Another important category of career advice offered by these participants to other African-American males encapsulates a range of responses focusing on the importance of making themselves invaluable to managers and their organizations as a whole, for example by standing out for something outside their job description or going out of their way to be supportive.

Transcend your position and title. If you want to be known for being creative, if you want to be known for being a great speaker, if you want to be known for being the person that has that language skill or that area familiarity, that is a good thing. Transcending your position and title. (Oscar)

Become an advocate for a cause greater than you and your organization. Develop the professional maturity to advance the cause of greatness, and consequently your career will flourish. (Isiah)

A really little, simple thing, and I would do intentionally now if I were coming up … I wouldn't let a day go by without asking my supervisor and choice other people around me, "Is there anything I can do for you." 'Because I believe that the more you offer to help other people, you ultimately help yourself … People remember that, and I think there's a reciprocity drive in people, that makes them want to be reciprocal to people that reach out to them … It sounds really non-technical and really low level, but the simple question is, "How can I help you," I believe (this) is a key to getting a lot of doors unlocked. (Clyde)

Finally, a number of participants stressed the importance not only that young African-American males are well prepared for their careers in federal government, but are also willing to take risks and chances and put in efforts that might be outside their immediate comfort zone.

Don't expect … somebody to hand it to you. Don't expect another African

American to hand it to you. I wouldn't. Preparation … Educate yourself first. Know what it is you want. Know yourself. Know what it is that I want to do. Then start looking. What is it you want to do? Then go volunteer without getting paid, if you like it that much. (Charles)

Don't be afraid to swing the bat. Don't be afraid of failure. We fear failure. It kills us. It stops us in our tracks … If you don't swing the bat, you don't get a hit. Swing the bat. You may miss it. You may strike out. You get to run back up and you try it again until you die. (Charles)

Can't let obstacles stand in your way. Move them out the way. Go through them. You can go around them, if it's sufficient to do so, but don't let it stop you from doing the right thing. Obstacles are opportunities to excel, period … If I don't put something in the road for you to deal with to test and measure your strength, your tenacity, your endurance, your decisiveness, your dedication, and determination, I would never know what you're made of and neither will you. (Charles)

Be mobile. If you're in the D.C. area, there are a lot of opportunities. You got to go out and seek them. (Elgin)

Summary

This chapter has set out the findings of this phenomenological study into personal experiences of being an African American senior executive in the Federal Government. Drawing heavily on the narratives of the research participants in order to convey a deep sense of their experiences in their own words, the chapter has focused in turn on findings relating to the three main research questions, that is, the experiences of being SES, strategies used to attain and fulfill this role, and the personal meanings attributed to these experiences. In the following chapter the significance and implications of these findings are discussed.

CHAPTER V:

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research has investigated the lived experiences of a sample of African-American male members of the federal Senior Executive Service (SES) using Husserl's descriptive phenomenological approach. The objective was to improve understanding of why this group remains significantly under-represented in the SES despite the existence of affirmative action and other policies and programs concerned with increasing diversity in federal employment, and to identify the various factors believed to have influenced the ability of African-American males to achieve SES positions.

The phenomenological method proved valuable in enabling African-American male executives from various federal agencies to describe their experiences. The phenomenological approach allows insights into research participants' personal experiences through their own narratives, their reported perceptions and opinions, and deductions by the researcher about the meaning and significance of these taking into account the whole context of their experiences (Reiners, 2012). In this study, for example, information was collected on socio-demographic and employment-related factors such as age, academic qualifications, and types of experience, which made the analysis more comprehensive and enabled the researcher to draw more precise deductions from the lived experiences of African-Americans in SES. The researcher has also minimized the possibility of biased or inaccurate interpretation of the research data by using the phenomenological technique of "bracketing" any pre-existing assumptions, opinions or knowledge relating to the research issue and ensuring that the findings of the

study are derived from the research data itself and from a systematic process of thematic analysis.

Colaizzi's method was used for this analysis process, and facilitated by use of the NVivo10 software. This method involves strategies for the analysis of data from a phenomenological study. Bracketing, analyzing, intuiting, and describing comprised the main stages of data analysis (Reiners, 2012). The findings have been reported in Chapter Four by the major themes of the research as set out in the research questions, and by the sub-themes that were identified through an iterative process of coding and recoding the research material. In order to convey the views and experiences of the research participants most effectively, the results commentary is supported by verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts to illustrate each key finding. Achieving a full understanding of the lived experiences of African-American males in the SES in this study has involved synthesizing various pieces of information provided at various points in the interviews, and identifying the various influences and determinants of their experiences as well as other factors relevant to the research questions. The main themes of the analysis correspond to the following research questions:

1. How do African-American male executives understand their lived experiences in reaching the federal Senior Executive Service?

    d) What are the experiences which shape the achievements of African-American men in the Senior Executive Service?

    e) What strategies do African-American men believe they used to reach the senior executive service?

f) What meanings do African-American male executives make of their

achievements in the SES?

In Chapter Four, the results were presented by themes corresponding to the

experiences that have shaped the achievements of participants in the SES; factors

influencing the choice to seek federal employment; federal employment history; factors

contributing to the attainment of SES status; deliberate strategies and activities used to

reach the SES and stay relevant in their roles; personal skills, values and attributes

contributing to their achievement of SES positions; the ways they have overcome barriers

to career progression that relate to being African-American; and what it means to the

participants to be an African-American male in the SES. Verbatim narratives from the

interviews were included to illustrate the findings with regard to each of the themes.

Inclusion of these narratives is very important as pre-conceived opinions are likely to

differ between researchers and may influence the ways that research data is interpreted.

Allowing the participants' own voices to be heard through the verbatim quotes helps

increase the validity of the findings and enables readers to evaluate and verify the

interpretations and conclusions of the researcher. It is also the most effective way of

conveying lived experiences from the perspective of the individuals involved, while

attributing meaning to these through a systematic analysis and interpretation process. The

purpose of the present chapter is to discuss the meaning and significance of the research

findings.

The discussion is arranged by themes that were generated from the data analysis.

In identifying relevant themes for this purpose, the types of factors relevant to success in

any work environment were considered critical points of discussion, as well as contextual

information based on statistical evidence relating to the representation of African-American males in the SES. Key factors identified from the research data that were pivotal in making inferences about perceived success and experiences in the SES included skills, personal development, values, overcoming barriers and reasons for the choice of federal agencies as the research participants' career destinations. Articulation of the apparent relationships and linkages between these factors and the experiences of African-Americans in the SES enabled comparison of these real-life experiences with the pre-conceived opinions of the researcher. Current statistics regarding employment in SES indicate that most minority groups are underrepresented in this group. Hence, it is important to identify the likely causes of underrepresentation through exploration of the lived experiences of minority groups. Their personal experiences and perceptions are very important in the process of establishing the human, organizational and social factors that have contributed to this underrepresentation, as well as the factors instrumental in the success of particular members of this group in achieving SES status.

The discussion chapter links the research findings with contextual and background information derived from the review of literature and analysis of statistical data on the representation of minority groups in federal employment and in the SES. The objective is to provide insights into the reasons for underrepresentation of African-American males in the SES based on discussion of the lived experiences of the few African-American males who have succeeded in achieving SES positions. The chapter will enhance understanding of the findings presented in Chapter Four, by providing linkages between the various forms of information that were generated and utilized during the study and drawing conclusions from these. The discussion will also address

the specific research questions relating to the participants' perceived meanings of their SES achievements, the specific strategies they used to achieve their positions and the experiences that shaped these achievements.

Review of Results and Findings

Experiences that Shape Achievements of African-American Men in SES

The research findings clearly highlighted the important role of other people in influencing the career progression of each of the research participants and the ways that these influences can be either negative or positive. In particular, this study provides evidence in support for the argument of Catalyst (2004) that preconceptions and stereotypes are major hindrances to career advancement among minorities. Managers may view minorities as lacking the necessary skills to fully exercise their mandate (James, 2014). The participants in this study stressed at many different points in the interviews the importance of other people in the work setting to their own career progression and success in their current role. Overcoming inaccurate pre-conceptions and changing negative stereotypes, are critical within any workplace to promote positive experiences and career progression of minority groups. To an extent, this can be achieved by demonstrating credentials for a role: in this study, all participants were highly qualified for their positions with bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees, and they highlighted the importance of education and qualifications in providing them with credibility.

Once in their SES roles, the participants' reported continuing impacts of negative stereotypes on their abilities to fulfill their responsibilities. SES roles involve high-level decision-making, and for some of the participants this was seen as one of the major

challenges of their jobs. The high stakes nature of decision-making in the SES contributes to the magnitude of this challenge. Racial stereotypes and the resulting lack of respects and antagonism between co-workers can have a negative impact on decision-making abilities and outcomes as highlighted by James (2014). Perceptions of African-American culture being more demonstrative in terms of passion, use of gestures and body movement can be utilized for career development and inclusion of more African-Americans in decision-making positions in SES (White, 2009). However, stereotypes can hinder leadership positions from being offered to African-American males, and the few that are in those positions experience a major challenge in exhibiting their decision making abilities.

Personal recognition was mentioned as one of the rewards for various achievements in the SES, reflecting some of the participants' reported aspirations at the time they entered federal service. In addition, it was important to many of the participants to serve as role models to other African-American men, with their achievement of SES positions setting a standard for others to follow. However, these individuals clearly indicated that achieving their position and being perceived as an African-American role model is a process that involves performance beyond what would normally be expected. This experience of working beyond usual limits is perceived by many of the participants as a major contributor to their success. However, it is important to distinguish here between the extra efforts required of any individual, whether African-American or white, to attain the higher ranks of an organization, and the extra efforts over and above this that African-Americans are required to make. Virtually all of the participants stressed that these were necessary to help overcome negative stereotypes and preconceptions in order

to secure careers opportunities or validate the right to be in a role they had already earned.

