

Leadership Opportunity Experiences among African American Female Veteran Officers in the US Army: A Qualitative Case Study

Judie Sherrer¹, Ingrid Hayes-Burrell²

¹Eastern Gateway Community College, Steubenville, OH, USA

²University of Maryland Global Campus, Adelphi, MD, USA

Email: jsherrer50@gmail.com, hyattsville9@verizon.net

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how African American female veteran officers in the United States Army experienced leadership opportunities and positions of Captain or above. Participants shared their perceptions through interviews and open-ended questions. The general research question was: How did African Americans female veteran officers experience leadership opportunities in the US Army? Seven themes emerged from the interviews: 1) Definition of leadership opportunities, 2) Encouragement for competing, 3) Exceed expectations, 4) Overcoming leadership obstacles, 5) Gender and race, 6) Impact of networking and mentoring, and 7) Respecting African American women as leaders. The eight African American female veteran officers were interviewed in one-on-one Skype interviews. Using the qualitative case study approach provided individual experiences more in-depth and detailedly. Participants shared their opinions and experiences, noting that African American female officers have opportunities. However, opportunities are limited due to a lack of mentoring, networking, and senior leadership perceptions that African Americans may not be qualified to move into many leadership positions. Data drawn demonstrate mentors are essential in opportunities for African American females seeking opportunities into senior-level positions in the US Army. The conceptual framework was the Leader-Member Exchange Theory.

Keywords

African American Women, Mentoring, Leadership, Glass Ceiling, Military, Women Officer's

1. Introduction

African American females have joined the Armed forces and have been in the

US Army since the Revolutionary War; they have also endured physical and personal discomfort while their contributions went unrecognized and unrewarded (Zoroya, 2014). In 1942, African American females were officially allowed to serve in the Armed Forces in high numbers. Equal employment opportunities for African Americans and efforts to increase ethnic and racial diversity in the military have been the subject of many federal laws and regulations (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012). The history of challenges experienced by African American females in the US Army begins with women being denied the opportunity to join the Armed Forces. Therefore, women volunteered for the service until 1946, when the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed.

According to Melin (2016), African American women are enlisting in the military at far higher rates than Caucasian or Hispanic women and now represent a third of women in the Armed Forces. According to Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler (2017), African American, female veteran officers that served in the Armed Forces between 2013 and 2017, remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions of Captain or above. Through the integration of African Americans into the US Army has been considered successful under allowing them in the service, US Army statistics show that African Americans do not participate evenly across officer career fields (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). The theoretical conceptual frameworks that underpinned this qualitative case study were Yin (2009) social identity theory, Graen & Uhl-Bien's (1995) leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, Hymowitz & Schellhardt's (1986) glass ceiling theory.

2. Background and Literature Review

African American women gained more acceptance in the military when President Franklin D. Roosevelt created fair employment practices in 1941 which led the way to eradicate racial discrimination in the military. In 1948, President Truman eliminated segregation quotas (Jonasson, Kwakwa, & Sheldon, 1995). The first African American general officer became Chief of the US Army Nurse Corps in 1979. In 2003, the first African American woman was promoted to command sergeant major of the US Army Reserve, and in 2011, the first African American woman obtained the rank of Major General in the US Army. Reichel, Brandl, & Mayrhofer (2010) posited current trends indicate female representation has increased, and women assumed more roles and greater responsibilities.

Two primary barriers that inhibit advancement in all women's careers are lack of mentoring and exclusion from informal networks (Perryer, 2010). In the military, the glass ceiling has taken years to shatter. Culturally the glass ceiling is historically represented as a barrier to the advancement of women's experience (Maume Jr., 2004).

African American women's experience in the military is different from Caucasian women's experienced, based on both gender and race. US society views African American women as inferior because of their gender and race. By 2020,

Black women are expected to represent 6.3% of the workforce (Catalyst, 2020). In 2012, Black women only held 5.4% of management and professional related jobs and 11.4% of directorships held by women, although that number decreased to 10.4% in 2014 (Catalyst, 2014). According to Catalyst (2014), in 1950, women represented 34% of the labor force. Despite the significant progress made in the United States regarding gender and racial equality, there continues to be a pervasive lack of African American women in senior leadership positions (La-Sharnda Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016). Challenges within social networks within organizations and the stereotypes about African American women have created barriers that impede career mobility upward to positions of leadership (Adesaogun, Flottemesch, & Ibrahim-DeVries, 2015). Linaberry, Stuhlmacher, & Towler (2014) asserted that African American women are more likely than white women to experience gender bias in the workplace.

