# Me? A Leader?

## AN EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

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AN EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND THEIR

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP


BY

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DEDICATION

To Nacala Mizan Ayele.

*Sometimes when you attempt to describe something so indescribable, your words only*

*diminish it. I love you.*

—Michelle Majors

ABSTRACT

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Literature regarding African American girls and leadership development is scarce. With a preponderance of the literature focusing on issues such as teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates among urban African American adolescent girls, this study sought to provide a healthy view of African American girls as leaders and agents of change. The purpose of this study was to give voice to African American girls to understand how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. From different regions of the United States, 12 African American girls who were actively engaged in leadership roles were interviewed. Data collected through the interviews revealed that (a) family and upbringing was the strongest influence on respondents' self-perceptions as a leader (b) mentors and role models were not only highly valued among respondents, but were a critical aspect of their leadership formation, (c) respondents were keenly aware of the negative influences that mainstream and social media held on their self- and public perceptions as leaders, and (d) respondents expressed a desire for more *practical leadership skills,* such as conflict resolution, as part of their development as leaders.

*Keywords:* African American girls, Black girls, leadership, leadership development, mentors

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*Most capabilities that enable an outstanding leader to lead are learned*

—Gardner, 1990, p. 157

*Young people with substantial native gifts for leadership often fail to achieve what*

*is in them to achieve. So part of the task is to develop what is naturally there but*

*in need of cultivation. Talent is one thing; but its triumphant expression is quite*

*another.*

—Gardner, 1990, p. 158

This study seeks to give voice to African American girls to understand how they

come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. Using a phenomenological

research design, the researcher interviewed 12 African American girls to explore their

lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about leadership. Participants interviewed

for this study were African American, aged 18–19 years, and were currently serving in

formal leadership roles in their schools, communities, or churches.

This research focuses on this age range to allow for deeper, richer exploration,

rather than broadening this study to include, for example, middle school girls or freshmen

high school girls. The researcher used purposive sampling for three participants in this

study, as they were previous participants in leadership programs she facilitated. The

remaining nine participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

## About the Literature

At the onset of research for this study, it was immediately evident that an abundance of literature addressed the *pathologies* that plague African American girls. A review of literature indicated that researchers have predominantly taken a deficit approach, focusing on issues such as teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates among urban African American adolescent girls (Evans-Winters, 2005). Very rarely did they discuss the *apithology,* or wellness, of the many African American girls from urban and inner-city communities who graduate from high school and college and lead successful lives (Evans-Winters, 2005).

In this study, the researcher recognized an existing gap in the literature regarding African American girls and their development as leaders. A review of the literature revealed a gap in information that provides aid, tools, and resources to those who serve the population of African American girls. As the researcher also sought to affirm the *potential* and *hope* of African American girls as leaders, she found it necessary to also shed light on the experiences of the everyday African American girl that influence her self-perception.

Finally, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of girls in global and national contexts. On the global front, heightened urgency exists in the fight for justice for girls, as researchers claim that the current state of global gender inequity is one of our most pressing moral challenges and is essential in the pursuit of a peaceful world free of poverty. (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005). This growing interest in equity and justice for girls is also significant in the United

States where Black girls are especially impacted by inequity and poverty (Jones-

DeWeever, 2009). Many African American girls face issues of poverty that often increase

threats of violence, school dropouts, teen pregnancy, and other poor choices that deny

them an experience of childhood and the development that takes place during this time

(Jones-DeWeever, 2009).

For many girls in the United States, adolescence is "a troubled crossing fraught

with feelings and questions about identity, value, and sense of self" (Durham, 1999,

p. 192). Adolescence is also a period in which girls begins to undervalue themselves

while their increasing self-consciousness leads to suppression of their own thoughts and

feelings (Buckley & Carter, 2005). However, this experience occurs less frequently with

African American girls. The results of a nationwide study conducted by the GSRI

concluded that African American girls navigate this period with greater self-confidence

than Caucasian girls. This may be better understood when examining the criteria by

which girls measure themselves.

For example, one way girls measure themselves is based on physical beauty.

Considering that the majority of mainstream media is hyperfocused on Eurocentric

feminine ideals (Baek, Jemczura, Reno, Staats, & Stanley, 2011), Caucasian girls are

more likely to identify with and attempt to uphold these often false and unreasonable

standards of beauty (Baek et al., 2011). Many African American girls, in contrast, reject

mediacentric ideals of femininity that do not align with their cultural norms, allowing

them to discard mainstream images of White beauty (Baek et al., 2011). As a result,

Black girls experience fewer instances of body dissatisfaction, having accepted standards

of beauty that are more in line with their cultural norms (Baek et al., 2011; Bissell & Hays, 2010).

However, African American girls fall prey to other forms of mediated ideals. While Eurocentric media images may not play as strong a role in the self-identity development of African American girls, the hip hop/urban media portrayals of African American women and girls play a stronger role in how girls negotiate emerging adulthood and self-perception. This area has begun to capture the attention of researchers (Durham, 1999; Fujioka, 2005; Gordon, 2008; Hazell & Clarke, 2008; Ross & Coleman, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Stokes, 2007) as they seek to understand the intersections of race, class, and gender that are unique to the African American girl and the many influences that inform her self-concept. Although hip-hop culture has historically provided a space for disenfranchised youth of color, including young women, to resist oppression (Rose, 1994), widespread criticism has arisen of sexist and misogynistic sexual scripts in mainstream rap and rhythm and blues music videos (Stokes, 2007). Authors Stephens and Phillips (2003) argued that "the popular images found in mainstream hip-hop promote and reinforce racially-stereotypic and highly-sexualized portrayals of African American women" (p. 38). With African American youth consuming media content at a rate 4.5 times greater than their Caucasian counterparts (Northwestern University, 2011), these portrayals can be perilous for a young woman who attempts to balance her self-identity as a leader with the prevailing negative images she encounters on a daily basis.

African American girls are at a unique intersection of race in which their experiences are categorized as a *Black* experience (Evans-Winters, 2005). However, the experiences of African American girls are vastly different from those of African American boys. To compare them can further silence girls' voices and negate the personhood of the African American girl and her distinct experiences. This is evidenced in a study of a program called "Diversify": an urban-to-suburban racial integration program in which African American boys and girls were placed in suburban, predominantly White schools. The researchers concluded that "as a group, the Diversify boys were welcomed in suburban social cliques. Diversify girls, on the other hand, were stereotyped as 'ghetto' or loud for behavior that, when exhibited by the boys in the program, was socially rewarded" (Ispa-Landa, 2013, p. 230). The Ispa-Landa (2013) study illustrated the differences in perception and attitudes toward African American girls that should be considered when making generalized assessments about African American youth.

The African American girl is at a unique intersection of gender; her experiences are often categorized as a *female/woman/girl* experience. However, ignoring the critical aspect of race can potentially create cognitive dissonance in African American girls who confront race as part of their daily lived experiences. Researchers use the term cognitive dissonance to describe the feeling of discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs (Cherry, 2014). When faced with a challenge of being a girl, being an African American girl, and being (in many cases) a lower socioeconomic-class African American

girl, the struggle to negotiate these worlds can massively disrupt her sense of belonging and self-identity (Cherry, 2014).

## About the Researcher

Before going further into this topic of African American girls and leadership, it is vital to understand where and how this research project, a synthesis of stories told by African American girls, began. As an African American woman, my journey through childhood was filled with many challenges. Some were the effects of typical adolescent development, such as struggling with my sense of identity, or feeling comfortable with my body and desirability by others. Also I fought to negotiate challenges to different aspects of my identity that included low socioeconomic status, issues specific to being a good girl, and, as Scott (2004) stated, "the derogation of my racial identity by the dominant culture" (p. 384).

Through elementary and middle school, I was between worlds. In one world, I participated in the Horizon Program: the advanced academic program in my school. This meant very few girls looked like me. I began straightening my hair and engaging in other forms of code switching, changing my appearance and speech patterns to assimilate with classmates (Scott, 2004). I listened to 1980s new-wave music and changed my wardrobe to be like those with whom I spent the majority of my time. In the other world, I was a Black girl. My hair was course, my lips were big, we ate soul food, my family rushed to the television every time "Black folks" came on, and the sounds of Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Donny Hathaway, and Roberta Flack boomed through my home on a daily basis. I was a Black girl. My dolls were Black, my community was Black, and what

I soon learned—my perceived capacity and opportunities to be a leader—were indeed

Black.

My introduction to athletics in high school allowed me to see leadership

possibilities for myself. My coach, Gartha Morgan, used to preach to me about "intestinal

fortitude," integrity, showing up for practice/life, focus, passion, discipline—all of which

were the makings of the leader I am today. But I wrestled with understanding how I—not

captain of the team, an average student by this time, not the prettiest or most popular

person in my school—could be a leader. Me? A leader? Yes, me.

My first job after high school was in a community center working with youth who

lived in the heart of the central district of Seattle. African American youth would come to

the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center and engage in different forms of artistic

expression through theater arts classes. They had a place to express themselves, discover

hidden talents, and creatively address emotional issues in a safe, affirming environment. I

found myself being a mentor to many of the dozens of youth who walked through the

doors each day—especially the girls. These girls were grappling with many of the same

issues I grappled with as a younger teen. I was able to relate to their challenges and issues

effortlessly and felt naturally drawn to them, as they to me. I found that by helping them

answer their questions, I was able to answer many of the questions I had as a girl. By

loving them, I found love for myself as a Black woman, and eventually a Black woman

*who could lead*. My commitment and passion for Black girls to discover their leadership

capacity has continued to this day.

I chose a phenomenological study to be able to hear the rich stories and lived experiences of African American girls and how they define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders; but most importantly—*to give them a voice*. I believe the experience and power of having her voice heard is foundational in a girl's self-perception and identity as a leader.

## Statement of the Problem

In social sciences and educational research, African American female adolescents' experience have been essentially left out, included as part of White girls' experiences, generalized in the Black-male experience, or simply pathologized (Evans-Winters, 2005). The story and experiences of Black girls have often been excluded in historical accounts of White feminist or Afrocentric-led movements (Evans-Winters, 2005). In terms of leadership, most of the research has focused on concepts related to male, Caucasian, usually upper middle-class culture; with very little research exploring how the same leadership concepts can be applied to women and other non-dominant groups (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). Recently, however, researchers on leadership have begun to include the female perspective (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008).

A lack of data also exists that acknowledges the strengths and capacities of African American youth as leaders in general. The American Psychological Association's (APA) Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008) conducted a study examining how African American youth are perceived in the literature. Also, they examined how the professional and scholarly literature has devalued the strengths of these youth. This meta-analysis

reviewed 450 studies and surveys of African American youth age 5 to 21 across

all socioeconomic conditions and geographical areas to understand how factors

such as racial identity, racial socialization, emotional regulation and expression,

religiosity, and school and family support can prepare African American children

and adolescents to thrive in spite of various societal challenges. (Nauert, 2008,

p. 1)

The task force concluded that researchers deemphasized positive attitudes and behaviors

that contribute to the strengths of these young people and the current conceptions of

African American youth do not address healthy coping, adjustment, and overall

functioning (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and

Adolescents, 2008).

As awareness grows of the untapped potential of girls' leadership, the research

literature lacked information that examined how, and in what context, girls develop

leadership skills (Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007). However, studies showed that

particular factors do support girls' self-assurance and development as leaders

(Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007). The present study sought to understand these factors—

especially as they relate to African American girls—and how they define, perceive, and

express their leadership.

## Purpose of the Study

This dissertation is a qualitative phenomenological study of African American

girls in leadership and how they come to define, perceive, and express their leadership.

The primary purpose of this study was to hear the voices of African American girls and

their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding leadership. Secondary objectives

were to identify themes and patterns that can be applied to predict, cultivate, and advance

their leadership potential, and provide an apithological (healthy) view of African

American girls that disrupt many of the pathological (unhealthy) and stereotypical

representations of African American girls and their capacity as leaders.

Literature on African American girls and their leadership development is scarce

(Stevens, 2002). Even more scarce is literature on African American girls that does not

focus on the pathologies and challenges they face (Evans-Winters, 2005). As this work

sought to understand African American girls and their relationship to leadership, the

researcher required an essential element that has been missing from the literature until

very recently—their voice. The theme of silence is one of the most pervasive themes in

the study of girls and women (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002), and by allowing African

American girls a voice to express what *they* need, hope for, and experience, society may

better identify the predictors, influencers, stressors, and conditions that can impact their

development as leaders.

## Research Questions

To add to the existing body of literature on African American girls and leadership,

the following questions guided this study:

1. How do African American girls define, perceive, and express leadership?

2. What do African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for

   their leadership development?

3.  What do African American girls identify as motivators for them to express their leadership?

## Frameworks

As this study sought to understand African American girls and their perceptions about leadership, the researcher applied three types of frameworks that served as a foundation for this study. These frameworks are guiding frameworks, conceptual frameworks, and structural frameworks.

### Guiding Frameworks

Guiding frameworks describe the leading concepts on which a study is based. These guiding frameworks, or concepts, allowed the researcher to establish a common baseline for leadership and the African American girl. The guiding frameworks for this study are transformational leadership and intersectionality.