The participants cited organizational as well as individual-level barriers as hindrances to career progression and goals. A perceived lack of meritocracy in promotion procedures as well as recruitment-related barriers in agencies were included among various negative experiences of the participants journey's to success in the SES. Although the literature stresses the importance of education in career progression (e.g. Erdreich, 1996), the findings of the present study indicate that a lack of managerial and organizational commitment to diversity may hinder career progression even among highly qualified candidates. Although all of the well-educated participants in this sample eventually achieved SES positions, most had also encountered organizational barriers that delayed or hindered this success, and their accounts of unfair or discriminatory practice suggest that other suitably qualified African-American males may have been less fortunate in overcoming these barriers. Organizational commitment starts from the formulation by the Federal Government of policies and guidelines that promote the inclusion of minority groups. However, the existence of a policy does not guarantee its enforcement. Federal agencies must formulate policies that adhere to the government policy recommendations with a strict requirement for compliance by management, and adherence to such policies should be investigated through regular checks at all levels and areas of government (Yoder, 2012). Without enforcement, the behaviors and practices of managers in individual areas might prevent the career progression of certain groups.

An aspect of these participants' SES experiences that emerged as being highly important to them is the various ways in which their roles enable them to serve or support

others. Several emphasized that in their daily work they strive to enhance the skills of their colleagues and make sure they develop in their careers. They further indicated that they conceptualize their SES roles largely in terms of service to colleagues, subordinates, and the community at large. These attitudes are likely to be highly instrumental in ensuring the career progression of new staff members and can help inspire individuals wishing to join the SES from minority groups.

The evidence from the literature (e.g. Whitherspoon, 2009) as well as the present study is that individuals from minority groups often need to work harder than their Caucasian counterparts to acquire competencies and secure promotion opportunities. The "work hard to be better" attitude is widespread in many workplaces but the outcomes may vary between ethnic groups, with some obtaining promotion more easily than their minority counterparts as a result of management stereotypes and organizational forms of discrimination. These might force individuals from minority groups to put in extra efforts to achieve career progression. Since the research results indicate that African American members of the SES place a high emphasis on service to fellow employees and the community at large in their work, one way that agency managers might better acknowledge these efforts would be to consider this type of service when considering individuals for promotion to higher ranks.

According to Stark (2009), a deep entrenchment of self-doubt can develop among minority groups as a result of the lack of comprehensive strategies for career progression and the perceived lack of equality in recruitment to the SES. When the number of individuals from minority groups is negligible this can act as a deterrent to individuals from these groups, who may lack self-confidence in their own ability to achieve these

ranks. The desire to serve and support others exhibited by the research participants indicates that they may play an important role in encouraging and assisting fellow African-Americans to pursue SES positions. The lack of initiatives to monitor career progression among employees of all ethnic groups not only reinforces the current under-representation of African-Americans in SES but also prevents this trickle-down effect whereby successful individuals reach out and provide guidance and support to others, eventually increasing the representation of members of their own ethnic group in senior government roles.

Strategies that African-Americans Believe they Used to Reach SES

The participants identified various strategies that they had used to reach the SES positions they currently hold. The research findings indicate that around half of the participants had entered federal agency employment almost due to chance or to particualar circumstances, such as a history of family employment in this sector or because federal agencies were the most appropriate choice at the time they were looking for a job. This indicates that the available opportunities may compel an individual to pursue a career in a certain organization that might not be their preferred choice an may result in some African-Americans being employed in types of organizations that they perceive as not so favorable for them. However, this also enables individuals to take advantage of career opportunities that they may not have previously envisaged or been aware of. A minority of three of the ten participants in this study indicated that their entry into SES had been inspired by higher-level factors such as being role models and serving the government. These participants had sought positions in federal government with the perception that SES would match their career aspirations, but these were less commonly

cited reasons for entering federal employment, perhaps because of awareness that very few African-Americans attain SES positions. Kohli et al. (2011) reported, for example, that only 5.3% of SES roles are occupied by African-American males. Despite workplace diversity initiatives, the percentage of senior executive service positions occupied by this group has not changed significantly over time, and these jobs may only attract a minority of African-Americans for the purpose of fulfilling career goals or being a role model.

Among these research participants who had been successful in achieving the ranks of the SES, more than half highlighted the importance of training, education, and ongoing learning as crucial in preparing them for their positions as well as ensuring that they remained relevant in these roles. Acquiring knowledge and skills through training and formal education was seen as very important, particularly due to the awareness that competition from their Caucasian counterparts would be very high. All the participants in this research had bachelors, masters, or doctorate degrees, and these were likely to have been instrumental in enabling them to obtain senior level positions due to the competitiveness for entry to these jobs. Mental preparation was also seen as important as African-American males to cope with the risk of discrimination and to overcome various barriers in their career progression. Continued capacity development was regarded as important for ascending to the SES and staying relevant in current roles. It is expected that when any graduate is employed with little or no experience, they should develop themselves in the posts they hold to enhance competitiveness (Kohli et al., 2011), regardless of their social group. For members of minority groups facing other barriers to

progression, it is likely that extra efforts may be necessary to ensure continued skills and knowledge development.

Two participants in the research stressed the value of taking extended periods away from work to obtain more training and education relevant to their SES position. This may reflect the perception that highly qualified and learned individuals are more likely to secure leadership positions in federal agencies. However, it is clear that African-Americans and whites with similar qualifications and level of experience do not have the same chance of becoming leaders in SES. If this was the case, the percentage of African-Americans in SES would not be 5.3%. This relates instead to poor career advancement prospects as discussed by Carton and Rosette (2011). It may be particularly important for African-American males to spend longer periods obtaining more training and education to enhance their prospects of obtaining leadership positions.

Discrimination in the evaluation of candidates for promotion is also a barrier to the upward mobility of African-American males in the SES especially in relation to recognition based processing. Evaluation of leadership capabilities may be limited to or biased towards particular traits or behaviors not commonly exhibited by African-American males and therefore eliminating them. This relates to the policies that have been introduced by federal government providing guidance on how to be promoted to leadership positions. Carton and Rosette (2011) indicated that stereotyping of employees according to their race, level of education or training may hinder the achievement of diversity in workplaces, as many suitably qualified individuals will be ruled out as a result. This stereotyping may be the reason that many African-Americans males in the SES seek additional education and training to advance their knowledge, in order to gain a

competitive advantage over other ethnic counterparts in obtaining SES posts or other

leadership positions. The research findings support this argument, as participants

indicated that continued education gives them legitimacy in their roles and indicates that

they are well prepared for their responsibilities.

Another important strategy for these research participants, both in achieving SES

positions and dealing with the day-to-day responsibilities of their roles, was obtaining the

advice of other people, both within and outside the workplace. Having someone outside

work to talk to was emphasized as a way of obtaining objective advice: three out of ten

participants indicated that they rely critically on family members in discussing work-

related matters and seeking their advice. This is evidence of the multiple work-related

issues that are common to African-American males in the SES. Issues of promotion,

selection of the right career, and leadership opportunities need discussion not only with

colleagues but with family members who care most about their well-being. Obtaining

advice on training and development programs is particularly important since ethnic

minorities are reported to place high value on professional development and career

building (Simard, 2009; Witherspoon, 2009). The need to seek advice from colleagues

and family members in this area may reflect the failure of public service managers to

introduce professional development programs for progression to the SES that are targeted

at the needs of all ethnic groups. As a result, valuable talents in the workforce may be

under-utilized, and members of minority groups may have to work extra hard to earn

senior positions. Some are assisted in this process by their own personal skills and

attributes. The research findings indicate that communications skills, ability to engage

with people and other interpersonal abilities are important skills that have helped African-

American males advance in their SES careers. The introduction of initiatives focused on improving these personal attributes and communication skills of African-American males may therefore help in the development of effective leaders from that group, enhance the overall performance of African-American males in terms of career progression and encourage other members of this group to join the SES.

Currently, low progression rates of African-Americans in the SES, despite similar levels of qualifications between this group and their white counterparts, indicates that there is a certain level of discrimination in selecting individuals to fill leadership positions. Even though SES requires individuals of the right management cadre and appropriate competencies (GAO, 2005), the statistics suggest that the policies are not operating to achieve this fairly. The reported difficulties experienced by African-American males in their SES progression and the low representation of this group in the SES indicates that the workplace diversity policies are not being followed to the letter. The conditions and attitudes of American society should be reflected better in federal agencies, especially in this 21st century in which diversity and an all-inclusive workforce are inevitable (Simard, 2009). The glass ceiling can be overcome in federal agencies by offering fair opportunities for professional development to all individuals and selecting the best candidates for promotion regardless of their race. This will ensure optimal utilization of valuable talents that are curently being suppressed by discrimination.

Meanings Made from Achievements of African–American Men in SES

The African-Americans participants in this research place various meanings on their achievements in the SES. Many of these are derived from specific experiences in the agencies in which they are operating and the kinds of treatment they receive. Examples of

discriminatory behavior were highlighted by a number of participants who expressed high levels of concern arising from the various misconceptions and stereotypical views they had encountered. The findings illustrate ways in which African-Americans experience various social and human barriers to achieving their full career potential in federal organizations. Only 5.3% of SES employees are African-American males, a statistic that is highly significant in relation to social equity.

In describing the meanings they derived from their achievements, a number of participants stressed their responsibility for driving the organization forward in line with leadership requirements. Indeed, half of the participants defined their SES role as strategically guiding the organization into the future. It is from an understanding of this role that they made strategic plans in order to make their mark as the minority group in SES (Butts, 2012), and this understanding was used to guide their various achievements in SES. Driving the organization forward is a responsibility expected of every leader regardless of their race. Being proactive, decisive and taking responsibility for transforming the organization over time are the strategic roles of any leader. However, since most of their subordinates are white, the African-American leaders may be subject to a lot of negative criticism that can hinder them from effectively executing their mandate.