Combs (2003) found African American females had not experienced career progression in executive leadership to the same extent as males and White females. Combs suggested African American females experienced a lack of progress due to a lack of access to informal meetings and mentoring which is closely associated with race and gender status. Researchers for the American Association of University Women conducted a study on women of color and leadership. Fewer than 3% of board directors at Fortune 500 companies are women of color. Women of color in leadership roles may therefore experience triple jeopardy because of the multiple stereotypes associated with gender, race, and ethnicity that they trigger in others (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

In a study conducted by Hewlett (2013), more than 35% of African Americans and Hispanics indicated the need to compromise their authenticity to conform to their company's standards of demeanor or style. Hewlett further noted that a third of people of color working in corporate America lack a sense of belonging to the organization's culture. Alfred (2002) explored the effects of demographic variables on interactions in a sociocultural environment. Alfred found a silent encouragement exists for African American women to ignore specific cultural factors and to try and assimilate with Caucasian counterparts. Alfred found African American women would leave their cultural identity outside the workplace to avoid confrontation in values, beliefs, and professional experiences adopted by the organization.

Heldrich (2002) posted workplace environments operate differently for African Americans than for other racial and minority groups. According to Heldrich, African Americans are more likely to be unfairly treated regarding promotion, training, and would be more likely to be discriminated against at work. African American women serving in the military face discriminatory practices of having to sacrifice their authenticity by not being allowed to wear common hairstyles such as cornrows, braids, and dreadlocks.

According to Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley (2016), mentoring may help some women overcome the barrier represented by the glass ceiling (Elacqua et

al., 2009). Mentoring is an invaluable development strategy (Catalyst, 2020) and a collaborative learning relationship between two individuals, typically a senior employee and his or her junior protégé, who possesses the potential to excel (De-la-haye & Ehrich, 2008). According to Schunk & Mullen (2012), effective mentoring relationships between mentors and protégés transform based on different phases, characteristics, and outcomes throughout the relationship.

Confidence and trust are keys to a successful mentoring relationship. Wang (2010) found that trust is a social and professional account that is critical to the success of formal mentoring. Career or professional mentoring involves on-the-job mentoring between a mentor and a protégé and focuses on coaching, work assignments, professional goals, and career advice. Mentors and protégés establish informal mentoring relationships without any or with little assistance from the organization (Brandt & Laiho, 2013).

Within the US Army, African American women officers are viewed as Superwoman: The Overachiever. Even though being Superwoman seems like a negative stereotype, it is not. Many working women find themselves alone since they appear to be friendly, easy to work with, and more intelligent than their peers (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). However, they do not get support from their employees because they are viewed as being able to do everything themselves (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Knowing that these stereotypes exist is imperative for African American women leaders to know their jobs and maintain job standards.

A new promotion policy went into effect in the US Army in May 2018 and requires specialists and sergeants to identify soldiers eligible for promotion and submit their nominations to a local promotion board rather than individuals requiring nominations from within the chain of command. Kane (2013) noted that US Army Human Resources Command implemented a new Officer Evaluation Reporting process that aligned with Kane's belief that the military needed peer assessment or 360-degree evaluation (US Department of the Army, 2012). For the US Department of Defense to remain the global dominant fighting force well into the 21st century, its leaders must be able to reach out to diverse communities and compete for top talent. Diversity in a deliberately broad context enables the US Armed Forces and US Department of Defense to include diversity in all the aspects that make them unique while still emphasizing the demographics that drive the future talent pool. Diversity refers to all the different characteristics and attributes of the US Department of Defense's Total Force, which is consistent with the core values, integral to overall readiness and mission accomplishment, and reflective of the nation (Johnson, 2001; US Department of Defense, 2006). Leaders expect individuals to form an effective working team to achieve their missions (Dalenberg, Vogelaar, & Beersma, 2009).

Research on LMX indicates that high-quality relationships with one's immediate supervisor relate to increased performance, satisfaction, commitment, and

other work outcomes of employees (Bauer & Green, 1996). The LMX theory, therefore, indicates that leaders recognize the out-groups and work to move them into the in-group. LMX is particularly important for the modern workforce. Prominent theories in the diversity literature indicate that if a leader and member share a similar racial background, they experience a greater quality of LMX than would a cross-race dyad (Bauer & Green, 1996).

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative research design examined in this study was a case study. According to Yin (2009), the case study is suitable for examining a portrayal, event, or situation, and appropriate when a goal is an in-depth approach to an inquiry (Stake, 1995). A case study research design was the most appropriate for exploring how African American, female veteran officers experienced senior leadership or above opportunities for Captain in the US Army. This study involves an exploration of African American, female veteran officers' interviews using the case study methodology. Participants shared their perspectives through storytelling. In addition to storytelling, a case study also indicates how individuals construct meaning regarding research and interpretation. Using a one-one-on-one research interview approach to study and interpret the attitudes, preferences, and opinions of participants in a specific situation was constructed, and (Stake, 1995), and gained a greater scope of access to information (Yin, 2009).

4. Research Questions

Rather than challenging assumptions, the use of research questions in qualitative studies constructed meaning and bridged gaps in existing literature and theories (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Based on the problem statement and purpose of this study, the central research question was as follows: How did African American, female veteran officers experience leadership opportunities in the US Army? The study also included four interview questions, which were as follows:

Interview Q1: What are the experiences of career advancement opportunities for African American females in leadership positions within the US Army?