**Transformational leadership.** Bass (1990) coined the term transformational leadership to describe the ability to get people to want to change, to improve, and to be led. Using the four elements of (a) individualized consideration, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) idealized influence, transformational leadership is foundational in many leadership theories today (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1970; Northouse, 2009; Spears, 2010). The researcher selected transformational leadership as the primary leadership theory on which this paper is based because it is one of the more popular styles of leadership for girls and women, as it tends to model traditionally feminine qualities such as collaboration, teamwork, and encouragement (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

**Intersectionality.** The term intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Crenshaw, underscored the multidimensionality of marginalized people's lived experiences (as cited in Nash, 2008). Psychologists increasingly address the effects of race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality on outcomes such as health and well-being, personal and social identities, and political views and participation (Cole, 2009). This paper focused on African American girls who are at the crossroads of the aforementioned intersections of race, gender, and often lower socioeconomic status. Ignoring these factors could neglect key elements that strongly influence their self-concept as leaders.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Conceptual frameworks provide a lens through which this research was conducted. The conceptual frameworks for this study are Black feminist thought and resiliency. These lenses are specific to the researcher, as she acknowledges personal bias as an African American woman who benefitted from the Black Feminist Movement; as well as having demonstrated resilience in the researcher's ability to overcome obstacles as a youth.

**Black feminist thought.** As researchers use theory to bring understanding and predictability to certain phenomena, theory can also be used to challenge and expand knowledge (University of Southern California Libraries, 2014). This study referenced Black feminist thought as a theory to contextualize the lived experiences unique to African American women and girls. This theory acknowledges that since the era of U.S. slavery, the intersections of race, class, and gender play a significant role for Black women and how they navigate their family, community, work, and personal relationships.

The intersections of race, class, and gender characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships (Collins, 2000). In this study, the researcher recognized these nuances of Black womanhood as a potential influence on Black girls and their self-awareness, self-concept, and self-actualization as leaders. Therefore, Black feminist thought was an applicable framework for this study.

**Resiliency.** The phenomenon of successful development under high-risk conditions is known as resilience, and many researchers have identified the protective factors and processes that might account for children's successful outcomes (Braverman, 2001). Most often, the growing interest in the subject of resiliency has been linked to understanding how African American youth are able to not only bounce back after facing hardship and adversity (Nauert, 2008), but excel and become well-adjusted, high-functioning adults and leaders.

**Structural Frameworks: Phenomenology**

This study used a phenomenological design as the structural framework. This framework served as the foundation on which the research was designed, conducted, and analyzed. Phenomenology shares the goal of other qualitative research traditions to understand how individuals construct and are constructed by social reality (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). With the researcher's passion for and history with African American girls, this methodology was particularly appropriate, as it typically involves a researcher who is "intimately connected with the phenomena being studied and comes to know himself within his experiencing of this phenomena" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 481).

**Context of Study**

This study consisted of interviews with 12 African American girls, selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Participants resided in northwestern, southern, and eastern regions of the United States. Participants varied in academic performance, with grade point averages ranging from 2.5 to 4. Four participants selected for this study attended an alternative high school program that provides students with a personalized learning experience and allows them to retrieve academic credit in a small, supportive school setting.

The girls also varied in socioeconomic status. Some participants shared that they fell on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, having lived on public assistance for the majority of their childhood, whereas others reported they considered their families to have a middle- to upper-middle class income. Although the aforementioned variations did occur among respondents, they were all 18–19 years of age and participated in leadership roles in their schools, churches, athletic teams, or community organizations. Three participants involved in this study are past participants in programs the researcher created, sponsored, and facilitated. The researcher conducted all interviews by telephone.

**Overview of Methods**

This study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of African American girls using a phenomenological design that was essential in obtaining the thick descriptions from respondents, in their own voices. Using a mix of purposive and snowball sampling, the researcher interviewed 12 African American girls, aged 18–19, who were currently serving in a leadership capacity in their schools, communities, or

churches. Three participants for this study were engaged in programs the researcher

previously facilitated. The remaining nine were recruited through snowball sampling,

contacting parents and associates who recommended participants for the study.

The researcher analyzed the data gathered from the interviews of the girls,

looking for themes and patterns that emerged. These themes and patterns provided insight

about African American girls and their attitudes and perceptions about leadership

juxtaposed with barriers of race, class, and gender. Explicit details follow in the

methodology section.

**Significance of the Study**

By collecting the stories of African American girls in leadership positions and

identifying similar themes and patterns, society may be better able to predict, nourish,

and advance their leadership potential. Findings from this study could potentially affect

three major areas:

1.  African American girls as narrators of their own story. The researcher hoped

    that the findings would have implications in the following two ways: Girls

    who participate in the study are empowered by the telling of their story and

    the experience of having their voice heard, and other African American girls

    will locate themselves inside these shared stories and find affirmation,

    validation, and a sense of belonging in a society that often derogates the

    unique intersections of their personhood such as race, class, and gender (Nash,

    2008).

2. Educational reform. This research may help identify new ways to engage African American girls mentally, emotionally, and educationally, that considers the multidimensional experiences that are unique to them and other girls of color, perhaps opening dialogue for "more educational research and policies that take the 'whole' child approach to school reform" (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 7).

3. Social sciences and practitioners. As stated in the aforementioned meta-study by the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008), "positive attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the strengths of these young people were de-emphasized in research and the current conceptions of African American youth don't address healthy coping, adjustment and overall functioning" (p. 2). Findings from this study may help shift current perceptions and attitudes about African American girls. This shift in attitudes may allow social service agencies, community organizations, families, and other organizations the ability to recontextualize the needs, pathologies, and overall functioning of African American girls—creating spaces and programs that support them most effectively.

**Definition of Terms**

Following are the key terms and definitions used throughout this study.

**Adolescent.** A youth between the ages of 10 and 19 (World Health Organization, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the age range of participants was 18–19 years.

**African American.** A Black American of African descent (*Merriam-Webster,* 2014); in particular a descendent of Africans brought to the United States via the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

**Girl.** A person born female who has lived as a female from birth to her current age.

**Leader.** According to a study conducted by Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI, 2008), girls defined a leader as someone who (a) brings people together to get things done, (b) stands up for her beliefs and values, (c) is in charge of other people and makes decisions that affect them, and (d) has skills that garner the respect of others. For this study, these are the attributes considered in selecting participants.

**Leadership.** The process of persuasion or example by which a girl induces a person or group to pursue and meet objectives held by her or shared by her and her followers (Gardner, 1990).

**Leadership role.** This study consists of African American girls who are currently engaged in a *leadership role* in school, church, or community organizations. For this study, a leadership role is a position in which a girl who, by formal election or appointment, has responsibilities to or for a specific group or persons.

## Assumptions

This study about African American girls and how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders assumes that participants were truthful when answering the interview questions. The researcher recognized that the results and validity

of this study hinged on honest answers being provided by participants and that dishonest

answers could skew the data, rendering it unusable.

## Delimitations

The following are the delimitations that were *purposely* added to this study. This

purposive sampling of girls who have a history with the researcher could have resulted in

social desirability data. In other words, participants may have wished to give answers

they think would please the researcher rather than true answers. To address social

desirability data, this study used the neutral-question method suggested by Nederhof

(1985). The neutral-question method consists of "asking questions that are supposed to be

'neutral' with regard to social desirability" (Nederhof, 1985, p. 271). For example,

instead of asking a respondent, "Do you believe you are a leader?" the neutral alternative

question was, "What leadership roles are you currently engaged in and which feels most

natural to you?"

The study included only African American high school girls aged 18–19 who are

descendants of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This eliminated a large population of

African American immigrant girls who could have provided useful information regarding

leadership. The sample varied in areas such as socioeconomic status, academic

performance, and family structure. A singular study focusing on any one of these

variables could produce other findings. For example, a study that focused on leadership

among African American girls from only low socioeconomic backgrounds could yield

particular findings. Or perhaps, a study that focused on leadership among African

American girls with high academic achievement could produce different results.

For this study, the researcher used interviews as the means to collect data to better understand how girls define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. The purpose of this study was to give girls a voice and allow them to share their own experiences. The researcher recognized that other more collaborative research methods could achieve this purpose such as action research, which provides a means for girls to express their leadership through hands-on engagement in the design, data-collection, and analysis processes of the research. However, interviews were selected as the optimal research method due to the nature of the study—giving voice to African American girls. Interviews allowed the researcher to better capture the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of respondents.

## Summary

In the United States, adolescent girls hover at an important crossroads, where their potential and their identities are profoundly and rapidly influenced and shaped, including their development of a leadership identity (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). For African American girls, this time can be tumultuous as they begin to negotiate the dynamics of race, class, and gender as part of their overall identity. Although predominant research tended to pathologize African American girls (Evans-Winters, 2005), some researchers suggested that African American girls are still more likely to consider themselves leaders (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011).

This study was a qualitative phenomenological study of African American girls and how they came to define, perceive, and express their leadership while navigating the intersections of race, class, and gender. As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to

hear the voices of African American girls and their lived experiences, perceptions, and

attitudes regarding leadership, while providing an apithological (healthy) view of African

American girls that disrupt many of the pathological (unhealthy) and stereotypical

representations of African American girls and their capacity as leaders. Finally, the

researcher aimed to identify themes and patterns that can be applied to predict, cultivate,

and advance their leadership potential.

Chapter 1 contained an introduction and background to the exploration of the

African American girls and their perceptions of leadership. Chapter 2 is a review of

recent literature related to African American girls and leadership. Chapter 3 contains the

methodology of this qualitative research study. Chapter 4 contains information about

these key insights and overall findings of the data analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses

answers related to the research questions that guided this study, the implications,

strengths, and limitations, a summary of conclusions, and reflections.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to give voice to African American girls to understand how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. By allowing them to share their unique stories in their own voice, the researcher sought to better understand how to predict, cultivate, and advance their leadership potential. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge an understanding of the dynamics that contribute to an African American girl's ability to perceive herself as a leader. The literature indicated that the media primarily portrays African American girls negatively (Duke, 2000) in a context of "deviance, deficiency or dysfunction" (Quinlan, Bates, & Webb, 2012, p. 120). Many researchers of the African American girl tend to hyperfocus on her pathologies such as teen pregnancy, weight issues, or school drop-out rates (Evans-Winters, 2005). Still more studies reveal disparities in the treatment of African American girls by professionals such as teachers, in comparison to African American boys and Caucasian girls (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Adding to these factors is the ongoing negotiation of the intersections of race, class, and gender (Evans-Winters, 2005). Nevertheless, African American girls are still more likely than their Caucasian counter parts to perceive themselves as leaders (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011).

In this section, the researcher reviewed recent literature that can help readers gain a deeper understanding of the African American girl and her lived experiences—and how

these experiences inform her leadership aspirations and potential. The literature reviewed

revealed the following themes relevant to this topic that will serve as a guide for this

section: (a) global and national examination of the power of girls, (b) leadership concepts

relevant to this study, (c) intersections of race, class, and gender of the African American

girl, (d) family influences on the African American girl, (e) media influences on the

African American girl, (f) education and classroom experiences and the African

American girl, and (g) community and mentor influences on the African American girl.

<div align="center">**Girl Power**</div>

**A Global Perspective**

In 1990, UNESCO, along with four other United Nations agencies, came together

to address the global education crisis. The result was an international collaboration of 164

countries and partners to create Education for All, a global initiative advocating that all

people should have equal access to education by the year 2015 (UNESCO, 2013). Below

are the six goals that comprise the focus of Education for All (UNESCO, 2013, para 2–

7):

1.     Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and

education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

2.     Ensuring that by 2015 all children, *particularly girls*, in difficult

circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and

complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

3.     Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met

through *equitable access* to appropriate learning and life-skills programs.

4.       Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, *especially for women,* and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

5.       Eliminating *gender disparities* in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

6.       Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Although education for all children is the goal indicated by the title and mission statement, two-thirds of the goals listed were specific in addressing equal access to and quality education for girls and women. Why is the need for gender equity so pressing that it is mentioned in four of six of UNESCO's Education for All goals? A growing popular discourse has ensued about this topic. For example, *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Farley speculated,

A UNICEF report released on Thursday warns that global development efforts have hit a glass ceiling, and that educating girls is the best way to break through it. Women make most of the decisions that affect a family's health and welfare, and thus a nation's living standard, the report says. Without accelerated action to get more girls into school over the next two years, global goals to reduce poverty and improve the human condition will not be reached. (Farley, 2003, para 1–2)

Farley's speculations have become a reality. Progress reports indicated persistent gender inequality continues to undermine all efforts in achieving the intended goals (World Young Women's Christian Association, 2013). Although former United Nations Secretary General Annan stated that "Study after study teaches us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education and empowerment of girls" (as cited in Loveland, 2013, p. 26), girls still make up the greatest number of children who remain out-of-school (UNESCO, 2005). Annan continued, "When it comes to many problems of the world, I believe in girl power" (as cited in Loveland, 2013, p. 26).

Cambridge Dictionary describes *girl power* as "an idea that women and girls should be confident, make decisions, and achieve things independently of men, or the social and political movement that is based on this idea" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2014, para 1). Researchers supported the notion that girls hold genuine power in transforming nations. A passage from the book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide,* evidences this concept:

> Concerns about terrorism after the 9/11 attacks triggered interest in these issues in an unlikely constituency: the military and counterterrorism agencies. Some security experts noted that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionally those where women are marginalized. The reason there are so many Muslim terrorists, they argued, has little to do with the Koran but a great deal to do with the lack of robust female participation in the economy and society of many Islamic countries. As the Pentagon gained a deeper understanding of counterterrorism, and as it found that dropping bombs often didn't do much to

help, it became increasingly interested in grassroots projects such as girls'

education. Empowering girls, some in the military argued, would disempower

terrorists. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff hold discussions of girls' education in

Pakistan and Afghanistan, as they did in 2008, you know that gender is a serious

topic that fits squarely on the international affairs agenda. (Kristof & WuDunn,

2009, p. xxi)

Indeed, an ever-increasing awareness of girls and their role as leaders can affect

nations. As girls garner more attention, an opportunity opens for new dialogue about how

to best maximize the indwelling leadership potential of girls who often seem to have

concrete conceptions of how to lead (GSRI, 2008, p. 7). From a global perspective,

social-media initiatives such as girleffect.org speak to the power and influence girls have

on the transformation of the world when they state, "girls are agents of change and play a

crucial role in solving the most persistent development problems facing the world today"

(Girl Effect, 2014). Developing nations may need to make considerable strides in

providing equal access to social, economic, and political arenas for girls and women

(Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). U.S. researchers discovered some similarities in

understanding the challenges faced by women and girls.