Despite these challenges, the participants themselves were demonstrating a transformational approach to leadership. Transformational leadership is regarded as most applicable to modern organizations as it allows every person to air their views for the common good. Participants in this research indicated that they were driving their organizations forward in line with leadership requirements and responsibilities, and that

including the opinions of others was very instrumental in enabling them to achieve

success in their positions. Strategically guiding the organization into the future requires

inclusion of others in decision-making decisions and the participants indicated that they

were effectively achieving this.

Having successfully achieved SES positions in spite of all the organizational and

individual-level challenges they faced, all the participants in the research placed great

importance on being positive role models for other African-American males, to help

enable members of this community to compete with other groups and realize their

potential of gaining equality in federal employment and, for some, securing employment

in the SES. Based on their own experience and lessons learned, current African-American

males in SES mentor aspiring individuals, offering advice and guidance to fellow

African-Americans who wish to become leaders in federal agencies. As a result of their

mentoring, the strategies used by African-Americans to obtain senior federal positions

may change over time, resulting in a higher percentage of these positions being held by

African-Americans. For those already in SES posts who mentor fellow African-American

males to take up leadership positions in SES, the success rates of those that they mentor

in reaching SES will be an important indicator of their own effectiveness as

organizational leaders, and is likely to provide them with satisfaction and a sense of

achievement.

According to the research findings, the key advice offered in mentorship is

presenting the right image, communicating effectively, and adequately preparing oneself

to take up a leadership position in the SES. Presentation of the right image is seen by the

participants as pivotal to the ability of African-American males to ascend in the federal

service. Due to prevailing misconceptions and stereotypes, an African-American needs to present a different image from what is expected of them by other races and ensure that they perform beyond what is expected of them, in order that managers of different races will change their negative perceptions towards African-American males. Continued development through training and education while working will be important in providing individuals with the right skills and abilities to achieve this. Additional education and training are important to meet the challenges of current forms of public governance that require employees to have advanced skills and broader perspectives (Garey, 2011). However, it is notable that many institutions that were established for the development of leadership skills do not tailor their offerings to the leadership and management skills required in federal agencies, nor do they focus on promoting equal representation. To drive federal agenicies forward and improve service effectiveness, suitably qualified people are required in senior positions. However, with only 5.3% representation of African–Americans in SES and various hurdles to be faced when ascending to top positions, many individuals in this social group will be discouraged from pursuing promotion to SES (Simard, 2009). Mentoring of these individuals can help overcome this resistance, but the full solution also requires strict compliance with federal diversity policies.

Being outstanding for something outside their job description and being supportive to others were among the main methods that participants reported using to make themselves invaluable to federal agency managers. Personal recognition for various achievements as well as being a positive role model for other African-American males formed an integral part of the participants' aspirations that were achieved in federal

service. This indicates that some of the way that the research participants conceptualized their own greatest achievements in federal service were not necessarily recognized formally by their managers. Through the development of federal-level initiatives to train public sector leaders in strategies for the improved incorporation of minority groups in employment, achievements by African-Americans can be properly recognized and rewarded thereby motivating more people in minority groups to join the SES. These initiatives might be based on training and awareness raising about diversity policies and regulations and the importance of compliance, and could be instrumental in improving social equity in government agencies.

To date, various states have initiated projects of this nature but strict enforcement of the regulations is lacking. A diverse workplace ensures that the most qualified candidate is chosen for a leadership position regardless of their social status. Moreover, in measuring their success, African-Americans males in SES should be evaluated on the same scale as their Caucasian counterparts to enhance equality and motivation of the workforce. In this way, the achievements of African-American males in SES can be better highlighted and acknowledged by managers, thereby inspiring other due to evidence from a third party. Formal recognition and reward for best performing officers of all races in the SES will help enable realization of the agency's diversity efforts and positive representation of the organizational image. This will help change various negative perceptions and misconceptions about African-American males and their performance in federal agencies. Nationwide recognition of various achievements of African-American males will promote feelings of success and inspire others to join SES. Recognition of the efforts of various individuals and promotion according to merit rather

than misconceptions and stereotypes will encourage more African-American males to seek employment in SES and work hard to gain leadership positions. On the other hand, when only the individuals themselves and not their managers recognize their achievements, workplace diversity initiatives are likely to be ineffective. Most of the participants in this study did not report receiving credit from their seniors or colleagues from other races for their achievements. This means that African-Americans often struggle for their own success with minimal support from the agency they are working for. This may discourage other African-Americans who want to join SES.

Theoretical Implication and Practice

Research on racial equality in public service has identified the existence of various stereotypes and misconceptions, which are reportedly the greatest hindrances to the success of minority groups in the SES. This study has added to the existing body of knowledge information regarding the lived experiences of African-American males in the SES. It provides greater insights into how African-Americans in SES view their own achievements and the support obtained from various organizations and individuals. A reported lack of support from managers, colleagues, and federal agencies has resulted in low levels of interest in working in federal agencies among African-Americans (Carton & Rosette, 2011), and this study expands on understanding of this issue by exploring in details the actual experiences of African-Americans who have ascended to SES despite the challenges they have faced. The study also provides a clearer understanding of how African-American males in SES actually achieved their positions, for example the ways in which they were able to change or overcome negative perceptions and the skills and personal attributes that they were able to draw on in their career progression. These

insights provide valuable information that will be critical in changing perceptions of African-Americans and designing improved pathways of career success for this group.

The study is also of wider theoretical importance in understanding how the glass ceiling has affected workplace diversity in federal agencies. The social composition of American society is very diverse and incorporation of all social groups in federal agencies is therefore important to help promote racial cohesion and peaceful co-existence. Various factors have been identified that hinder African-American males' progression in SES, with the major barrier being a lack of training programs in the leadership dynamics of SES. Most leadership training programs are not tailored to SES leadership; as a result, some individuals aspiring to SES posts tend to take time out of employment to further their education and delay advancing their careers in federal agencies as a result. They often do so at their own expense or that of their family members, with little support being available from employers.

This study offers a chance to understand how mentorship can be used to inspire African-Americans to join SES. Several of the participants had experienced mentorship or more informal methods of seeking guidance and advice from others, and saw this as highly valuable in contributing to their career progression and ability to perform effectively in their SES positions. In turn, they acknowledged that mentoring other aspiring African-Americans is an important personality responsibility.

This phenomenological research focused on the lived experiences of African–American males in SES and how pathways to success are defined and conceived by them. Insights into perceived methods used to get into SES offer policy makers and researchers a chance to understand various strategies that can be used to boost career interest in SES

among African-Americans. For example, the research indicates that these research participants measure their own achievements in SES in ways including personal mentorship of others and offering guidance and support to the agencies they are heading through transformational leadership. This information is useful in highlighting the types of incentives that can be used to motivate African-American males in SES and promote their further success, for example by introducing formal mentorship programs. These may result in an increase in numbers of African-Americans who are interested in joining the SES and thus compel federal agencies to observe formal policies regarding equal employment opportunities at this level.

Recognition of efforts by senior managers is important as it motivates workers. In the study, there was little information about any recognition by an outside party. This makes it important for researchers and federal agencies to find ways of improving motivation schemes to encourage more African-American males into the SES. This study offers theoretical insights into various leadership paradigms and social equity theories regarding the representation of minority groups in SES. Federal agencies are directly in touch with lawmakers and are expected to be compliant with federal policies. However, the results of this study indicated that agencies are not uniformly upholding equality policies and reflects the ways in diversity in federal agencies has been relegated.

Limitations of the Study

There are various limitations to this phenomenological study, including the relatively small sample of 15 participants. A wider variety of insights might have been obtained from a larger sample. In relation to this, it must be acknowledged that the overall findings may be somewhat biased since 15 people limits the diversity of

responses and may skew the overall findings. However, the researcher attempted to minimize the likelihood of bias and maximize the diversity of responses by including SES participants from 11 departments and federal agencies. There are likely to be differences between departments and agencies in terms of methods of operations and compliance with diversity policies and regulations. The use of open-ended questions may increase redundancy with the same information being repeated by participants during their interviews, resulting in some time being wasted when coding the data. The researcher attempted to avoid this by using a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure that relevant information was collected, and steering the interviewees away from repetitive responses.

Although secondary statistical data were reviewed in the literature review to provide background information for use in interpreting the data, this is less directly relevant to the lived experiences of individuals. Hence, some of the statistics reviewed were discarded as being of little relevance to the study. Other statistical information was used to link lived experiences with current employment trends. These include, for example, how the participants have progressed from the positions they held at the time of recruitment, as well as current statistics on leadership positions and training programs in federal agencies. These provide useful contextual information for interpreting the lived experiences and pathways of success of African-American males in the SES.

In investigating the different perceptions of African-Americans who have succeeded in attaining SES positions, it is also important to explore motivational strategies provided by federal agencies and whether these are offered equally to male workers of all races. The study findings indicate that the research participants mainly

define their own successes in terms of mentoring others and leading their organizations,

and this may suggest that managers and departmental heads do not offer rewards or

discriminate in the way that these are provided. This might not necessarily be true, but no

information is available from the research data on the use of motivational strategies by

federal governments. It is possible that some information may have been concealed by

the participants due to the contractual terms of employment they signed before being

officially hired into federal agencies. This is a limitation in the present study as

insufficient information was available to provide a comprehensive understanding of how

agencies acknowledge and reward their SES officials.

Moreover, the study provides a lot of information regarding public service

without much historical background about how social equity policies have changed over

time in federal agencies. Efforts by the federal government to extend their campaign for

equality to federal agencies is important information and must be highlighted as one of

the potential solutions to improved social equity in these organizations. It was intended to

highlight barriers to expansion of such drives to government agencies, with more insights

being sought from the participants. In addition, further insights into federal government

training programs on leadership and what these focus on is important to shed more light

on the inadequacies of current policies on leadership training in the USA. Finally, the

study did not investigate whether African-Americans males are currently applying for

leadership positions in the federal organizations they work for. The low percentage of

African-Americans males in SES leadership may reflect low numbers of African-

American men applying for these positions rather than any discriminatory practices. If

this is the case, however, it remains important to understand the reasons why African-

American males are not applying for SES positions and whether organizational or individual-level barriers discourage them from doing so.