Interview Q2: Why is there an underrepresentation of African American female officers in the senior ranks of the US Army?

Interview Q3: How do African American female officers experience support and training to prepare them for promotion to positions of Captain or above in the US Army?

Interview Q4: How do African American female officers experience opportunities to practice leadership and improve their skills to obtain a position of Captain or above in the US Army?

5. Data Analysis

This research examined and interpreted how African American, female veteran officers' who served in the US Army experience leadership opportunities for

Captain or above senior leadership positions. The general problem was an underrepresentation of African American, female veteran officers that served in the US Army, an indication that US Army personnel fail to promote from the available pool of qualified African American female officers and, therefore, opportunities for advancement into leadership positions for African American Females are unknown (Asch et al., 2012).

Qualitative stories were collected from purposefully selected African American, female veteran officers who previously held the position of Captain or higher in the US Army. The study participants' responses to the interview questions were used to develop specific themes that directly address the research questions. All participants were members of the Georgia Military Women (GMW) group. Understanding how African American, female veteran officers perceive leadership opportunities in the US Army brought awareness to the challenges and barriers experienced by the African American, female veteran officers aspiring to move into positions of Captain or above in the US Army. The participants in this study shared their experiences through one-on-one Skype interviews. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. All participants agreed to be recorded. The recording device captured both researcher and participant's responses. Completed transcripts were emailed to participants for their verification for accuracy. The data analysis began upon the receipt of all transcripts from participants.

The qualitative data analysis process began after the completion of the verification phase of the interview transcripts. The analysis consisted of examining the similarities in the participant stories, seeking points of alignment, and looking for items that held each participant's story together.

Additionally, the analysis included the transcriptions from the audio recording, where transcribed interviews were conducted, and a written transcript was produced. An audio recording of the interviews enhanced the credibility of the study by establishing the reliability of the data. Transcripts were forwarded to participants for their review for accuracy. After all the participant's transcripts were received, the thematic analysis began. Thematic analysis was conducted to move small, coded data to broader themes. Coding of the data was performed first with the assistance of NVivo12 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Emergent Themes

Major themes that emerge from the data are listed below. Primarily, among those views and experiences were the need to be recognized and mentored. Participants spoke freely about opportunities, challenges, and barriers to gaining opportunities. Themes that emerged from the participants' stories were combined to gain a comprehensive picture of their collective experience, and as a result, seven themes from this case study were developed.

Theme 1: Leadership opportunities.

Theme 2: Encouragement for competing.

Theme 3: Exceed expectation.

Theme 4: Overcoming leadership obstacles.

Theme 5: Gender and race.

Theme 6: Impact of networking and mentoring.

Theme 7: Respecting African American women as leaders.

6. Summary

Seven themes emerged that African American, female veteran officers based their overall opportunities as being minimized due to problematic development of acceptance of working relationships. Creating a working relationship with African American females have proven to be problematic in predominantly male and white organizations. The African American, female veteran officers equated the need for better working relationships with senior leaders, more encouragement, and motivation from leaders. While African American female participants in this study were open and answered candidly, they are reluctant to speak out on their jobs.

While African American females remain quiet, their dual influences of race and gender place them at the bottom of the ladder for advancement and earning power. African American women are further alienated by the issues of a lack of mentoring and networking opportunity. This behavior further affects African American female inclusion in every aspect of opportunities in the US Army.

Major themes and factors revealed as a concern to opportunity was the lack of mentoring due to a male-dominated organization, and “Trust” in establishing relationships. According to the leader-member dyads, the lack of positive relationships continues to have negative impacts on African American females’ opportunities in the US Army. As fewer African American females move into leadership positions, consequences lead to fewer female leaders for future mentoring.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study’s data capture stories and experiences directly from African American, female veteran officers. Most of the participants indicated that the opportunity for advancement into senior positions was hindered due to lack of mentorship, failure to establish relationships with senior officers, and the opportunity to network. African American veteran women also indicated that they encountered negative race and gender-based stereotypes and reported that they are often questioned about their ability, credibility, and authority which they felt hindered their opportunities for promotions. Additionally, opportunities in the US Army for future senior leadership positions are grounded in career disparities in racial and gender inequalities, disempowerment, and marginalization that is historically endured by African American women in American.

Throughout the interviews, the participants spoke of being judicious in their professional US Army careers by remaining positive with high self-esteem, and

belief in themselves, and working hard to achieve their career goals. Unfortunately, many worked harder, but their voices were low. The participants described their personal goals to succeed by setting goals, creating, and working to achieve their goals.

Many of the participants used the word self-confident, while they did not refer to high self-esteem, their belief in their ability alluded to how they believed in themselves. The overall perception was that the participants believed they created their opportunities through hard work, and they will be recognized for their achievements. Women who can identify a positive mentorship experience as a personal motivator to achieve their goals may be more successful in their careers and may produce more self-confidence, self-worth, and self-esteem.

Conflicts of Interest

The contents of this paper are attributable to the author and not to the US Armed Forces, the Department of the Army, or any federal agency.

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