**A U.S. Perspective**

Many could argue that U.S. girls, in contrast to girls in most developing nations,

experience more opportunities, access, and inclusion than at any other time in history.

However, even with all of these opportunities, many girls still face the challenges of

addressing personal, interpersonal, and societal views that attempt to define them (Hoyt

& Kennedy, 2008). Some results of these challenges are "body dissatisfaction and image disorders, academic underachievement, problems associated with sexual behaviors and high rates of depression and unhappiness" (Lecroy, 2005, p. 76). In a nation where girls today largely enjoy opportunities and privileges that women of earlier generations could not, many girls still must navigate issues of (a) adolescence; (b) race, class, and gender; (c) pervasive media images that undermine their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy; and (d) issues related to sexual objectification.

**Adolescence.** During adolescence, girls gain independence. They begin to participate in decision making, starting relationships, making mistakes, learning lessons, and developing character (World Young Women's Christian Association, 2013). However, it is also a period in girls' development in which they often begin to devalue their thoughts and feelings, and face increased risk for depression (Buckley & Carter, 2005).

In the United States, an increased interest in girls and their lived experiences has been developing. On one hand, girls are told "Girls Rule" (Girls Rule, 2014), "Black Girls Rock" (Black Girls Rock, 2014), that there is a gross "missrepresentation" of the messages delivered to them through the media (Miss Representation, 2014), and that they have a substantial impact on the world, as affirmed by the "Girl Effect" (Girl Effect, 2014). In contrast, pop singer Lady Gaga sang, in her hit song, "Do what you want with my body"; the Bravo series "Real Housewives of …," "Basketball Wives," and other reality shows portray women as combative, competitive, and insecure; media images

such as "Girls Gone Wild" promote the sexually explicit and reckless activity of young women.

These conflicting messages can place girls in a precarious situation as they attempt to navigate the already perilous phase of adolescence: a time when exuberant self-expression gives way to insecurity and self-silencing (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). As beneficiaries of feminist civil rights movements and other equality movements, girls today have many more choices. However, many lack precise rules and expectations as they consider the variety of roles now open to them, in contrast with more generally accepted expectations for girls in the past (APA, 2014). Although society expects girls to *have it all*, few role models or guidelines exist (APA, 2014). Interventions with adolescent girls must address this predicament, for it is an important factor of adolescent girls' transition (APA, 2014).

**Race, class, and gender.** Despite considerable advancement of women and girls in the United States, all have not yet enjoyed the benefits and opportunities resulting from these advancements equally. Race, social class, and gender can play a significant role in how girls shape their view of the world. Their worldview, in turn, can influence how they envision their possibilities for the future.

Psychologists increasingly address the effects of race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality on outcomes such as health and well-being, personal and social identities, and political views and participation (Cole, 2009). A growing body of research asserts these intersections or intersectionalities are prominent in how individuals develop their self-identity (Cole, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2007; Rozie-Battle, 2002).

The result of this growing interest has brought forth emergent theories that help explain one's ability to overcome the challenges of navigating the limiting social constructions of race, class, and gender. For example, self-determination theory concerns exploring and supporting a person's natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways (Self-Determination Theory, 2014). Resilience theory examines the phenomenon of successful development under high-risk conditions in one's life (Braverman, 2001).

**Media.** Part of the environment of nearly every adolescent currently growing up in the United States and other industrialized countries is daily use of a variety of media (Arnett, 2001). Emerging research indicates that many girls moving through adolescence will likely experience a loss of self-esteem and self-determination as they negotiate societally imposed standards of femininity, beauty, and sexuality (Durham, 1999). This phenomenon rests, in large part, on the role of mass media as "crucial symbolic vehicles for the construction of meaning in girls' everyday lives" (Durham, 1999, p. 192). Body dissatisfaction also takes a strong hold on young women in the United States (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004). As media dominates the socialization of young people, researchers suggested media is a kind of "super peer" (J. D. Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005, p. 421). J. D. Brown and colleagues explained this idea of media as a super peer, proposing that girls who mature faster than their counterparts will "turn to the media as a source of information and models" (J. D. Brown et al., 2005, p. 421).

Despite a prevalence of literature that addresses media influences on U.S. adolescent girls and their self-esteem and self-determination (Arnett, 2001; J. D. Brown

et al., 2005; Durham, 1999; Grabe, Ward, & Shibley Hyde, 2008; Schooler et al., 2004),

Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) reported evidence that girls as young as 6 and 7 years share

the norms of the *thin ideal* that dominate the media.

**Sexual Objectification.** Objectification theory attempts to understand the

consequences of being female in a society that sexually objectifies the female body

(Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body is

treated as an object (especially as an object that exists for the pleasure and use of others),

illustrated interpersonally through gaze or "checking out" and in the representation of

women in the media (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). This objectification can be even more

confusing and insidious when the objectification comes through the media from another

female. Lady Gaga's hit single, "Do What You Want with My Body," or Britney Spears'

single entitled, "I'm a Slave 4 U," send sexually explicit and potentially reckless

messages to adolescent girls who comprise a considerable percentage of their fan base

(AZ Lyrics, 2014). The result of continuous images of body objectification is *objectified*

*body consciousness*—the tendency for a girl to begin to view herself as an object to be

looked at and evaluated by others (Grabe, Lindberg, & Shibley-Hide, 2007). At this point,

she will begin to value herself based on her appearance. (Grabe et al., 2007).

Most girls in the United States undoubtedly experience certain freedoms that their

counterparts in developing nations do not. However, if Girl Effect (2014) is correct that

"girls are the most powerful force for change on the planet"; or if Kristof and WuDunn

(2009) are accurate that "when you empower a girl, you disempower terrorists" (p. xxi),

then citizens of the world stand to benefit from providing *all* girls the needed love,

respect, resources, education, and opportunity they need to become leaders—to make the world a better place.

The following section explores the concept of leadership through the examination of various theoretical concepts. Transformational leadership is a foundation theory of this study. Other theories focus on leadership personalities, leadership behaviors, and leadership related to group dynamics.

## Leadership

**Transformational Leadership**

The guiding leadership theory for this study is transformational leadership.

**Bass**. Bass (1990) built on the work of Burns (1978) by replacing Burns's transforming leadership with the term transformational leadership. Bass (1990) contended that transformational leaders achieve results by being charismatic, inspiring trust and admiration in followers. Bass (1990) theorized that transformational leaders stimulate a stronger work ethic, as followers believe they are working toward something greater than personal gains; followers believe they are working toward an inspiring mission and vision shared by the leader.

Bass (1990) also added to Burns's (1978) work by providing a way to measure transformational leadership, positing that the extent to which a leader is transformational can be measured by the following four primary components (Bass, 1990):

1. Individualized consideration—Transformational leaders act as coaches and advisors to their followers. Leaders with individual consideration encourage associates to reach goals that help the followers and the organization.

2. Intellectual stimulation—Transformational leaders encourage innovation and creativity, challenging the normal beliefs or views of a group. Leaders use intellectual stimulation to promote critical thinking and problem solving to improve the organization.

3. Inspirational motivation—Transformational leaders motivate followers to commit to the vision of the organization. Leaders with inspirational motivation encourage team spirit to reach goals of increased revenue and market growth for the organization.

4. Idealized influence—Transformational leaders perform as exemplary role models for followers. Associates will respect and trust leaders with idealized influence to make good decisions for the organization (Bass, 1990).

Researchers can examine transformational leadership from different perspectives. One way is based on the personality or characteristics of the leader. For example, Gardner (1990) identified some of these traits as "intelligence and judgment-in-action, eagerness to accept responsibilities, skill in dealing with people, confidence and adaptability" (pp. 49–51).

Another perspective of transformational leadership involves the acts or behavior of the leader, such as the ability to set goals and motivate followers. Bennis (2009) believed that the basic ingredient of leadership is creating a guiding vision, with leaders sharing a clear idea of what they want. Other theorists, such as Rowe and Guerrero (2013), maintained that the ability to influence subordinates, peers, and bosses defines a leader.

Still another perspective considers group process, in which the leader serves as the center and catalyst of the group's activities, motivations, and changes. Northouse (2009) maintained that leaders initiate the relationship, create the communication linkages, and carry the burden of maintaining the relationship, and that this is an interactive process that requires transactions between the leader and the follower. However, Gardner (1990) maintained that this relationship between leader and follower "varies according to whether the organization or group is in a time of quiescence or crisis, in prosperity or recession, on steep growth curve or stagnating" (p. 23). Either way, group processes require the leader to balance ambition with competency and integrity, and to build trust to generate shared values, goals, and vision (Bennis & Goldsmith, 2003).

**Supporting Theories and Theorists**

The aforementioned leadership perspectives encompass three transformational-leadership themes: (a) the traits and characteristics of the leader, (b) the behaviors and activities of the leader, and (c) the leader's ability to lead in the context of group dynamics. For this reason, the researcher chose the following definition of leadership for this study: "the process of persuasion or example by which a girl induces a person or group to pursue and meet objectives held by her, or shared by her and her followers" (Gardner, 1990, p. 1). The remainder of this section examines some of the predominant leadership theorists whose work supported Bass's transformational-leadership theory (Bass, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Burns, 1978; Covey, 1990; Greenleaf, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2009; Spears, 2010). The researcher categorizes these theories and theorists into three sections: (a) the personality of the transformational leader,

(b) the actions of the transformational leader, and (c) group dynamics and the

transformational leader.

**Personality of the Leader**

**Greenleaf.** Greenleaf coined the term *servant-leadership* in a 1970 essay entitled,

"The Servant as Leader." Servant leaders are those who "serve first" (Greenleaf, 1970,

p. 6) and through "individual efforts, inspired by vision and a servant ethic; make a

substantial difference in the quality of society" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 28). A servant leader

focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which

they belong, whereas traditional leadership generally involves an individual in power at

the "top of the pyramid," (Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2014). The

servant leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and

perform as highly as possible (Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2014).

**Spears.** Spears was a staunch follower of Greenleaf's servant-leadership theory

(Spears Center for Servant Leadership, 2014). Having worked alongside Greenleaf for

many years, Spears discovered more than 5 decades of Greenleaf's unpublished writings

after his death and began to edit and publish them. One of these works was Greenleaf's

"10 Characteristics of a Servant Leader" (Spears, 2010). Spears cited the following

characteristics as a conceptual framework to understand Greenleaf's servant-leadership

theory (Spears, 2010):

1. Listening—The leader is able to hear the voices, needs and concerns of
   followers as well as their own inner voice.

2. Empathy—The leader is able to connect with followers by listening and sharing their feelings.

3. Healing—The leader is invested in healing themselves and healing relationships with others.

4. Awareness—The leader is aware of issues, power dynamics, values, needs of the followers and especially their own positions, strengths, and limitations.

5. Persuasion—The leader seeks to persuade followers rather than impose authority on them.

6. Conceptualization—The leader is a dreamer who is able to see overarching goals and keep followers inspired by the dream.

7. Foresight—The leader is able to use the lessons of the past and the circumstances of the present as a gauge to create and realize their intended future.

8. Stewardship—The leader holds the organization "in trust for the greater good of society" (p. 29).

9. Commitment to the growth of people—The leader is dedicated to the professional and personal growth of each of the followers.

10. Building in community—The leader seeks to bridge gaps of differences among followers and build connection and community in the organization.

Spears admitted this list was not complete, but believed the list communicated the "power and promise" of this concept to those who would be leaders (p. 29).

**Burns.** Also building on the work of Greenleaf's servant-leadership theory, Burns

(1978) first introduced the concept of transforming leadership in descriptive research on

political leaders; this term is now used in organizational psychology as well. According

to Burns, transforming leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each

other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation. Unlike the transactional

approach, based on a mutually motivational relationship, the transforming-leadership

approach rests on the leader's personality, traits, ability to make change through example,

articulation of an energizing vision, and challenging goals. Burns theorized that

transforming and transactional leadership were mutually exclusive styles. Later,

researcher Bass (1990) expanded on Burns's original ideas to develop what is today

referenced as Bass's (2008) transformational-leadership theory.

**Actions or Behaviors of the Leader**

**Covey.** Covey (1990) asserted that a person's character is an amalgamation of

their habits. Covey invited people to adopt the following seven habits as those that all

truly effective people share:

1. Be proactive—Be responsible for choices.

2. Begin with the end in mind—Envision an ideal future that compels action.

3. Put first things first—Be organized and balanced in approach to life and goals.

4. Think "win/win"—Seek mutually beneficial long term solutions.

5. Seek to understand then be understood—Listen to another with empathy and a
   genuine commitment to understand them.

6. Synergize—Leverage the skills of the team by using cooperative teamwork.

7. Sharpen the saw—Take time for physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual renewal.

**Kouzes and Posner.** In defining leadership, Kouzes and Posner believed leadership is not about personality, but about behavior: an observable set of skills and abilities (Leadership Challenge, 2014). In 1982, Kouzes and Posner set out to understand those times when leaders performed their personal best. After conducting hundreds of interviews and reviewing hundreds of case studies and survey questionnaires, five fundamental practices emerged, common to extraordinary leadership achievements (Kouzes & Posner, 2007):

1. Model the way—Exemplary leaders provide an example for others follow.

2. Inspire a shared vision—Exemplary leaders are inspired by their vision and eagerly share and inspire others toward that vision.