Future Research

The lived experiences of African-Americans in SES as reported in this study indicate that most of their achievements derived from personal efforts. Future studies should investigate various organizational strategies for motivation in SES and whether African-American males are included in those schemes. Inter-organizational working between different races and the impact of those relationships on the career progression of African-Americans should be investigated. These types of research would offer further insights into why diversity has not yet taken root in federal agencies. Human, social, and organizational factors that help propel individuals to leadership positions are very important. Investigating the factors that deter African-Americans from applying to SES positions will be instrumental in ensuring that all minority groups are better represented in the SES. In addition, future studies should focus on the lived experiences of other minority groups in order to compare the determinants of success in SES. Discrimination in places of work must be investigated as this might help explain why individuals from minority groups generally struggle to achieve career progression to the SES.

Conclusion

From the study findings, it is evident that most African-American males have struggled in various ways to achieve and succeed in their SES positions. This appears to be due to a lack of organizational support in their paths to success, as well as the negative impact of stereotypes and misconceptions relating to African-American men. Despite this, the research participants in this study have successfully overcome many challenges

and have been able to draw on personal strengths and skills as well as specific strategies, to achieve their success. The interview data suggest that, as a result, they are delivering high levels of value to their respective organizations as well as representing positive role models to other African-American males.

It is important to highlight these successes since any perception that individuals from minority groups struggle to achieve their career objectives in SES is likely to discourage individuals from the same groups from applying to the SES. Greater formal acknowledgement of the achievements of African-American males in SES, for example through mentorship, effective communication, service to community and colleagues, and taking responsibility and guiding the organization to success, is an important aspect of this. The study indicates that, at present, African-American males in the SES recognize their own personal achievements but agency managers do not often recognize these formally.

Pathways to success for African-Americans often involve enrolling in continued education and training before and during their service in SES, and indeed most of the research participants indicated that they had prepared for their SES positions through training and professional education. Some had entered SES not as a deliberate career strategy but due to a range of reasons such as a family background in government service or because suitable vacancies were available at the time they were looking for jobs. This implies that lived experiences, including career progression, depend on multiple personal and organizational factors, which must be taken into account when interpreting phenomenological data of the type collected in this study. Positive lived experiences of African-American males are likely to be pivotal in creating interest among other African-

Americans to join SES, but if these experiences are negative then African-American males will be less interested. This study indicates that, among this sample of African-American males in the SES, at least some negative experiences have influenced their career paths and continue to have an impact on their current roles. Despite the existence of various equality policies in federal agencies, the overall number of African-American males as a proportion of the federal workforce remains below 10% with high numbers of qualified individuals shunning federal service in favor of organizations that uphold equality and offer support for career progression.

Summary

Organizational barriers hinder African-American males from acquiring top leadership positions in the SES, and the findings of this study indicate that the research participants in SES leadership roles were spending long periods in continued education and training to satisfy job requirements and keep themselves relevant in their roles. A lack of career progression programs and the need to develop leadership skills emerged as potential barriers to success, as the research participants emphasized their efforts in enhancing their skills and identified a lack of customized leadership training programs in federal agencies. A lack of commitment to diversity by the management of federal agencies had also limited their opportunities for securing leadership positions in the past. The findings of this phenomenological study highlight various organizational barriers to the success of African-Americans in federal service and demonstrate that most of the achievements of the participants were due to their own personal efforts. More research should be conducted into various paradigms of federal service and how agencies are currently working towards ensuring diversity is upheld. By identifying the various

benefits that can accrue to federal systems from an all-inclusive workforce, this may help drive policy change and improved compliance with diversity initiatives, particularly in relation to the SES. Previous research on the phenomenological examination of African-American in the SES is limited and this study makes an important contribution to understanding the lived experiences of this group.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1: SES DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS

Table 1

Senior Executive Service (SES) Appointments

Appointment	Count	Percent
Unspecified	10	0.12
Career (SES permanent)	7,199	89.94
Non-career (SES permanent)	675	8.43
Limited term (SES non-permanent)	117	1.46
Limited Emergency (SES non-permanent)	3	0.04
ALL	**8, 004**	**100.00**

Source: United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) (2013). 2012 Senior Executive Service report. Retrieved 3rd December 2014, from https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/federal-employment-reports/reports-publications/ses-summary-2012.pdf

Table 1 presents the number and percentages of SES employees in Fiscal year 2012 categorized in relation to the type of appointment. More than 89% of the appointments are career appointments.

Table 2

Senior Executive Service (SES) Appointment Trends

Appointment	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
Unspecified	115	100	89	96	10
Career (SES permanent	6, 853	6, 968	6, 999	7, 126	7, 199
Non-career (SES permanent)	631	501	672	669	675
Limited Term (SES Non-permanent)	132	501	672	669	675
Limited Emergency (SES Non-permanent)	5	6	1	5	3
ALL	**7, 736**	**7, 712**	**7, 905**	**8, 022**	**8, 004**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 2 presents the number of SES employees for the last five fiscal years (FY 2008-FY 2012) categorized by type of employment. The data focus on pay plan ES.
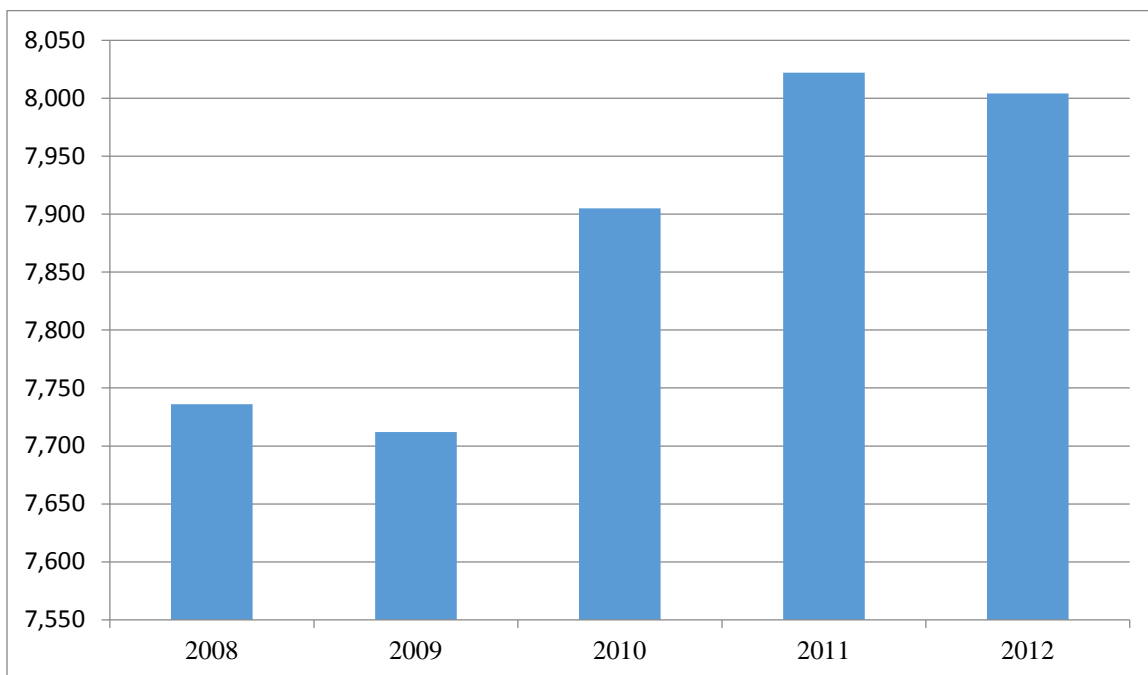
Figure 1: Graphical representation of SES appointment trends.

Figure 1 presents the total number of SES employees in the pay plan ES from the year 2008 to 2012. It is evident that the number increased significantly from 2008 to 2011 but slightly declined in 2012.

Table 3

Senior Executive Service (SES) Agency

Agency	Count	Percent
Department of Education	78	0.97
Department of Housing and Development	104	1.30
Department of Labor	177	2.21
Department of the Air Force	181	2.26
Department of State	189	2.36
Department of Transportation	231	2.89
Department of the Army	266	3.32
Department of the Interior	270	3.37
Department of the Navy	318	3.97
Department of Agriculture	344	4.30
Department of Commerce	372	4.65
Department of Veterans Affairs	387	4.84
Department of Health and Human Services	460	5.75
Department of Energy	471	5.88
Department of Defense	478	5.97
Department of the Treasury	493	6.16
Department of Homeland Security	614	7.67
Department of Justice	749	9.36
All Other Agencies	1,822	22.76
ALL	**8,004**	**100.00**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 3 indicates the number and percentage of SES employees categorized by agency for Cabinet level agencies in 2012. The second last category, "ALL OTHER AGENCIES" highlights non-cabinet level agencies. It is important to note that over three quarters of the SES is made up of Cabinet level agencies.

Table 4

SES Agency Trends

Agency	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
Department of Education	90	79	79	88	78
Department of Housing and Development	107	99	112	105	104
Department of Labor	187	180	171	166	177
Department of the Air Force	161	164	195	190	181
Department of State	168	151	173	184	189
Department of Transportation	219	210	214	213	231
Department of the Army	271	276	284	288	266
Department of the Interior	261	265	267	274	270
Department of the Navy	335	326	350	331	318
Department of Agriculture	345	347	364	350	344
Department of Commerce	373	383	372	371	372
Department of Veterans Affairs	318	323	338	373	387
Department of Health and Human Services	428	416	454	439	460
Department of Energy	487	468	454	453	471
Department of Defense	509	502	514	504	478
Department of the Treasury	440	466	466	484	493
Department of Homeland Security	491	503	513	579	614
Department of Justice	727	747	750	762	749
All Other Agencies	1,819	1,807	1,835	1,835	1,822
ALL	**7,736**	**7,712**	**7,905**	**8,022**	**8,004**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 4 indicates the number of SES employees by agency in a period of five
years (2008-2012). The table highlights number of employees in all the Cabinet level
agencies and non-Cabinet level agencies.