3. Challenge the process—Exemplary leaders are willing to confront and accept challenges.

4. Enable others to act—Exemplary leaders are group-centric and promote collaboration and leveraging of skills among the team.

5. Encourage the heart—Exemplary leaders inspire people through acts of caring, encouragement and appreciation.

**Group Processes and the Leader**

**Bolman and Deal.** Bolman and Deal (2003) used *frames* to help leaders navigate their current leadership environment. Their leadership premise suggests that leaders are a function of the environment in which they lead. They believe that framing organizations

helps a leader understand their environment so they can lead more efficiently and

effectively (Bolman & Deal, 2003). To this end, they established the following four

frameworks that help leaders best understand the environment and position themselves

and organizations for success (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

1.   **Structural framework**—Considers the structure of the organization such a

     roles, responsibilities, rules, and other formal aspects that form the foundation

     of the organization.

2.   **Human-resource framework**—Focuses on the needs, talents, skills,

     strengths, and limitations of the people in the organization.

3.   **Political framework**—Underscores issues of power and resource distribution

     in the organization.

4.   **Symbolic framework**—Points to the informal symbols, rituals, and culture of

     the organization.

**Northouse.** Northouse (2013) believed that one cannot examine a leader outside

of the context of a group of followers and cited the following four components that are

central to the phenomenon of leadership (2013):

1.   Leadership is a process. Northouse (2013) believed leadership is not a specific

     quality or characteristic of a person, but rather an ongoing exchange that

     occurs between one who is leading and another who is following. Yukl (2006)

     substantiated this assertion, defining leadership as "the process of influencing

     others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it,

and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish
shared objectives" (p. 8).

2. Leadership involves influence. Northouse (2013) asserted that influence is
   vital in inspiring, motivating and moving individuals and groups toward a
   common goal.

3. Leadership occurs in a group context. Northouse (2013) maintained that
   leadership is a function of a person's ability to manage groups in
   accomplishing a common goal.

4. Leadership includes attention to common goals. Northouse (2013) also
   believed that leadership should focus on goals held jointly by leaders and
   followers that serve a mutual purpose or goal.

It is possible to begin to apply the different theories, definitions, and theorists
mentioned in ways that can be helpful in seeking to understand some unique leadership
challenges faced by African American girls. For example, if an African American girl
were to follow Kouzes and Posner's (2007), directive to "challenge the process" (p. 18)
when she is already perceived as "loud or aggressive" (Morris, 2007, p. 502), she could
meet some resistance to this manner of expressing leadership. In contrast, adopting
Northouse's (2013) leadership model and focusing on common goals (p. 6), a greater
potential for all to be heard, understood, and valued in the process of goal attainment
could ensue, despite gender, race, and class differences that may be held among the group.
Next, the researcher more tightly examines and defines these concepts of leadership as
they relate to adolescent girls.

**Girls**

> The youth of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. It is a well-known refrain,
> often invoked to justify investment in youth leadership training. Increasingly,
> however, organizations, agencies, and political institutions are recognizing the
> role girls can play not in the future but at the present moment, as leaders and
> change agents. (Conner & Strobel, 2007, p. 275)

Leadership models for girls and for boys have critical differences. Girls need the emerging innovative and unconventional means of developing leadership (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005). For instance, Schoenberg and Salmond (2007) noted that researchers in the youth-development field are moving away from the model of one individual leader to a model of shared leadership. According to GSRI, this more inclusive and empowering approach is the one girls value most. In their research with girls in North America, GSRI found, "Girls recognize that leadership needs to change in order to fully engage them. The traditional command and control approach to leadership does not appeal to girls and their desire to improve their world" (as cited in Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007).

One more popular style of leadership for girls and women is transformational leadership. In contrast to transactional leadership, which is a more traditional technique that involves setting objectives, goals, and responsibilities for followers (Rorem & Bajaj, 2012), in transformational leadership, the leader initiates a kind of partnership with followers based on mutual trust and invites collaboration (Rorem & Bajaj, 2012). Researchers suggested "women appear to be particularly effective as transformational leaders" (Rorem & Bajaj, 2012, p. 2) and are more likely to adopt this style of leadership.

To further this notion, others believe this to be true based on the idea that

transformational leaders tend to model traditionally feminine qualities that "encourage

teamwork and collaboration and emphasize the ability to empower, support, and engage

workers" (Eagly & Carli, 2003, p. 809).

Wilson (2004) defined leadership as "the harnessing of the individual and

collective potential of young women to challenge existing realities" (p. 17). To challenge

existing realities, one may need to challenge existing constructs that uphold these realities.

Models of leadership development are one such construct. Wilson's (2004) research

revealed,

> many initiatives that facilitate leadership focus either on information, education
>
> and communication or service provision. While these are very important
>
> strategies for developing leadership, we identified the gap as being a need for
>
> greater analysis and interconnection of the issue, especially the need to make
>
> connections from local to regional to global. (p. 18)

A report issued by Girls Scouts of America stated, "While the topic of gender and

leadership has been widely explored by social scientists and management practitioners,

little or no specific in-depth research has been done on how girls and youth view

leadership itself" (GSRI, 2008, p. 5). The report concluded that girls identify better with

leadership definitions that "imply personal principles, ethical behaviors, and the ability to

effect social change" (GSRI, 2008, p. 8; see Table 1).

Table 1

*How Leadership is Defined by Boys and Girls by Percentage*

| Definitions of leaders | Total | Girls | Boys |
|---|---|---|---|
| One who brings people together to get things done | 69 | 64 | 72 |
| One who stands up for his or her beliefs and values | 62 | 57 | 65 |
| One who tries to change the world for the better | 51 | 46 | 54 |
| One who is in charge of other people and makes decisions that affect them | 49 | 50 | 49 |
| One who has skills that make others respect them | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| One who tries to be the very best at something | 36 | 38 | 36 |

*Note.* Source: *Change It Up: What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership,* by Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2008, retrieved from http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/change_it_up_executive_summary _english.pdf, p. 8.

In addition to understanding how girls define leadership, understanding girls' preferences may be valuable. This knowledge can be beneficial when creating programs and services intended to help girls develop as leaders. Table 2 highlights the types of leaders girls *want* to be.

Table 2

*Types of Leaders Youth Want to Be by Percentage*

| Type of leader | Total | Girls | Boys |
|---|---|---|---|
| One who stands up for their beliefs and values | 65 | 59 | 68 |
| One who brings people together to get things done | 55 | 52 | 58 |
| One who tries to change the world for the better | 55 | 49 | 50 |
| One who has skills that make others respect them | 50 | 49 | 50 |
| One who tries to be the very best at something | 49 | 50 | 49 |
| One who is in charge of other people and makes decisions that affect them | 33 | 34 | 33 |

*Note.* Source: *Change It Up: What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership,* by Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2008, retrieved from http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/change_it_up_executive_summary _english.pdf, p. 8.

In a 2007 report, GSRI published the report, *Exploring Girls' Leadership* (as cited in Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007), which examined literature from the youth-development and youth-leadership fields of study. This report explored continued misperceptions of youths' realities, and community approaches to youth leadership. Researchers found that although ample information about youth leadership in general existed, specific data regarding girls' leadership was scarce. Researchers also revealed several key insights into girls and their views and attitudes about leadership, that GSRI hoped would significantly contribute to the national dialogue on leadership development among girls and young women (as cited in Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007):

- As early as the age of 7, girls have clear preconceptions about leadership.

- Girls develop leadership most effectively by having safe spaces that highlight leadership activities while nurturing self-esteem.

- Emotional, social, and personal development are the cornerstones of successful leadership programs for girls.

- Girls hold a variety of "leadership identities" (Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007, p. 7) and each must feel that their specific identity of leadership is addressed for any leadership program to be successful.

**Losses During Adolescence That Affect Leadership**

During adolescence, many U.S. adolescent girls experience certain losses as they transition to adulthood; all can be devastating. These losses can be emotional, physical, educational, and behavioral (Iglesias & Cornier, 2002).

**Emotional losses.** As a girl moves through adolescence, she may feel less free to experience emotions, and in particular, less free to feel anger, sadness, or pain (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). Exemplary leaders must find their own voices (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). During adolescence, girls often become unsure of themselves and tend to self-silence, often sacrificing their own voice for the sake of saving relationships with their friends (Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007). During this time, they may feel challenged to find, much less *speak,* their truth, especially as a leader.

**Physical losses.** White Western standards of beauty affect many girls in adolescence, leading them to feel sorrowful about their bodies (Baek et al., 2011). In general, teenage girls, especially White girls in the United States, are preoccupied with and critical of their bodies and weight (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). As body image develops in the context of sociocultural factors, such as unrealistic media images of female beauty (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005), girls may see themselves as objects, assessing their value based on how they look (Grabe et al., 2007). Often, the ideal of thinness becomes overwhelming (Harrison & Hefner, 2006, p. 153) which can lead to disordered eating and depressed mood (Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008). Defining and developing leadership under these emotional and physiological circumstances can seem insurmountable for the adolescent girl who is trying to define herself while adhering to the prescribed roles (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006) assigned to women.

**Educational losses.** According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1992) Educational Foundation report, U.S. African American, Latina, and Caucasian girls in their middle school years lose self-esteem and confidence in their

school-related competence, particularly in the academic areas of mathematics, science, and technology. However, in areas other than the school setting, the level of self-esteem in African American girls did not show the sharp drop seen in Latina and Caucasian girls. Researchers did not include Asian American and Native American girls in the study (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). As future leaders, leaders must direct girls toward and give access to skills and information that will allow them to harness their potential as leaders (AAUW, 1992). However, presently, the nation is at risk of losing more than one-half its human potential (AAUW, 1992).

**Behavioral losses**. Teenage girls often act out their disempowerment in their relationships with each other and through covert anger manifested in games of exclusion and inclusion, betrayal, competition, and cruelty (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). These forms of social aggression can serve as a deterrent in a girl's willingness to claim her role as a leader. Instead of facing the risk of "social exclusion, malicious gossip, and friendship manipulation" (Underwood, 2004, p. 265), girls often choose to shy away from roles that can potentially result in these experiences—and go "underground" into psychological hiding (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 103).

The researcher examined the research literature of adolescent girls in the United States and identified some of the challenges that affect their leadership capacities. When factoring in race, culture, socialization, and family dynamics, these challenges become even more complex—particularly for the African American girl. In the following section, the researcher examines the African American girl and the specific dynamics distinctive to her life that shape how she defines, perceives, and expresses herself as a leader.

**African American Girls In Context**

Across the economic divide, Black girls negotiate a variety of potentially stressful

life events that ultimately require them to function in a number of roles: that of

academic achiever, caretaker, and significant contributor to the household—

financially or otherwise. Along with these stressors, Black girls must negotiate a

daily existence under the challenge of both race and gender social disadvantage.

Some scholars suggest that the resulting stressors that come as a result of

experiences with sexism and racism eventually accumulate in the lives of Black

girls, causing psychological distress that over time result in an increased

vulnerability to mental health problems. (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 17)

In spite of this sobering reality, leadership aspirations are high among African

American girls (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011). Limited research describes the

psychosocial development of African American girls (Baric et al., 2010; Evans-Winters,

2005; Rozie-Battle, 2002). The research that does exist focuses primarily on the

challenges and pathologies of African America girls such as poverty, crime, poor self-

esteem, peer pressure, teen pregnancy, obesity, or lack of health and nutrition.

Paradoxically, many African American girls reach educational and personal success

(Buckley & Carter, 2005; Evans-Winters, 2005; GSRI, 2008; Rozie-Battle, 2002; Stevens,

2002).

Some researchers identify this success with an ability to embrace nontraditional

gender roles that align with life satisfaction, positive body image, and academic

achievement (Buckley & Carter, 2005). This premise is consistent with the GSRI (as

cited in Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011) findings that explicitly identified three key

factors as influencing the positive self-concept of African American girls: flexible gender

roles, positive body image, and academic achievement.

  **Flexible gender roles.** Often, society understands gender roles with either

masculine characteristics (typically seen as assertiveness, self-confidence, independence,

responsibility, and individuality) or feminine characteristics (such as nurturance,

emotional expressiveness, dependence, empathy, and community; GSRI, 2008).

Historically, conformity to traditional gender roles was a prerequisite for psychological

well-being. However, more contemporary researchers argued that conformity to

traditional gender roles aligns with poor adjustment. These theorists asserted that

androgyny (e.g., possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics) or masculinity

(e.g., possessing a predominance of instrumental characteristics) is positive for self-

esteem and psychological well-being (Buckley & Carter, 2005, p. 648).

  Because poverty is a reality for many African American girls, they often must

grow up fast. Their economic conditions make early employment and adult-like

responsibilities (i.e., caregiving for younger siblings and managing other household

duties) a necessity. Thus, they have a view of femininity that "includes both hard work

and perseverance; self-reliance and tenacity; care-giving work and wage-earning work;

along with egalitarian notions of sexual equality" (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 16). As a

result, Black girls tend to be assertive, confident, independent, and strong—traits

traditionally viewed as masculine (Buckley & Carter 2005). Ironically, these are also

traits researchers characterized as leadership qualities (GSRI, 2008). Being socialized to

possess such gender-role flexibility, they tend to develop self-confidence and resilience (GSRI, 2008). "For more than 200 years, Black women had to function similarly to their Black male slave counterparts. Black people continue to face unequal access to social, economic and political resources which reduces the viability of gender role differentiation" (Buckley & Carter, 2005, p. 651).

> **Positive body image.**
>
> Body image is also a core component of positive self-concept for African American girls and young women. This is because many African American girls reject the mainstream media's standard of beauty—a characteristic that distinguishes them from Caucasian females—and accept in a positive way their own personal appearance and that of other African American females. (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, pp. 4–5)

Although some researchers supported the idea that rejecting predominantly Eurocentric ideals of beauty contributes to African American girls' positive body image (Baric et al., Buckley & Carter, 2005; Evans-Winters, 2005; GSRI, 2008; Rozie-Battle, 2002; Stevens, 2002), others believe that a girl's view of herself can only be contextualized in the framework of the greater society in which she lives. "African American emerging adults' identity explorations are complicated by the fact that these explorations are taking place within a society they perceive as possessing negative assumptions about them" (Arnett & Brody, 2008, p. 292). Nevertheless, many African American girls are still able to hold a positive sense of self (Duke, 2002).

The remainder of this section will describe the multiple social influences that shape and nurture the African American girl's ability to be successful, not only as a leader, but as a young woman who is challenged to stay resilient through the unique dimensions of race, class, gender, family, media, social constructions, and education. This section concludes by identifying some barriers to African American girls' ability to actualize their leadership potential, as well opportunities that support and advance them as leaders.

**Intersectionality: Race, Class, and Gender**

Feminist and critical-race theories offer the concept of intersectionality to describe analytic approaches that simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage (Cole, 2009). In 1972, both houses of Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment, which aimed to ensure equal rights for women (Francis, 2014). Although the amendment was not adopted, women across the nation began to actively push for its adoption by lobbying, marching, rallying, petitioning, picketing, and participating in hunger strikes and acts of civil disobedience (Francis, 2014) in an effort to show support for the amendment and women's rights.

Two years later a group of African American women formed the Combahee River Collective (Napikoski, 2014) to address the needs of Black women, as members believed the Women's Liberation Movement focused solely on the rights and freedoms of White women (Napikoski, 2014). Feeling excluded from the Women's Liberation Movement, members created the Combahee River Collective (named after the Combahee River Raid

of June 1863, led by Harriet Tubman) to include and validate their place in the Women's

Movement and feminism. They argued, "We … find it difficult to separate race from

class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced

simultaneously" (Cole, 2009). To this end, theirs are known to be one of the earliest

expressions of intersectionality (Cole, 2009)—an idea created in an attempt to explain

how race/ethnicity, gender, and social class, (as well as other classifications) play a role

in one's personal and social identity.

Increasingly, literature emerges examining how race, class, and gender systems

interlock to create social constructions of African American girls (Bettie, 2003; Buckley

& Carter, 2005; Cole, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2007; Nash, 2008; Rozie-

Battle, 2002). African American girls face unique perceptions and obstacles (Morris,

2007) that are not typically imposed on African American boys or Caucasian girls. Scott

(2004) challenged scholars to "consider the multiple locations in which Black girls find

themselves and the contextual variables that influence behaviors" (p. 385).

**Race**

Very little literature exists offering a healthy racial analysis of African American

girls (Evans-Winters, 2005). APA (2014) created a task force on adolescent girls to

address this concern citing, "In examining recent research studies, the lack of data and

information about the psychological development and lives in general of adolescent girls

of color is of great concern" (para 6). Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) defined precocity in

girls as the early adoption of adult social behaviors such as the ability to assert herself,

debate with adults to convince and manipulate them into getting what she desires, as well as her interests in more mature social matters such as makeup and boys.

Many African American girls exhibit these behaviors; however people often interpret these behaviors negatively, perceiving them as challenging authority (Morris, 2007). In observing a seventh-grade mathematics class, Morris (2007) wrote,

> I observed several instances of Black girls being scolded for calling out answers or questioning teachers. This reaction happened less frequently for boys and very rarely for girls of other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, although black girls often actively sought the attention of teachers in classrooms, many teachers would interpret their questioning and assertiveness negatively. (p. 502)

Silencing or denying one's voice is a well-known experience for African American girls (Bettie, 2003; Buckley & Carter, 2005; Cole, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2007; Nash, 2008; Rozie-Battle, 2002). In contrast, exemplary leaders are instructed to "challenge the process" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 18), and "find their voice" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 47). In exploring leadership by African American girls, the questions brought forth in this section are, "How can African American girls express themselves as leaders when their voice is perceived as "highly expressive" and "problematic" (Scott, 2004, p. 385); "a challenge to authority" (Morris, 2007, p. 502); "un-ladylike" (Baek et al., 2011, p. 5); "ghetto," and "loud" (Ispa-Landa, 2013, p. 230)? Du Bois (1903) described this challenge as double-consciousness: a need for African Americans to evaluate themselves through the eyes of others. This challenge often also requires African American girls to adopt a dual sense of herself: one that fits with the

dominant culture, and another that longs to be true to her own nature (Koonce, 2012).

Even before Du Bois (1903) spoke of the concept of double consciousness, Cooper

(1892) introduced the concept of triple consciousness, outlining the difficulties of being

Black, American, and female (Koonce, 2012).

**Class**

Harris (2004) described two kinds of girls: *can-do* girls and *at-risk* girls. The can-

do girls are often White and middle class with an expectation of high academic

achievement, career success, and personal success. Society encourages White girls to be

outspoken, unafraid to take power, ambitious, self-inventing, and confident. These girls'

elders encourage delayed motherhood, as the primary messages are "achievement of

labor market accomplishments and a glamorous consumer lifestyle" (Harris, 2004).

> In contrast, Harris (2004) described at-risk girls as
>
> those that are rendered vulnerable by their circumstances—living in poverty, in
>
> unstable homes, in communities known for violence, drugs, crime and so on. …
>
> Not only are these girls unlikely to be middle class, but they are also generally of
>
> particular ethnic minorities. (p. 25)

These structural disadvantages faced by poor minority groups can often lead to

mislabeling as "poor personal choices, laziness and incompetent family practices" (Harris,

2004, p. 25). Furthermore these disadvantages can lead to depression as researchers

suggested that "Black girls who live within low-income families consider themselves to

be less likeable and lovable than their peers" (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 18). To this end,

these same girls are often perceived as a challenge or threat, based on their attitudes and

communication styles (Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2007) that go without investigation.

Without examining the social, political, economic, and educational structures that enforce

these perceptions, African American girls will continue to be categorized and constructed

as "likely failures" (Harris, 2004, p. 26), or their issues will continue to be addressed by

focusing on skills and competencies, rather than systems and structures.

**Gender**

Individuals internalize their conceptions of masculinity and femininity from their

culture; therefore, characteristics considered to be masculine or feminine largely depend

on one's racial or cultural identity (Buckley & Carter, 2005). Hill (2001) stated that,

"Economic deprivation and racism have made it impractical if not impossible for many

Black people to create sharp divisions between male and female roles or to divide family

labor into gendered categories of economic and domestic work" (p. 1539). As the African

American woman's economic participation is essential to the African American family,

her definition of womanhood has expanded "beyond traditional notions of femininity to

include hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, tenacity, resistance, and sexual equality"

(Buckley & Carter, 2005, pp. 648–649). As a result, African American girls are often

socialized with both traditional gender roles (e.g., care and nurturance) and with

nontraditional gender roles (e.g., worker and financial provider). This dichotomy has also

resulted in many African American girls adopting strong family roles, while learning to

be strong, self-reliant, and independent (Hill, 2001). Can-do girls not only embrace these

values but expect them (Harris, 2004). However, for the African American girl, these

values can prove to be troublesome when teachers, for example, encourage them to

"exemplify an ideal, more docile form of femininity, emblematized in the prescription to act like 'ladies' while at the same time viewing the existing femininity of these girls as coarse and overly assertive" (Morris, 2007, pp. 490–491).

African American girls often get lost in the social sciences and scholarly literature. Evans-Winters (2005) explained this phenomenon:

> There are several reasons why Black female adolescents are absent from the literature. Compared to Black males, Black females have fewer behavior problems. African American girls' behaviors are least likely to affect others; thus, research and the resulting reform efforts tend to focus on Black males. Another factor is that White women have dominated the women's movement, which means their research is conducted on themselves or White adolescents. Last, researchers tend to assume that White females and Black females have similar socialization processes. By ignoring or subsuming Black girls' experiences within White girls' and Black boys' experiences, we overlook the inimitable experience of the Black girl. (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 10)

Race, class, and gender intertwine to play a significant role in determining the present and future aspirations of an African American girl. With so many systems at play, a need exists for a relevant framework that considers the structures and social conditions that influence the African American girl's experiences (Evans-Winters, 2005), while allowing the African American girl to integrate those forces and conditions in a way that promotes a healthy and cohesive sense of self.

**Resilience**

Resilience incorporates two components: exposure to significant stressors or risks, and demonstration of competence and successful adaptation (Braverman, 2001). Applying this definition to African American girls, A. W. Brown and Gourdine (1998) conducted a study on 30 African American girls aged 14–19, residing in the inner city. Their findings indicated that, overall, the girls remained hopeful in spite of the violent communities in which they lived. Findings also failed to show expressions of anger or despair that are most prevalent in research pertaining to African American youth in conditions of poverty (A. W. Brown & Gourdine, 1998). In fact, the focus-group discussions suggested many of the girls shared the values of mainstream society in formulating their future aspirations (A. W. Brown & Gourdine, 1998).

Although this study used a small sample size of 30 girls, it offers a grounding point from which researchers can ask more questions. Questions arise such as, "Why is there such an abundance of research that focuses on the pathologies of African American girls such as teen pregnancy, poor academic performance, and poor health choices"? Considering evidence (such as the aforementioned study) to support the notion that many African American young women do not become pregnant, do excel academically, do engage in healthy life habits, and do remain vigilantly hopeful about their futures, a lack of research exists that highlights this particular population. Some researchers believe this deficit-oriented focus of traditional and current research findings hails back to the original research question itself and the motives of whoever asked the question in the first place (Evans-Winters, 2005).

Another question to consider is, "On what does predominant research focus"? It appears that research tends to focus on the individual (i.e., victim blaming) rather than focusing on systemic structures (i.e., race, class, and gender) that significantly influence the life experiences of the African American girl. When the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008) worked to identify factors that contribute to the resilience of African American children and adolescents, they proposed a reframing of resilience research that would encourage researchers to consider new constructs that would include five widely recognized domains for child development to guide the interpretation of the research: (a) identity development, (b) emotional development, (c) social development, (d) cognitive development, and (e) physical health and development (pp. 3–7).

**Identity development.** How African American girls socialize racially and ethnically is central to their ability to manage issues of racism, marginalization, and conditions of poverty. Establishing a healthy ethnic identity supports girls in managing external influences. These may include negative media images that can impact their self-conception.

**Emotional development.** Emotional intelligence is essential to an African American girl's ability to understand and regulate her feelings and emotions. Creating safe spaces that allow girls to process and navigate these various emotions can enable them to develop the self-confidence to handle conflicts. Self-confidence, in turn, may lead to thriving more responsibly under stressful conditions.

**Social development.** Without healthy social development, many African American girls often resort to drastic, often unhealthy measures to preserve social connections. At time, preservation means suppressing parts of themselves to gain social acceptance (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). By creating stronger community ties through athletics, church affiliations, community organizations, and other groups, African American girls build stronger social identities, resulting in healthier self-perceptions.

**Cognitive development.** In many cases, educators and social scientists measure adolescent development based on cognitive abilities. In other words, stakeholders focus on information processing, intelligence, reasoning, and problem solving (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Piaget (1928) characterized adolescence as a time when abstract thought emerges. During this time, African American girls begin to think about larger moral, ethical, and social implications, especially as they relate to the themselves (Piaget, 1928). Mentorship can play a key role in helping African American girls reconcile these emerging thoughts and concepts.

**Physical health and development.** Compared to their Caucasian counterparts, African American girls were 80% more likely to be overweight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Like youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, "African American youth who are in good physical health are more likely to experience positive mental health, fewer behavioral and social difficulties, and sharper or more responsive cognitive functioning" (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008, pp. 6–7). Much of the current literature explains

resilience as "an extraordinary quality that distinguishes relatively few extraordinary children" (Braverman, 2001, p. 3). However, researchers found "resilient outcomes to be present when a small number of systems are operating well" (Braverman, 2001, p. 3). When analyzing the resilience of African American girls, some systems that can greatly influence them are healthy racial socialization, safe spaces to be heard and validated, community support, sound cognitive aptitudes, and health.

**Family and Parent Structures**

African American parents have been instrumental in helping their children develop a positive self-concept and identity through socialization. Parents transmit values, beliefs, and ideas about lifestyles based on cultural knowledge of the adult tasks and competencies needed for appropriate functioning in society (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Because race has historically been a key factor in the lives of African Americans, African American parents and families have been charged with "preparing their children for the realities of being Black in America" (Hill, 2001, p. 498). With the family as the strongest source of influence in the average person's life, much can be learned by examining how the family of African American girls affect their self-confidence and potentially their perceptions and behaviors as leaders. Three factors in the family domain are rooted in girls' identity as leaders: mothers, racial pride, and religiosity.