Table 5

SES Age Trends

Fiscal Year	Average Age	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile
2008	53.4	48.6	53.8	58.7
2009	53.8	48.9	54.2	59.0
2010	54.0	49.0	54.3	59.2
2011	54.1	49.1	54.3	59.2
2012	54.2	49.3	54.3	59.3

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 5 highlights the age distribution among SES employees for a period of the last five years. In 2012, at the 25th percentile, 25% of the employees were younger than 49.3. The median is the 50th percentile. In 2012, 50% of the employees were aged 49.3 and below. At the 75th percentile, 75% of the employees were younger than 59.3.
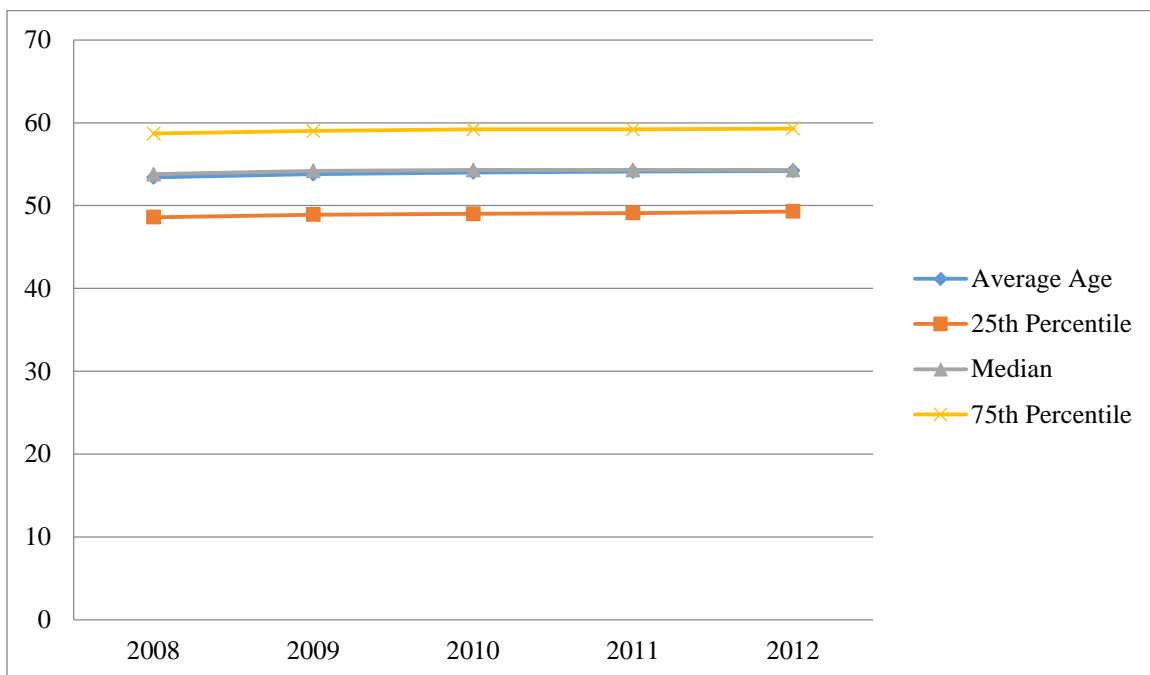
Figure 2: Graphical representation of SES age trends. Source: OPM (2013).

Figure 2 indicates that age statistics have been gradually increasing over the last

five years.

Table 6

SES by Gender

Gender	Count	Percent
Female	2, 678	33.46
Male	5, 326	66.54
All	8,004	100.00

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 6 indicates the number and percentage of SES employees under the ES pay plan, by gender. Most of the employees (66%) are male.

Table 7

SES Gender Trends

Fiscal Year	Female	Male	All
2008	2,243	5,493	7,736
2009	2,373	5,339	7,712
2010	2,480	5,425	7,905
2011	2,593	5,429	8,022
2012	2,678	5,326	8,004

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 7 presents the number of SES employees for the last five years, by gender. It is evident that the number of females has been increasing over the years while that of males has been fluctuating over the years.
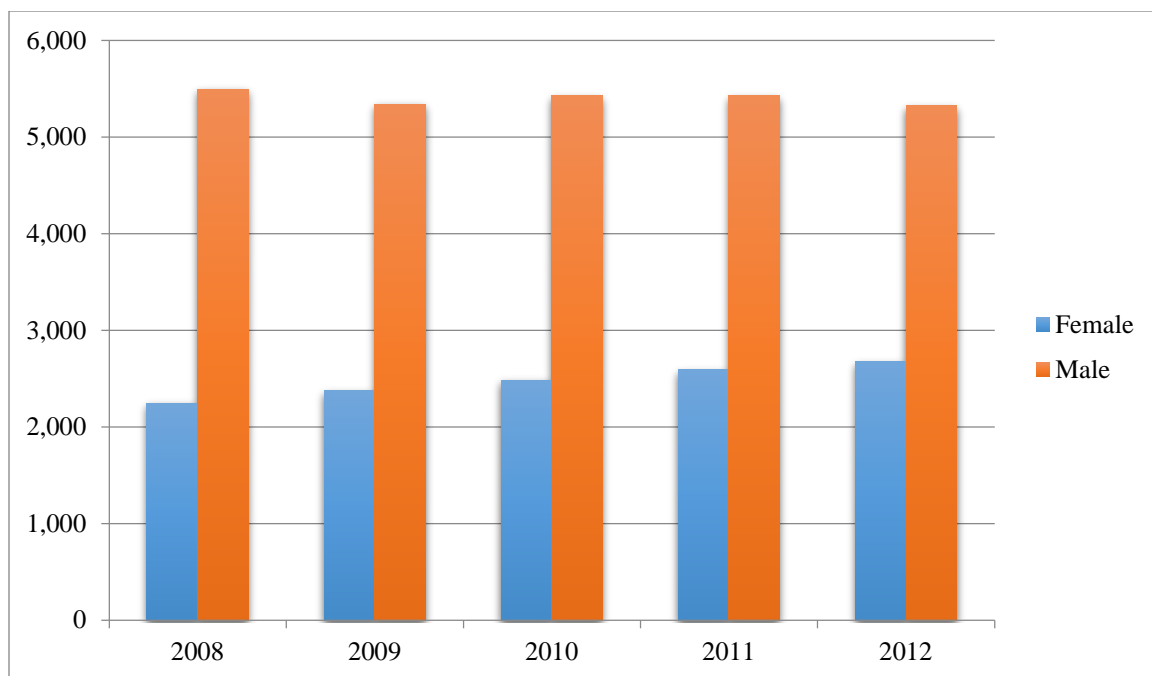
Figure 3: SES gender trends. Source: OPM (2013).

Figure 3, is a graphical representation of the information presented in Table 7.

Table 8

SES by Ethnicity and Race

Ethnicity and Race	Count	Percent
Unspecified	3	0.04
Not Hispanic/Latino & American Indian/Alaska Native	91	1.14
Not Hispanic/Latino & Asian	251	3.14
Not Hispanic/Latino & Black/African American	829	10.36
Not Hispanic/Latino & Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	12	0.15
Not Hispanic/Latino & White	6,444	80.51
Not Hispanic/Latino & of More than One Race	46	0.57
Hispanic/Latino	254	3.17
Hispanic/Latino & American Indian/Alaska Native	1	0.01
Hispanic/Latino & Asian	1	0.01
Hispanic/Latino & Black/African American	3	0.04
Hispanic/Latino & Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0.01
Hispanic/Latino & White	64	0.80
Hispanic/Latino & of More than One Race	4	0.05
All	**8,004**	**100.00**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 8 indicates the number and percentage of SES employees by ethnicity and race for the year 2012. It is evident that White is the predominant race in the SES. The presented data is restricted to employees in pay plan ES.

Table 9

SES Ethnicity and Race Trends

Ethnicity and Race	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
Unspecified	9	22	14	5	3
Not Hispanic/Latino & American Indian/Alaska Native	88	87	93	90	91
Not Hispanic/Latino & Asian	180	210	229	242	251
Not Hispanic/Latino & Black/African American	625	687	752	794	829
Not Hispanic/Latino & Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	5	7	10	12
Not Hispanic/Latino & White	6,530	6,386	6,477	6,515	6,444
Not Hispanic/Latino & of More than One Race	18	23	32	39	46
Hispanic/Latino	255	235	242	261	254
Hispanic/Latino & American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1	1	1	1
Hispanic/Latino & Asian	-	1	1	-	1
Hispanic/Latino & Black/African American	3	5	3	4	3
Hispanic/Latino & Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	1	1	1	1
Hispanic/Latino & White	22	43	47	56	64
Hispanic/Latino & of More than One Race	1	6	6	4	4
All	**7,736**	**7,712**	**7,905**	**8,022**	**8,004**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 9 indicates the differences in number of SES employees by ethnicity and race over a period of five fiscal years. It is evident that the number of employees from some ethnicities and races has not changed much over the period.

Table 10

SES Education

Education	Count	Percent
No High School Degree	6	0.07
High School Degree	277	3.46
Some College	224	2.80
Technical Training	2	0.02
Associates Degree	39	0.49
College Degree	1,895	23.68
Advanced Degree	5, 556	69.42
Unknown or Unspecified	5	0.06
ALL	**8,004**	**100.00**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 10 presents the number and percentage of SES employees in 2012, by their education level. However, the data may not be a factual representation of educational attainment of the SES workforce since education data are only recorded during hiring and employees' initiative thereafter.

Table 11

SES Education Trends

Education	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
No High School Degree	4	3	4	5	6
High School Degree	300	272	285	288	277
Some College	197	204	216	236	224
Technical Training	4	4	4	5	2
Associates Degree	38	39	40	36	39
College Degree	1,908	1,856	1,946	1,885	1,895
Advanced Degree	5,269	5,327	5,400	5,561	5,556
Unknown or Unspecified	16	7	10	6	5
ALL	**7,736**	**7,712**	**7,905**	**8,022**	**8,004**

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 11 presents number and percentage of SES employees by education for a five year period FY2008 to FY2012. The data are restricted to SES employees under pay plan ES.