**Mothers.** The functioning of the family plays a more significant role than the structure of the family. In other words, "regardless of whether an African American girl is from a single parent or a two-parent family home, a positive relationship with her

parent(s) is more critical to her positive self-development" (Rozie-Battle, 2002, p. 61). In

this regard, mothers greatly impact African American girls' leadership experiences and

opportunities (GSRI, 2008). More than eight in 10 African American girls (82%) say

their mothers encourage them to be leaders, followed by fathers (59%), friends (51%) and

older relatives (50%; Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011).

For many African American girls who face poverty, two primary facets of their

strength and resilience are how they see themselves in the future, and how their mothers

care for and involve themselves in their lives. This mother–daughter connection may act

as an enabling agent in providing a girl with an extended view of her future and allow her

to feel hopeful and in control. Thus, she may be more likely to be able to avoid sexual

risk taking, substance use, delinquency, and violence (Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy,

2004). Additionally, this connection between mother and daughter links to self-esteem,

good coping strategies, and strong ethnic identity among girls (Baek et al., 2011). These

data suggest a strong tie between African American mothers and their effect on the

development of their African American daughters.

**The Church.** The African American church has had a long tradition in the

African American community (Rozie-Battle, 2002). Researchers supported the contention

that greater levels of religiosity—including attendance, belief in God, and self-

identification with a religious community—align with higher self-esteem and more

positive psychological functioning (Baek et al., 2011). Church is the third place, outside

of school and home, in which African American girls find opportunities for engagement

and advocacy and where leadership experiences have been positive (Fleshman &

Schoenberg, 2011). Girls who believe in God, attend church or religious activities, tend to sense a higher purpose to their lives, and express empathy for others may become engaged leaders and advocates for their community (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Their religious involvement has an impact as a protective factor on crime and results in lower likelihood to become involved in the juvenile-justice system (Rozie-Battle, 2002). Further, religious engagement impacts decisions surrounding the sexual activity of African American girls including less sexual risk-taking, greater self-efficacy in communicating with sexual partners, and more positive attitudes toward condom usage (Jones-DeWeever, 2009).

For emerging leaders, the church may provide a unique context for African American girls to engage in social experiences that can teach values and encourage them to make moral decisions (Williams, 2003). Through programs and activities such as church school, Bible studies, youth programs, choirs, dramatics, and spiritual dancing, churches may provide multiple avenues of opportunities for teens to find their voice and develop a moral compass for adulthood (Williams, 2003).

In a report researched and written by Jones-DeWeever of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, findings showed,

> Overall, girls who highly valued such a [spiritual] relationship also tended to do better at school, were more likely to have excellent relationships at home, and to feel good about themselves. For example, over half (53 percent) of those who indicated that having a spiritual relationship was very important to them indicated that they received mostly A's or B's on their report card, compared with only

about one-third (33 percent) of those who said that such a relationship was only

somewhat important. (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 40)

**Racial pride.** Although most adolescent girls begin to answer the question, "Who

am I?" African American girls must also ask, "Who am I … as an African American?"

One way to confront these challenges faced by African American adolescent girls is

through instilling racial pride. African American children and adolescents who learn that

others have negative perspectives of African Americans but who have these messages

mediated by parents, peers, and other important adults are less likely to have negative

outcomes and more likely to be resilient in adverse conditions (APA Task Force on

Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Families may nurture

and encourage the development of youths, instilling cultural and racial pride that

counteracts these negative messages from the dominant society (Nicolas et al., 2008).

Positive racial identity contributes to the strength and resilience of African American

children and adolescents (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children

and Adolescents, 2008).

The most commonly transmitted racial-socialization messages by African

American parents are those regarding cultural socialization. Parents intend these

messages to instill racial pride and knowledge, and prepare youth for bias, equipping

them to encounter racial barriers and biases in society (Wang & Huguley, 2012). The

ability for African American girls to hold a positive perspective of race becomes essential

in their ability to "envision a positive future" and "impact their choices" (GSRI, 2008).

How African American girls internalize their racial identity accounts in part for their self-esteem. For example, African American girls who identify as "Afrocentric"— being strongly in touch with their racial heritage—are more likely to say they are happy than African American girls who do not describe themselves this way (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011). Overall, the more African American girls hold a positive perspective on their culture, the more likely they are to feel content with themselves and their lives (Buckley & Carter, 2005).

> Likewise, to the extent that they are successful in internalizing a positive conception of their racial identity and embracing egalitarian gender role attitudes as part of the process of self-understanding, the more likely Black girls are to hold favorable views of their physical appearance, fitness, academic achievement, career aspirations, and attach an importance to health. (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 18)

The African American family is a central influence in the lives of African American girls. Having strong bonds with parents; a structured place, such as a church to exercise her leadership and moral acumen; and being powerfully rooted in her racial identity all play a significant role in the development of her self-confidence, resilience, and resistance to the day-to-day stressors of her life.

## Media

The media are an important part of most adolescents' lives and offer numerous examples of what women are like and what their role is in society. Unfortunately, however, these examples include many images that hyper sexualize girls and

women which can distort their ideals about womanhood and femininity. (Gordon,

2008, p. 246)

Black media can also be equally damaging to the African American female

persona—especially in the hip hop music industry. Strong claims exist that African

American women are oversexualized in the media. These claims can be found in the

analyses of the images presented by the music industry (Gordon, 2008). These images are

driven, not by accuracy or social responsibility, but by the capitalist culture that "portrays

them in the manner(s) that is most profitable regardless of whether such portrayals are

accurate or not" (Nicolas et al., 2008, p. 262), leaving the identity of girls to the highest

bidder. These images, which continue to be circulated, can exert influence on the African

American girl as she endeavors to negotiate the anxious passage into womanhood.

**Black media and sexual scripting.** Although the mass media present more

representations of African American women for consumption than ever before, beliefs

and attitudes about African American women's sexuality appear to be sanctioned by a

culture that continues to embrace stereotypes about race and sexuality (Stephens &

Phillips, 2003), even in the Black media. The impact of hip-hop music/media and its

power to influence African American girls' sexuality has begun to garner attention in the

scholarly community (J. D. Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Emerson, 2002; Rose, 1994; Ross

& Coleman, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2002; Stokes, 2007).

Sexual-scripting theory centers on perceptions and expressions of sexual behavior

in a culture. These cultural and social constructions of sexuality "determine a person's

choice of sexual actions and the qualitative experience related to those acts" (Ross &

Coleman, 2011, p. 158). Because many of the sexual scripts available for African American women and girls have been shaped in a context laden with messages of racism and sexism (Emerson, 2002; Ross & Coleman, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2002; Townsend, Neilands, Jones, & Jackson, 2010), African American girls who are at a critical point of identity formation can fall prey to sexual socialization. This theory describes the process by which a young person is frequently exposed to themes about gender and sexual behavior that shape their "developing sense of what is expected sexually for males and females and may affect subsequent behavior as well" (J. D. Brown & L'Engle, 2009, p. 132).

   "Black girls are not seeing positive images of who they are and what they can be" (West, 2008, para 3). "Looking at the sexual imagery really impacts on the functioning of teenage girls" (West, 2008, para 3). Rap music identifies young Black women in five sexual personas: (a) diva, a woman who trades sexual favors for luxury; (b) gold digger, a woman who trades sexual favors for basic necessities and leaves men bankrupt; (c) freak, a sexual powerhouse; (d) gangster bitch, a "tough" girl; and (e) baby mama, a child's needy mother (West, 2008).

   When African American girls continue to download these messages visually (through videos) and audibly (through lyrics and music), they may begin to view themselves through the lens of the rappers. By adopting the persona the media presents and acting in accordance with that persona, African American girls begin to participate in their own self-objectification (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011).

**White-mediated mainstream beauty.**

Of the fourteen million girls between the ages of 12 and 19 in the United States, it

is estimated that more than half read *Seventeen,* the best-selling teen magazine.

Although the majority of readers of the three largest teen magazines. *Seventeen,*

*Teen,* and *YM,* are White, the magazines have a significant audience among girls

of color: *Seventeen* reaches 44 percent of "ethnic females 12 to 19" (defined as

African American, "other" race, or from a Spanish-speaking household); *Teen* and

*YM* each reach 34 percent of these same girls. African-American girls ages 12 to

19 make up the single largest non-White group of readers—comprising on

average, about 12 percent of the readership for each of the three major teen titles.

(Duke, 2000, p. 368)

Although African American girls make up a large percentage of readership for

mainstream magazines, a growing body of work suggests that the Caucasian feminine

ideals touted throughout these magazines have little or no effect on their self-concept,

largely because these ideals do not conform to their cultural norms as African Americans

(Baek et al., 2011; Bissell & Hays, 2010; Duke, 2000, 2002; Fleshman & Schoenberg,

2011; Quinlan et al., 2012; Ross & Coleman, 2011; Schooler et al., 2004). Instead,

African American girls tend to articulate their conceptions of beauty in comparison to

others in their own social group, rather than those conceptions popularized by the broader

culture (Bissell & Hays, 2010; Duke, 2000).

**The School Environment**

No shortage of literature argues the many inequities in education throughout the United States. "Disparities in school funding, overcrowding, low teacher expectations for students of color, absence of African American teachers and limited access to higher-level courses" (Nicolas et al., 2008, p. 267) all play a role in African American youths' educational experiences; especially those on the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Despite these challenges, African American girls, overall, have higher rates of academic achievement than African American boys—even though they fare worse than their Caucasian counterparts with lower levels of high school graduation and college degrees (Child Trends Data Bank, 2011).

Aside from the quantitative data available for African American girls' educational performance, a lack of literature addresses the challenges and experiences of African American girls in the classroom (Baek et al., 2011; Evans-Winters, 2005). Researchers on adolescent girls and conditions in the school environment suggested several potential stressors: puberty and its timing in relation to school transition, changes in school environment, unequal opportunities in the school environment, and inconsistent expectations of being females (Muno & Keenan, 2000). These forces may contribute to several unhealthy outcomes for girls, including persistent low self-esteem, unfavorable self-image, academic underachievement, decreased confidence and achievement in mathematics and science, and higher levels of depression (Muno & Keenan, 2000). For African American girls, these stressors become multiplied when factoring in the intersections of race, class, and gender (Cole, 2009; Morris, 2007; Nash, 2008).

In discussing African American girls in the school environment, first, it is important to reiterate that the preponderance of the limited literature regarding African American girls in general focuses on their pathologies rather than their wellness and achievements. Literature regarding their educational and classroom experiences appear to be no different (Evans-Winters, 2005). Studies show that African American girls confront special challenges in the classroom that may disrupt their ability to make the most of their educational experience (Jones-DeWeever, 2009): (a) teacher perceptions, (b) academic achievement and racial-identity conflicts, and (c) lower expectations of teachers and administrators.

**Teacher perceptions.** Educators often place African American girls in the position of negotiating gender, race, and class discrimination. Although many African American girls hold an optimistic view of their academic capacities (Townsend et al., 2010), to be successful in school they also must contend with personal biases among school personnel (Evans-Winters, 2005). Some researchers suggested that teachers tend to focus less on the academic performance of Black girls than on their social decorum, in an effort to promote what they perceive to be more "ladylike" behavior (Baek et al., 2011; Jones-DeWeever, 2009; Morris, 2007). These personal prejudices also manifest in girls being more frequently cited for dress-code violations and issues of talking back or being loud, and as a result, educators level more disciplinary infractions against them (Jones-DeWeever, 2009; Koonce, 2012; Morris , 2007). As a result, school personnel spend more time correcting their speech and dress patterns, and less time promoting their academic skills (Morris, 2007).

**Academic achievement and racial-identity conflicts.** Like many girls, African American girls face "the task of choosing between the competing goals of popularity and academic achievement; and social relations often take precedence over intellectual interests" (Gurian, 2008, p. 2). Factoring in the development of racial identity, these competing goals become even more complex as African Americans girls consistently juggle multiple erroneous perceptions and stereotypes (Townsend et al., 2010). When they internalize these negative perceptions, some avoid affiliations and activities associated with their racial group, seeking to position themselves as high academic achievers (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). In contrast, some African American girls compromise their academic success in an effort to show solidarity with their peers (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Some will even intentionally underachieve because they believe the display of superior academic competence often means "the abandonment of their own cultural and ethnic knowledge and integrity" (Howard, 2003, p. 6). When a girl has strong ties to her ethnic group, these concerns diminish considerably as strong ties between pride in ethnic-group membership align with positive feelings about academic performance (Townsend et al., 2010).

**Lowered expectations from teachers and administration.** Researchers suggested that teachers' expectations of students vary with race and gender, citing that they "look for and reinforce achievement-oriented behaviors in White students more often than they do in Black students" (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 26). Expectations held by teachers and administrators can place students on specialized tracks that boost or cripple

their chances of fully partaking in the resources available for their success. An example is

that many schools place

> Whites and Asians into advanced and college preparatory tracks, while
>
> disproportionately placing African Americans and Latinos in lower tracks which
>
> leaves African American students typically excluded from advanced placement
>
> college preparatory, and science technology, engineer, and mathematics (STEM)
>
> academic tracks. (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012, p. 201)

African American girls and women occupy a paradoxical position in education.

Although one could argue they are at risk because of their history and continued

experiences of economic and social oppression in the United States, one could also view

them as resilient, given their educational achievements and attainment (Chavous &

Cogburn, 2007).