Table 12

SES Length of Service (LOS) Trends

Fiscal Year	Average LOS	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile
2008	22.7	15.8	24.3	30.8
2009	22.8	15.5	24.5	31.2
2010	22.3	13.7	24.0	31.2
2011	22.0	13.0	23.8	30.9
2012	22.0	12.9	23.6	30.4

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 12 presents the LOS distribution of SES employees for a five-year period, FY2008 - FY2012. The LOS is based on all prior federal service rather than prior service in the SES. In 2012, at the 25th percentile, 25% of the employees had served less than 12.9 years in the federal service. This interpretation also applies for the median (50th percentile) where 50% of the employees had served less than 23.6 years. At the 75th percentile for FY2012, 75% of the employees had served less than 30.4 years. The data focus on SES employees under the ES pay plan.
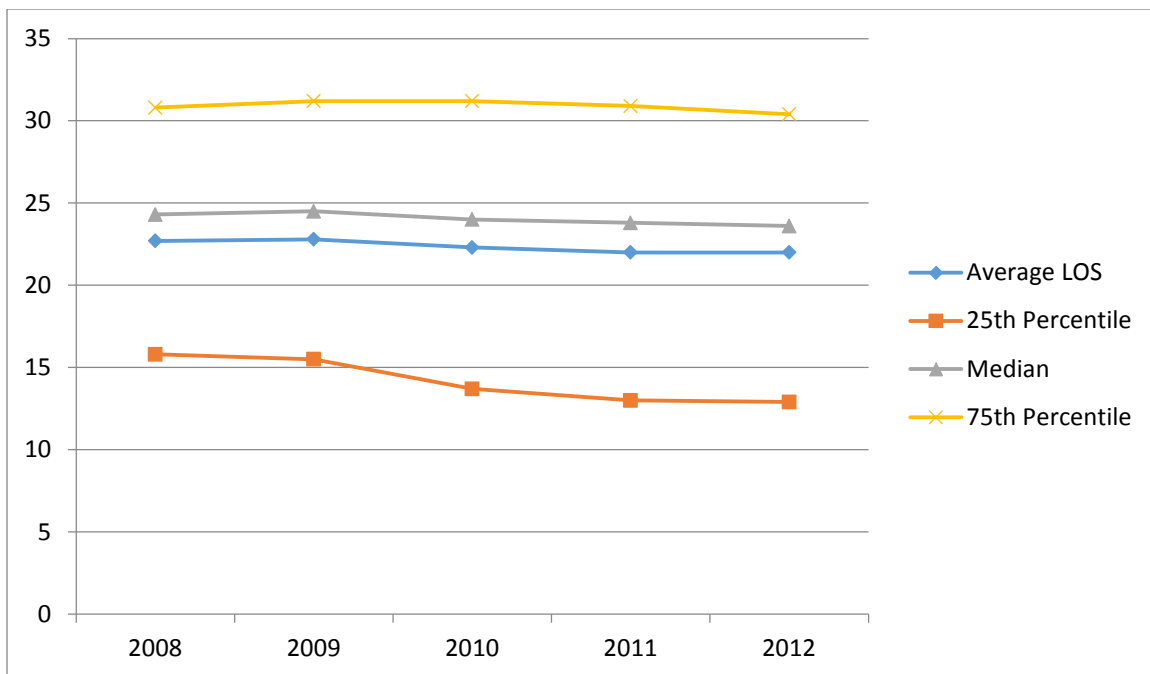
Figure 4: SES LOS trends. Source: OPM (2013).

Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the LOS trends in Table 12. The figure indicates that the LOS statistics were relatively stable over the five-year period (Fy2008 to FY2012). However, the 25th percentile indicates a decrease.

Table 13

SES Salary Trends

Fiscal Year	Average Salary ($)	25th Percentile ($)	Median ($)	75th Percentile ($)
2008	157, 917	152,079	158,500	166,500
2009	163, 214	157,400	163,512	172,200
2010	167,037	161,617	167,989	177,000
2011	166, 561	160,920	167,020	176,179
2012	166,025	160,000	165,800	175,013

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 13 presents data on salary distribution in the SES for a five-year period between FY2008 - FY2012. According to the data, in the 25th percentile of FY2012, 25% of SES employees earned less than $160,000 annually, while at the 50th percentile, 50% of the employees earned less than $165,000 annually. In the 75th percentile of the same year, 75% of the employees earned less than $175, 013 annually.
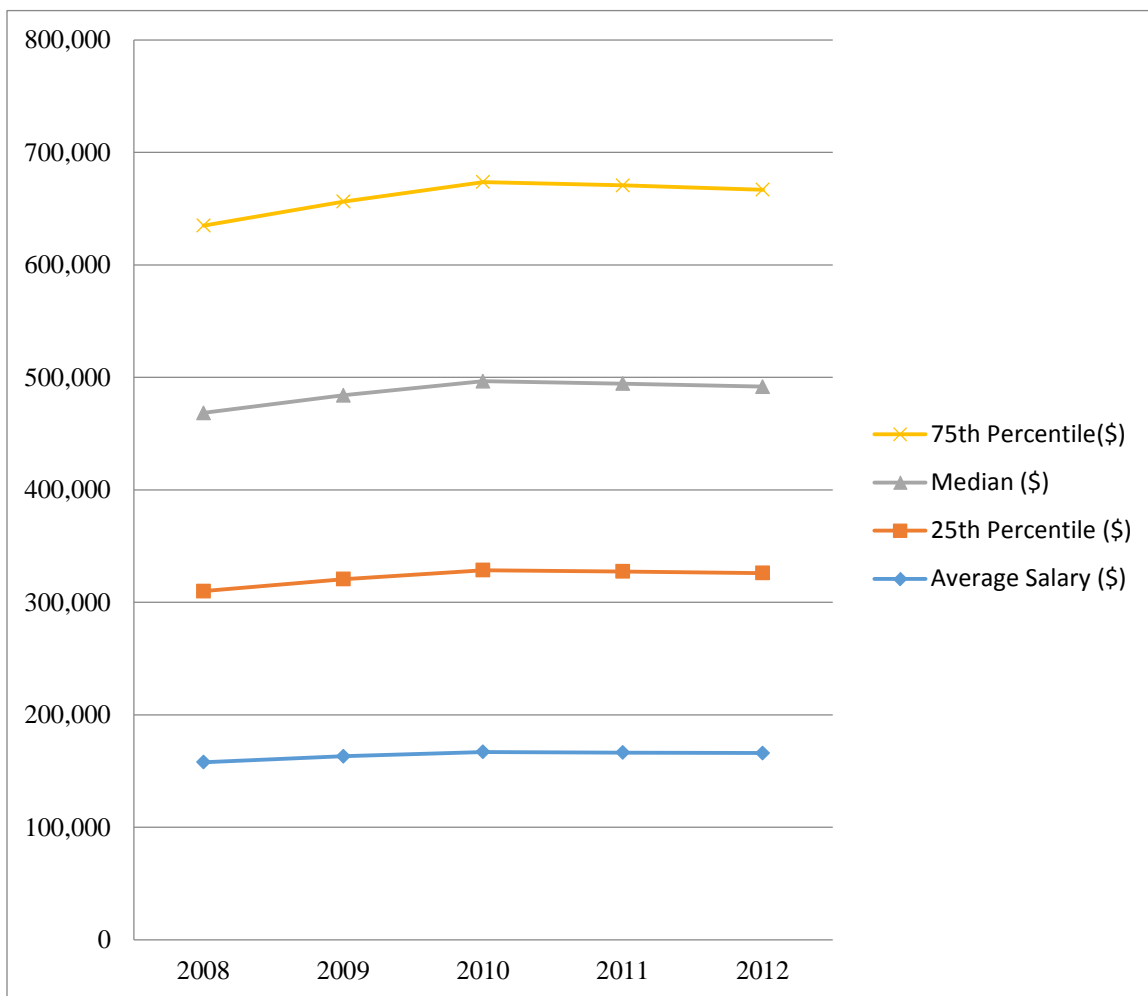
Figure 5: SES salary trends for FY2008 to FY2012. Source: OPM (2013).

Figure 5 is a graphical presentation of salary trends in the SES over a five-year period, from 2008 - 2012.

Table 14

SES Action Trends

Action	Dynamics	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
Separations	Quit	221	604	134	211	223
	Discharge	4	8	6	4	5
	Reduction in Force (RIF)	4	-	1	-	-
	Miscellaneous Termination	5	34	10	10	11
	Retirement	538	483	509	590	606
	Death	9	15	8	7	12
	Other Separation	4	-	3	-	-
New Hires	New Hire-Comp-Temp/Limited APPT	-	3	-	-	-
	New Hire-SES APPT	296	632	408	388	274
Conversions	Conversion-Excepted	1	1	-	1	1
	Conversion-SES	971	796	697	800	789

Source: OPM (2013).