**Community Support and Mentors**

With an estimated 3 million youth engaged in formal one-to-one mentor

relationships, mentoring is one of the most popular social interventions in U.S. society

(Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). A growing number of organizations espouse and uphold the

value of providing mentorship for African American girls, such as Black Girls Rock, The

Black Girls Corner, Girls Who Rule the World, Afro Puffs and Ponytails, League of

Black Women, LeadHERship Academy, and Her Best Self. As mentioned earlier in this

paper, the need for African American girls to have safe spaces to connect and share is an

essential aspect of their social, emotional, and leadership development. Further, literature

on girls' leadership conveys the importance of programs and relationships that exist

outside the formal school setting; programs specifically designed to allow girls to discover and express their own voices (Baric et al., 2010).

Some researchers maintained that "mentoring relationships with girls can be challenging" (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, & Lawrence, 2013, p. 47) because of the ways in which girls view and participate in relationships, including what they value and how they negotiate autonomy and connection, posing challenges for their relationships with adults. Others argued that African American girls, in particular, are not only receptive to mentoring, but require healthy mentoring relationships with older individuals as the maturity and wisdom of elders aids the role-model formulation process (Stevens, 2002, p. 116). Supportive relationships with older women, grounded in "mutuality, trust, and empathy" (Deutsch et al., 2013, p. 45), "make it possible for most African American girls to develop confidence and an appreciation of their strengths and beauty" (Stevens, 2002, p. 116). Engaging in a "warm and secure relationship with an important other person has even been linked with attitudes of acceptance and appreciation toward one's body as well as adaptive eating patterns" (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 1529).

As people of African descent traditionally value relationships that hold beliefs of communalism, respect for elders, interdependence, and ethnic cultural values (Belgrave, 2002), African American girls stand to benefit from relationships where these values are shared and appreciated. They are also more likely to have a positive understanding of female-leadership possibilities if they are exposed to leadership modeled by women who make up the same racial and ethnic composition (Rorem & Bajaj, 2012). In this way, the

concept of leadership becomes more achievable and proximate to the young women

being served.

## Gaps in the Literature

This literature review leaves a significant aspect of the African American girls'

lived experiences virtually unexplored. Researchers moderately detailed her experiences

living at the intersections of race, class, and gender; resilience theory partially recognizes

her resilience and her ability to overcome innumerable challenges and obstacles; to some

extent, researchers documented her roles in the home and family that inform her self-

identity; works fairly support her experiences in the classroom , and, in some measure,

record her need for role models and mentors. However, the factors that lead to, enhance,

and support the African American girl's leadership are nearly nonexistent.

Researchers revealed African American girls' insights regarding their lived

experiences in education and the classroom (Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2007).

However, minimal research clearly articulates the factors that predict or describe an

African American girl's experiences, perceptions, or attitudes regarding leadership,

especially from her own point of view and in her own voice. The present study sought to

address this gap. Hearing the stories, insights, and perspectives of African American girl

leaders adds to the breadth and depth of the existing body of literature.

## Summary

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the African American girl's challenges in

navigating the intersections of race, class, and gender; her socioeconomic condition that

requires her to be flexible in assuming traditionally masculine (provider) roles and

feminine (caretaker) roles in her family; her struggle to overcome the many negative

images, messages, and narratives leveled against her and her need to manage conflicting

identities as academic high achiever juxtaposed to racial and ethnic loyalist. Furthermore,

all of these conditions reconcile "in a society that commonly marginalizes her worth,

ignores her struggles, and consistently fails to address her distinct concerns through

social or policy action" (Jones-DeWeever, 2009, p. 8). Nonetheless, researchers

suggested that African American girls are more likely to aspire to roles of leadership than

their Caucasian counterparts. The following factors appear to inspire their resiliency and

hopefulness: (a) strong families (in particular mothers) who promote racial pride and

ethnic identity, (2) safe spaces where they can share and voice themselves, and

(3) mentors who understand their lived experiences and provide a model to which they

can aspire.

Chapter two provided an overview of literature on a global and national

perspective of girls, leadership theories, and African American girls' lived experiences,

as a baseline to better understand how they perceive, define, and express their leadership

potential. Chapter three contains the methodology of this qualitative research study,

which includes the overview and purpose of this research, the selected method, the design

of the study, the process for selecting participants, data-collection protocols and

procedures, data-analysis procedures, and ethical issues.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological study gives voice to African American girls to understand how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. This study addresses several variables that can have negative effects on African American girls and how they self-identify as leaders. One variable is the media and how Black women and girls are portrayed. These images often shape how they view and potentially express themselves (Gordon, 2008). Another variable is the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, which plays a significant role in determining present and future aspirations (Evans-Winters, 2005). The negotiation of gender roles in the family environment is another variable that can inform their conceptions of femininity and leadership (Duke, 2002; Harris, 2004). Finally, the school environment is a significant variable for African American girls where they are often subject to personal biases and misconstructions of their communication styles (Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2007).

Even with these variables present in many of their lives, researchers suggested that many African American girls remain resilient and hopeful about their futures and continue to embrace opportunities for leadership (A. W. Brown & Gourdine, 1998; Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011; GSRI, 2008). In this study, the researcher sought to capture their stories and gain a deeper understanding of how, in the midst of these many variables, they remain optimistic (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011) about their futures and

confident about themselves as leaders (GSRI, 2008), especially during one of the most turbulent stages in a girl's life: adolescence.

The findings from this study have implications for how educators, community organizations, social scientists, and families understand and nurture the leadership potential of African American girls. Also, as African American girls begin to hear stories from other girl leaders that reflect their own lived experiences, the findings from this study could lead to them having a healthier analysis of their own leadership capacities. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the purpose and research questions, a detailed explanation of the research methods, study design, participants, the setting in which the research took place, data-collection protocols and procedures, and data-analysis procedures.

## Overview of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of African American girls and examine how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. The data collection consisted of interviews that helped answer the following questions that guided this study:

1. How do African American girls define, perceive, and express leadership?

2. What do African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for their leadership development?

3. What do African American girls identify as a motivator for them to express their leadership?

## Methods

This qualitative phenomenological research study examined a sample of African American girls and how they came to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. the researcher selected a phenomenological design for this study because it was essential to obtain the rich stories and thick descriptions from the respondents, in their own voices. Through a mix of purposive and snowball sampling of African American girls, the aim was to reveal central themes and patterns that paint a picture of African American girls and the experiences that informed their leadership identity.

For this study, the researcher interviewed 12 African American girls, aged 18–19, who were currently serving in a leadership capacity in their schools, communities, or churches. Participants were engaged in prior programs the researcher facilitated, or were referred by parents, church leaders, community leaders, or teachers the researcher knew. The researcher recognizes the small sample size and its narrow criterion of race, gender, and age. The rationale for this narrow sample is to ensure a deeper, richer exploration of this group.

### Design

#### Qualitative Research

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological design for this study. Qualitative researchers assume that individuals construct social reality in the form of meanings and interpretations and that these constructions tend to be transitory and situational; therefore, phenomenology is the dominant methodology researchers use to discover these meanings and interpretations (Gall et al., 2003). The benefit of a

qualitative research design lies in the rich, comprehensive, and holistic data that comes from respondents. Although quantitative research provides clear and measurable data, it can often omit key narrative information that could be invaluable to findings of the study.

**Phenomenological Research**

Phenomenologists, like those using other qualitative research traditions, seek to understand how individuals construct, and are constructed by, social reality (Gall et al., 2003). Because the researcher holds a passion for and history with African American girls, this methodology was particularly appropriate. This methodology typically involves a researcher who is, "intimately connected with the phenomena being studied and comes to know himself within his experiencing of this phenomena" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 481).

Little research exists regarding African American girls in general (Baek et al., 2011; Evans-Winters, 2005), but in particular, little research describes the African American girl in the context of leadership. The limited information that does exist has predominantly been typified by quantitative designs that fail to address African American girls' feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs. Because this study aimed to give voice to African American girls through the sharing of their own lived experiences, a phenomenological design was ideal to accomplish this aim.

Having strong ties to participants, as well as the community in which the research takes place, the researcher took precautions to minimize bias and assumptions by using the method of *bracketing.* Bracketing is a process of putting aside of one's own beliefs and attitudes about the phenomenon under investigation (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Researchers

can apply bracketing in several ways (Tufford & Newman, 2012). For this study, the researcher used two methods of bracketing.

The first method was to engage in interviews with an outside source to uncover and bring into awareness preconceptions and biases (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher engaged a university professor from a major university to serve as this outside source. The university professor helped in vetting the research questions to ensure they were not leading questions and did not contain any implicit biases. The professor also helped in examining the themes and patterns the researcher identified during data analysis. Finally, the professor allowed for authentic dialogue throughout the research process about experiences and findings.

The second method was reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling is a deliberative process begun prior to defining the research question; researchers then identify preconceptions throughout the research process. Maintaining a reflexive journal enhanced the researcher's ability to sustain an impartial stance. Engaging in personal self-reflections concerning factors such as the researcher's reasons for conducting the study, her assumptions regarding race and gender, her personal value system, or any role conflicts with participants allowed her to better confront and manage biases throughout the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

## Sample

### Overview

The total sample consisted of 12 African American girls, aged 18–19, who were actively engaged in leadership roles in their school, community, or church. Three

participants were obtained through purposive sampling. The remaining nine participants

through snowball sampling.

## Sample Definitions and Rationale

For this study, African American girl was defined as a U.S. girl of Black African

descent who is a descendent of Africans brought to America through the trans-Atlantic

slave trade. The researcher's intention in specifying African Americans in this way lays

in the unique experiences of this population throughout U.S. history. For example, many

African Americans grew up in Black neighborhoods where they learned the history of

slavery and the cruelty it inflicted on Black Americans from older generations.

Furthermore, Black Americans have usually experienced first hand and in their

communities the legacies of racism that still exist in the United States; and they usually

see racism as the main cause of poverty and suffering among their people (Conteh, 2013).

In contrast, African American immigrants, who for many years have endured civil wars,

military coups, and other problems specific to their country, reported they are happy to be

in a country that offers them freedom from these atrocities (Conteh, 2013). How these

two groups internalize their future and their potential as leaders in this country could be

vastly different.

For this study, *leadership role* is a position in which a girl, who by formal

election or appointment, has responsibilities to or for a specific group or persons. The

researcher used this definition for two reasons: to create clear and easily identifiable

criteria in the selection process, and to create homogeny among participants when

identifying themes and patterns during data analysis. The leadership environments in

which the girls assumed these roles ranged from student government or other student-leadership activities, to community organizations, athletic teams, church groups, or job positions.

The researcher obtained three participants for this study through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is the process of selecting participants who are likely to be rich in information pertaining to the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2003). Researchers use purposive sampling to achieve a thorough and comprehensive understanding of selected individuals (Gall et al., 2003); therefore, the method requires predetermined criteria. The criteria in this case were African American girls, aged 18–19, who were actively engaged in leadership roles.

The rationale for this sampling method lies in the nature of the study: to explore a small population; not to produce generalizable data or achieve population validity. Therefore it was important to purposefully select participants who could illuminate answers to the questions of the study (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is also homogenous. Homogenous purposive sampling entails intentionally selecting a sample of similar cases so the particular group the sample represents can be studied in depth (Gall et al., 2003). Because this study focused on African American girls aged 18–19, who were actively engaged in leadership roles, the criterion of homogenous sampling was met.

The researcher obtained nine participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling "involves asking well-situated people to recommend cases to study" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 179). At the onset of this study, the researcher intended to obtain all participants through purposive sampling, assuming that her vast database of individuals who fit the

criteria for this study would be more easily accessed. However, this study was conducted

over the summer when many potential participants were unavailable. As a secondary

approach, the researcher obtained the remaining nine participants by asking friends,

family, and associates of the three primary participants for recommendations of

additional individuals who could be included in the study.

In determining the appropriate number of participants to interview in a qualitative

study, saturation became a key element of consideration. Saturation is the point in data

collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly

constructed theory (Given, 2008). Hence, a researcher assesses the point at which no

more data needs to be collected. When a theory appears to be robust, with no gaps or

unexplained phenomena, saturation has been achieved and the resulting theory is more

easily constructed (Given, 2008). In a study involving 60 in-depth interviews testing

saturation occurrences, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation occurred

within the first 12 interviews, although basic elements for metathemes were present as

early as six interviews. This study included 12 participants. Metathemes began to emerge

in the first eight interviews.

**Process**

Through the implementation of girls' leadership programs for nearly a decade, the

researcher has a longstanding history with African American girls and leadership

development programs. The researcher maintain a database of African American girls

who fit the criteria indicated for this study. As indicated earlier in this paper, many

participants were not available and therefore the researcher took the following steps:

1. Twenty-six individual were called who the researcher believed met the criteria of the study.

2. The researcher narrowed the 26 possible participants to nine who fully met the criteria.

3. The nine individuals were called, of whom three were available.

4.  The researcher asked each of the three individuals if they knew of anyone who could be included in the study, based on the criteria of the study.

5. Upon recommendation of the individuals, the researcher called one or a combination of parents/family members, church affiliates, or mentors to inquire about potential participants for this study.

6. Once the researcher identified the remaining nine respondents, the researcher sent by e-mail the "Invitation to Participate in Study Letter" (see Appendix A) to participants.

7. Upon receipt of the "Invitation to Participate in Study Letter," the researcher scheduled the interviews.

**Setting**

The initial plan for this study was focused on the Pacific northwestern geographic region of the United States. However, once the method of snowball sampling was incorporated, the locations of participants became more diverse. As a result, the final sample consisted of five participants from the Pacific northwest region, four participants from the southern region, and three participants from the eastern region of the United

States. To maintain consistency of interview protocol, the researcher interviewed all

respondents by recorded teleconference.