Table 14 presents the number of SES employees in relation to separations, new

hires, conversions, for the period FY2008 to FY2012. Separations indicate the number of

employees who left the SES in any particular year. New hires represent the number of

persons who joined the SES in any particular year within the period. Conversion

represents the number of employees who were converted to the SES in any particular
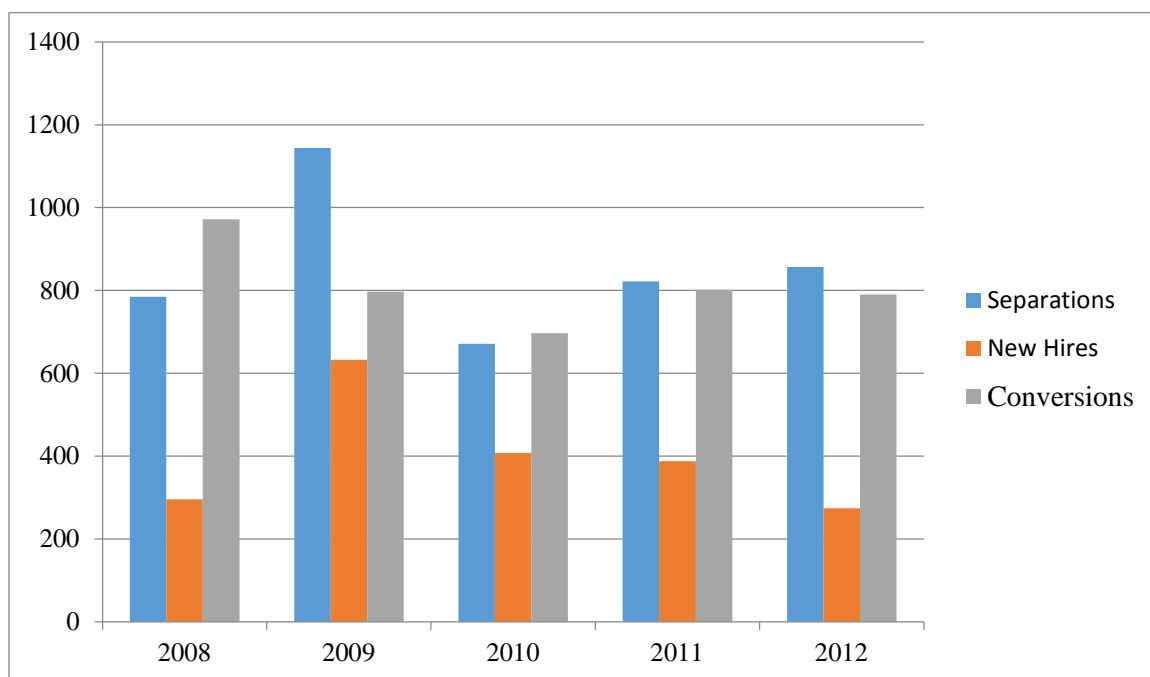
year within the period.

Figure 6: SES action trends. Source: OPM (2013).

Figure 6 is a graphical representation of SES action trends over the five year period, FY2008 to FY2012. The graph sums up the data in different categories as presented in Table 14.

APPENDIX 2: LETTERS OF INVITATION AND INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol-Pilot

Part 1: The goal is to gather each person's life history regarding how he became a leader at the Senior Executive Service (SES) level: including experiences that assisted him becoming a leader.

1. Let's start by looking at the big picture. Please tell me the story about how you reached the SES level.
   a. Specific events which propelled you to the SES level
   b. Specific places where the events took places
   c. People who were involved in your ascension to the SES level
   d. Personal actions which assisted you in achieving SES status
   e. How did the factors highlighted above assist you to achieve SES status

2. Provide a description of your employment history in federal employment.

3. Which experiences influenced your choice to work in federal employment?

4. How did the federal agency and other managers/leaders you have worked with supported your career development?
   a. Describe experiences where the federal agency you have worked for provided support.
   b. Describe experiences where other managers/leaders supported you.

Part 2: the goal is allow the individual to reconstruct the details of his life as a leader by focusing on what he does.

5. Please describe a typical day in your life as a Senior Executive?
   a. Tell me the benefits of being a Senior Executive.
   b. Tell me the challenges of being a Senior Executive.

6. Please explain to me how you prepared yourself to be a Senior Executive?
    a. What is your highest academic qualification? How did academics assist you to attain the SES status?
    b. Did you attend training and development programs? How did such programs assist you to ascend to the SES level?

7. What are some of the things you do to ensure that you remain relevant in your role?

8. Tell me how you have been able to fulfill your responsibilities and duties that come with being an executive.

9. In your ascension to the SES level, tell me how you avoided experiencing career plateau at the Middle Management level which many African-American males in federal employment are believed to experience.

10. Which competence skills strongly associate with your achievement of SES status? How did the skills assist you to achieve the status?

11. Which personal skills have benefited your career achievement to the SES level? How have the mentioned personal skills assisted you to reach the SES level?

12. Minorities are perceived to have to work harder in order to achieve the SES status. What extra efforts did you adopt in order to achieve the SES status? How did the efforts assist your career progression to the SES?

Part 3: The goal is to encourage each individual to reflect on the meaning his experience holds for him.

13. Tell me about a particularly rewarding time you had as an executive.
    a. What made the situation particularly rewarding?

      b.   What did you learn from this experience about leadership?

14. Tell me about a particularly challenging or difficult time in your role as a leader/executive (or the low point).
      a.   What made the situation challenging?
      b.   What was supposed to happen?
      c.   What did you learn from this experience about leadership?

15. Tell me about some of the key people you rely on in your role as a leader?
      a.   Are they internal or external networks? Women or men; coworkers, other colleagues, juniors, mentor, protégés, friends?
      b.   Why did you choose to rely on these people?
      c.   Why are they important to you?

16. What do you think is required or expected of you as a senior executive?

17. Apart from being a Senior Executive, what other roles do you play? How do the other roles enhance your achievements in the SES?

18. African Americans males are generally underrepresented in the SES. What advice would you give to other African-American males in federal employment that would aid in their ascension to the SES?
      a.   What should he prepare?
      b.   How should he conduct himself?
      c.   What are the important things he needs to do?
      d.   What are some experiences he should try to have?
      e.   Why did you think this advice/these suggestions are important?

19. From personal observation or experiences in the SES and federal employment in general, what hampers career achievement among African-American males in federal employment?

20. What else would someone need to know in order to fully understand about what it means to be an executive like you?

Interview Protocol-Final

Part 1: The goal is to gather each person's life history regarding how he became a leader at the Senior Executive Service (SES) level: including experiences that assisted him becoming a leader.

1. Let's start by looking at the big picture. Please tell me the story about how you reached the SES level.

2. Provide a description of your employment history in federal employment.

3. Which experiences influenced your choice to work in federal employment?

4. How did the federal agency and other managers/leaders you have worked with supported your career development?

Part 2: the goal is allow the individual to reconstruct the details of his life as a leader by focusing on what he does.

5. Please describe a typical day in your life as a Senior Executive?

6. Please explain to me how you prepared yourself to be a Senior Executive?

7. What are some of the things you do to ensure that you remain relevant in your role?

8. Tell me how you have been able to fulfill your responsibilities and duties that come with being an executive.

9. In your ascension to the SES level, tell me how you avoided experiencing career plateau at the Middle Management level which many African-American males in federal employment are believed to experience.

10. Which competence skills strongly associate with your achievement of SES status? How did the skills assist you to achieve the status?

11. Which personal skills have benefited your career achievement to the SES level? How have the mentioned personal skills assisted you to reach the SES level?

12. Minorities are perceived to have to work harder in order to achieve the SES status. What extra efforts did you adopt in order to achieve the SES status? How did the efforts assist your career progression to the SES?

Part 3: The goal is to encourage each individual to reflect on the meaning his experience holds for him.

13. Tell me about a particularly rewarding time you had as an executive.

14. Tell me about a particularly challenging or difficult time in your role as a leader/executive (or the low point).

15. Tell me about some of the key people you rely on in your role as a leader?

16. What do you think is required or expected of you as a senior executive?

17. Apart from being a Senior Executive, what other roles do you play? How do the other roles enhance your achievements in the SES?

18. African Americans males are generally underrepresented in the SES. What advice would you give to other African-American males in federal employment that would aid in their ascension to the SES?

19. From personal observation or experiences in the SES and federal employment in general, what hampers career achievement among African-American males in federal employment?

20. What else would someone need to know in order to fully understand about what it means to be an executive like you?
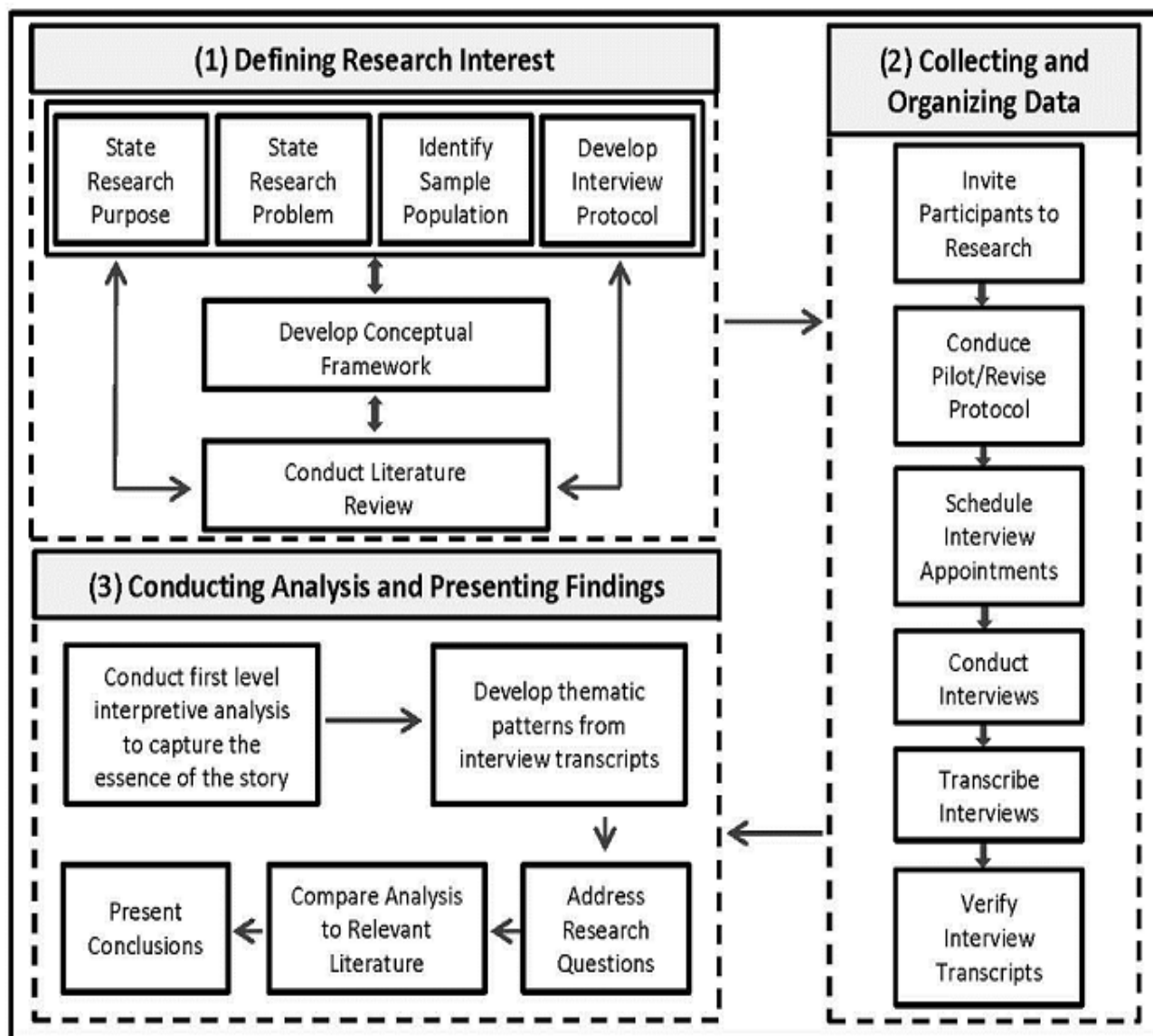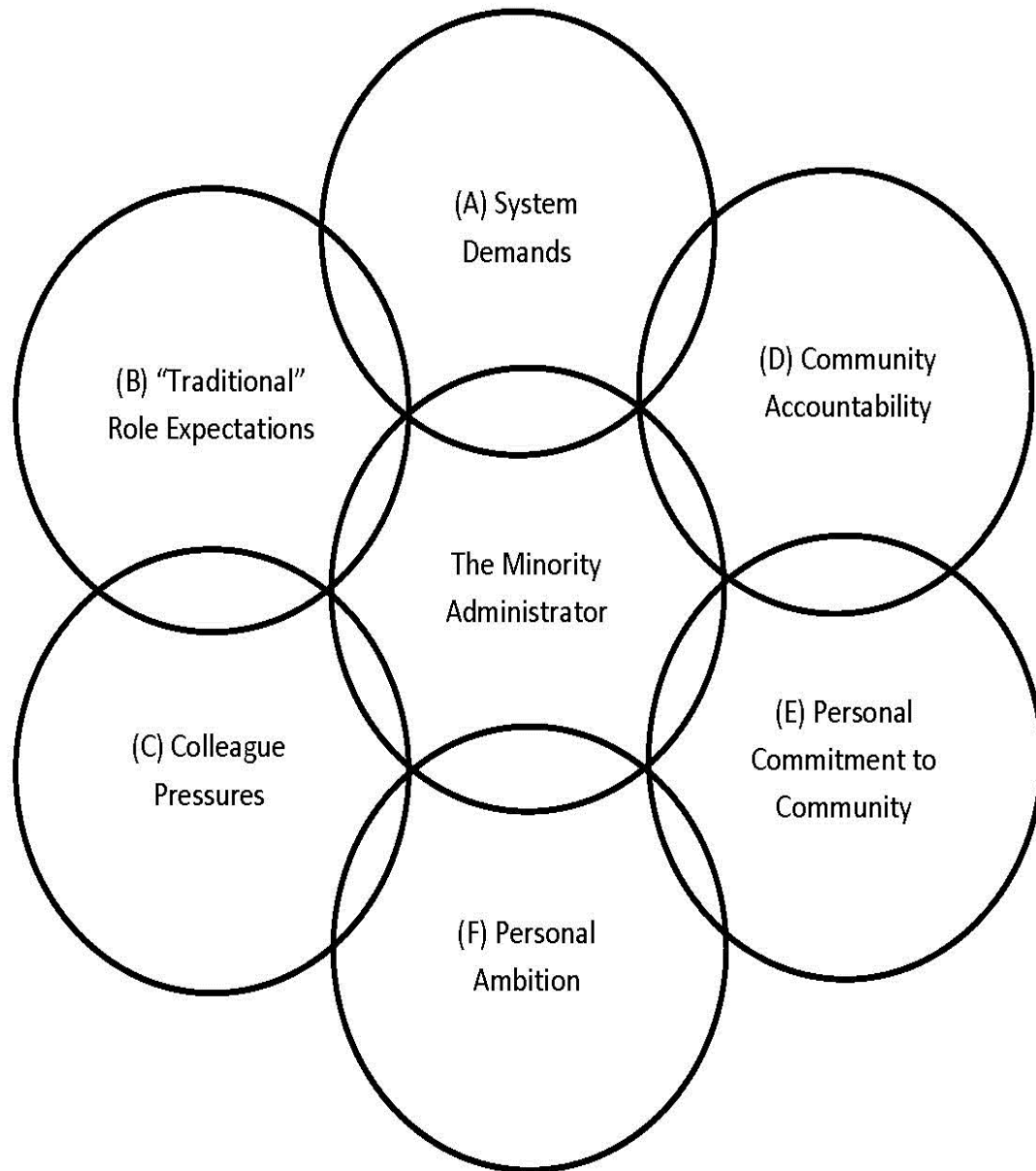
APPENDIX 4: DATA CODING

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes
Experiences that have Shaped the Participants' Achievements	Factors influencing the choice to seek federal employment	Chance or Circumstance Own career aspirations	First job offered Family background Convenience/Flexibility To serve others African American role model Security / career prospects
	Federal employment history	Military Non-military	Short step to SES from senior military position Relevant training and skills Experience of different area of work
	Influence of factors outside their control	No original intention to join SES Opportunity to demonstrate abilities Influence of key individuals	Indirect: providing opportunities to develop skills Direct: push or promotion
Strategies that the participants have used to reach or maintain SES role	Education and training to achieve role	Types of education/training Reason for importance	Formal education/training Informal reading Being knowledgeable and prepared Providing legitimacy/credibility
	Continuous learning to stay relevant in role	Types of learning	Leadership training Inspirational reading Work-related reading
	Self-care	Morning routines	Exercise Spiritual reading/prayer Current affairs/news update
	Support from others	Observation Seeking advice Getting support	Role models Seeking mentorship or feedback Seeking advice of deputies, supervisors etc. Learning from employees and wider network Support from family members

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes
	Extra efforts	Extra efforts not related to race Why extra efforts are required of African Americans Types of extra efforts as African American	Going beyond requirements Contributing additional value to managers Importance of perceptions Dress/demeanor Transparency of role Overcoming misconceptions Bar is set higher Greater transparency Demonstrating value Engaging people to change perceptions
	Personal skills, values and beliefs	People-related skills Skills learned in other roles Values and beliefs	Inter-personal skills Communication skills Motivational skills Leadership skills Organizational skills Understanding people Integrity, trust, justice Work ethic Religious/spiritual beliefs
	Dealing with "career plateaus"	Skills development Preparation for opportunities	
Meanings that the participants make of their SES achievements	Perceived benefits and rewards	Having influence and decision-making powers Recognition for achievements Being a positive African American role model Serving and helping others	
	Drawbacks and challenges	High stakes nature of decision-making role Perceived lack of meritocracy Other organizational barriers to career prospects for African Americans	
	What it means to them to be	Leading the organization Representing	Driving organization forward strategically Supporting the leadership

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes
	SES	Government Developing/empowering others	Responsibility Accountability Meeting high standards of performance Transparency/positive image Facilitating Enabling Ethical aspects Serving community and society Supporting individuals
	What it means to be an African-American male in the SES	Having to make greater efforts Confronting stereotypes Acting as a positive role model	
	Advice to other African-American males aspiring to SES	Present a positive image Communicate well Network/learn from others Contribute value Be a risk-taker	Dress/demeanor Changing misconceptions Find mentor/advisor/advocate Become known for a particular contribution/talent Be proactive Be prepared to move geographically Work at overcoming obstacles

**APPENDIX 5: OUTLINE OF RESEARCH DESIGN PROCESS**

APPENDIX 6: ROLE DEMANDS ON MINORITY ADMINISTRATORS

(A) System
Demands

(B) "Traditional"
Role Expectations

(D) Community
Accountability

The Minority
Administrator

(C) Colleague
Pressures

(E) Personal
Commitment to
Community

(F) Personal
Ambition

Source:
Adam W. Herbert, "The Minority Administrator; Problems, Prospects and Challenges,
"Public Administration Review, N. 334, v. 6, November/December 1974, p. 560.

APPENDIX 7: ADVOCACY MODELS
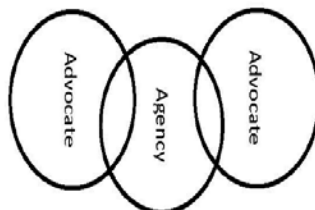

EXTERNAL ADVOCATE MODELS
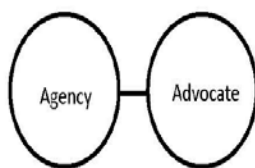
(MODEL A)
External Advocate/Agency
Model

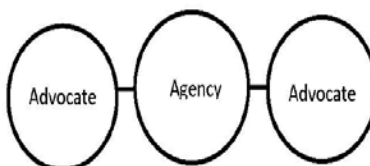(MODEL B)
Coalition External
Advocate/Agency Model

INTERMEDIATE ADVOCATE MODELS

(MODEL C)
Shared Advocate Model

(MODEL D)
Third-Party Advocate Model

INTERNAL ADVOCATE MODELS

(MODEL E)
Internal Advocate/Agency Model

(MODEL F)
Coalition Internal
Advocate/Agency Model

Source: Lenneal J. Henderson, Administrative Advocacy (R&E Research Associates, Inc., 1979), p.17