The diversity of the locations proved to be a beneficial aspect of the study as

many of the common perceptions and attitudes that girls held about leadership were not

specific to a particular region. Other variations in the sample included that three

participants selected for this study were young women who have been involved in

programs the researcher facilitated. the researcher obtained nine through snowball sample.

Respondents varied in academic performance. Some were academically high-achieving

whereas others struggle academically for various reasons. Some respondents fell on the

lower end of the socioeconomic status whereas others came from middle- to upper-

income families. Respondents also came from varying family structures and religious

affiliations.

Finally, four participants in the study had to overcome social/emotional issues and

therefore currently attend an Alternative School Program, through which they elected to

participate in a personalized learning experience and retrieve credit in a small, supportive

school setting. These programs primarily comprise students who may have been long-

term suspended or expelled from a comprehensive high school requiring the successful

completion of a behavior-modification program while continuing to work toward their

high school diploma. Despite these variations among the sample, all participants

participated in leadership roles in their schools, churches, athletic teams, or other

community organizations.

**Data-Collection Protocols and Procedures**

As phenomenological research seeks to understand how individuals construct and are constructed by social reality (Gall et al., 2003), interviews are a data-collection method that can be an effective tool to capture data that is not directly observable (Gall et al., 2003). For this study of African American girls and the concept of leadership, the researcher used interviews to uncover the core beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes African American girls about leadership and how they came to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. The rationale for this method lay in the premise that interviews allow respondents to speak in their own words, which can reveal rich data such as inner experiences, opinions, values, and interests (Gall et al., 2003).

The data collected holds its value to the degree that it results in a "good report" (Weiss, 1994). A good report is one that informs the audience about matters that are important to them, while presented in a form that can be grasped as a whole (Weiss, 1994). Weiss (1994) believed it was equally important for each individual part of the report to work cohesively in the context of the whole report—creating coherence. This coherence can be achieved in two ways:

- Diachronically—Data are presented chronologically. In this case, the researcher would start with the childhood of each respondent and create parallels in their development, through preteen and adolescent years.

- Synchronically— Data are presented thematically. Using this approach the researcher would describe and partition the data into sectors, themes, and

patterns (Weiss, 1994) such as common habits, experiences, or events shared

by respondents.

This study used the synchronic approach. Although the diachronic approach is

contextualized by the evolution of time and could be more engaging to the reader as a

"plot unfolding story line" (Weiss, 1994, p. 56), the researcher's aim for this study was to

understand fixed structures, themes, patterns, and experiences shared by respondents as

they relate to their beliefs and attitudes about leadership.

**Interview**

Much of the important work in the social sciences that has contributed in

fundamental ways to the understanding of society and people has been based on

qualitative interview studies that provided rich descriptions of data that could have been

provided in no other way (Weiss, 1994). Constructing fixed-question open-response

interviews allows the interviewer to ask each respondent the same carefully crafted

questions; however, participants may answer them freely in their own words (Weiss,

1994).

The type of interview used in this study was semistructured—an interview style in

which the interviewer asks a series of structured questions and then probes more deeply

with open-ended questions to obtain more information (Gall et al., 2003). Patton (2002)

described three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open-ended

interviews: (a) The informal conversational interview, which relies entirely on

spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction; (b) the general interview

guide approach, which involves outlining a set of topics to be explored with each

respondent; and (c) the standardized open-ended interview, which involves a predetermined sequence and wording of the same set of questions to be asked of each respondent to minimize bias.

Using a mix of the standardized open-ended questions and the general-interview-guide technique allowed for a natural, organic approach intended to create a more relaxed environment and a deeper excavation of data from respondents (Patton, 2002). Finally, based on personal experiences interviewing young adults, and the number of questions the researcher asked in the interviews, the researcher designated 90 minutes for the length of the interviews. However, the average length of time for each interview in this study was 32 minutes.

**Interview-Question Construction**

As stated earlier, for this semistructured interview, standardized open-ended questions and an interview guide were used. The general-interview-guide approach requires researchers possess the ability to think quickly in the moment (Gall et al., 2003) but provides a safeguard against missing or forgetting questions. The researcher created an interview guide that specified the topics to be explored, guiding questions to ask, the sequence to ask the questions, and guidelines to open and close the interview (Gall et al., 2003). This approach provided focus and organization for the interview.

The rationale for this approach was to collect rich qualitative data, but because everyone was asked the same questions, the researcher could more easily categorize and analyze responses. Although Weiss (1994) cautioned against "focusing too closely on the interview guide at the cost of attention to the respondent and the flow of the interview"

(p. 49), the researcher had strong knowledge of the subject matter and the likelihood of

the interview guide serving as a distraction was minimal.

The researcher designed questions to mitigate the potential for social-desirability

responses. Using the neutral-question method, questions invited a reflective response

rather than a response that may be interpreted as good, bad, right, or wrong. For example

instead of asking "What hinders you as a leader?" the neutral alternative question was,

"Can you please complete this sentence: I think more African American girls would be

leaders if…" Most importantly, the researcher designed questions to most effectively

answer the three research questions for this study. Table 3 provides a guide to illustrate

the rationale and congruency between the research questions and interview questions.

**Interview Pilot Test**

The researcher conducted a pilot study with three African American girls aged

18–19 to ensure the interview questions and procedures would yield substantive data. A

pilot test is a small-scale investigation that can be conducted with as few as two to three

individuals, to develop and test (in this case) the interview procedures the researcher will

use in the study, determine the merit of the procedures, and correct obvious flaws (Gall et

al., 2003). A single pilot interview can suggest where a guide is superfluous and where it

is insufficient (Weiss, 1994). The pilot interviews for this study were integral in gaining

insights into the questions, becoming aware of problems that could occur during the

interviews, and establishing the interview as a valid source of data collection for the

research study (Gall et al., 2003). Upon completion of the pilot, the researcher made the

necessary adjustments to the questions.

Table 3

*Research Questions and Interview Questions Correlations*

| Research question | Correlating interview questions | Rationale |
| --- | --- | --- |
| RQ 1: How do African American girls define, perceive and express leadership? | What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word "leader"? | Allows respondent to give direct responses regarding her leadership perceptions and attitude. |
| | Think of two or three leaders (male or female) you admire and tell me what you admire most about them? | By referencing another person, the respondent is making indirect inferences about what she believes "admirable" or perhaps "good" leadership is. |
| | What Leadership Roles are you currently engaged in? Which of these roles feels most natural to you? | By referencing a "role" the respondent is indicating what a leader "is" or "does". She is then placing herself in the role and reflecting on her own positionality as a leader. |
| RQ 2: What do African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for their leadership development? | Let's talk about your childhood and growing up. Tell me about a time(s) that you were told (or that you just knew) that you were a leader. | Helps researcher gain an understanding about the origins of their leadership in an effort understand what/if any experience or person influenced their self-perception as a leader. |
| | Can you recall a time when you were faced with a challenge or struggle in a leadership position? What was it and how did you handle it? | Allows respondent to verbally articulate any challenges they may have faced as a leader. Also addresses any resiliencies that support their leadership. |
| RQ 3: What do African American girls identify a motivator for them to express their leadership? | Fill in the blank: I think more young African American women would be leaders if _____. | Speaks to their understanding of what threatens their leadership— or what opportunities could enhance it. |
| | Let's talk about your future. Do you plan on continuing to pursue leadership roles? What kind of roles do you see yourself engaging in? Why? | Allows the respondent to express her leadership goals or dreams and examine why they are choosing that vision. |
| | You have an opportunity to voice yourself as a YAAWL. What do you want people to know? | The purpose of this study is to give African American girls a voice and this question is designed to allow for that. |

**Interview Protocol**

To ensure uniformity of the interviews, data collection, and data analysis, the researcher used the following protocols:

1. The researcher sent an "Invitation to Participate in Study Letter" to potential participants.

2. Once a participant returned the letter, the researcher scheduled interviews with participants.

3. The researcher conducted all interviews.

4. The researcher reminded respondents that their identity would be protected and that the recordings and transcripts of the interview would be kept in locked file cabinet under the researcher's protection.

5. Because some respondents were out of state, the researcher conducted all interviews uniformly through recorded teleconference. Weiss (1994) suggested that although recordings can deter candor, they can also capture verbatim data and the nuances or complexities of speech that can be important. Recordings also allow researchers to stay focused on the interview instead of attempting to capture the details by extensive note taking. the researcher took notes that captured critical statements and ensured back up in the event of tape-recorder failure.

6. The researcher used the same opening statement for each interview: "Is there anything you want me to know before we begin?" This allowed respondents to

understand that the researcher is both collaborative and concerned about their

experience and participation in the process. The researcher then stated,

> Thank you so much for participating in this study. The idea of this study is
>
> to understand how African American girls, such as yourself, come to be
>
> leaders. All of the information regarding your identity will be confidential.
>
> If at any point you feel uncomfortable or nervous, we can stop this
>
> interview. Is that clear?

7.  The researcher used interview questions and guiding questions for this study.

    Guiding questions prompted the researcher in the event a participant became

    uncertain about what questions came next, or if the researcher and participant

    had missed an area.

8.  The following script concluded the interview:

    a   "That concludes our formal interview. How do you feel?" Trochim (2006)

        believed this kind of question allows for a few minutes of drawing the

        conversation to a close and creates a way to conclude the conversation.

    b   "Thank you so much for your time and contribution to this work. I

        anticipate being done with this study in March of 2015. I have your e–mail

        address and can send you the results of the study, if you are interested."

9.  A professional transcription service transcribed the interviews.

10. After transcription, the researcher analyzed and stored the audio and written

    files in a locked file cabinet to protect the identity of participants.
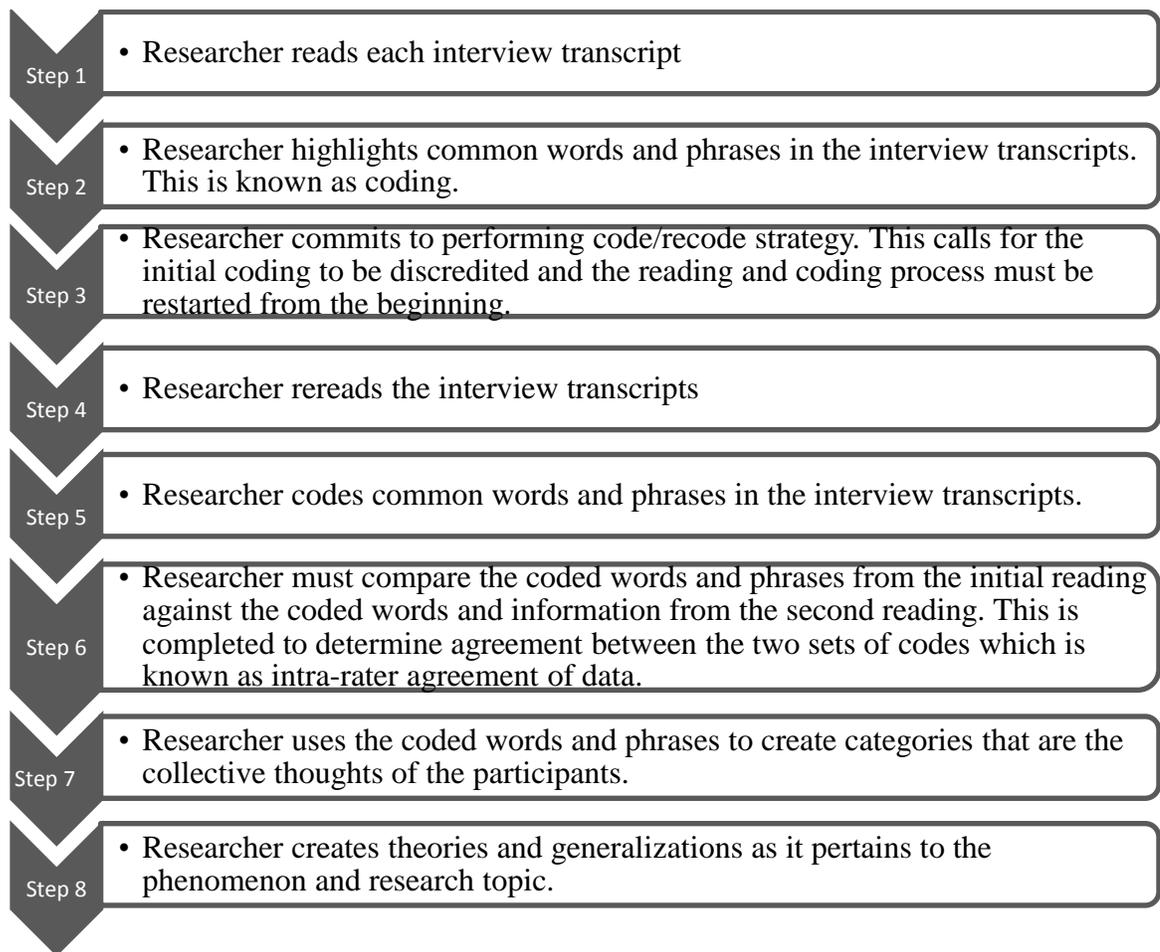
**Data Analysis and Procedures**

Qualitative data analysis is the range of processes and procedures whereby researchers move from the collected qualitative data into some form of explanation, understanding, or interpretation of the people and situations they are investigating. Oftentimes, qualitative data rests on an interpretative philosophy (Lewins, Taylor, & Gibbs, 2010). During analysis of the interview data, researchers attempt to excavate answers to questions regarding participants' interpretation of the world, why they held certain points of view, how they came to that view, what their experiences have been, how they conveyed their view of their situation, and how they identified or classified themselves and others in relationship to the phenomena (Lewins et al., 2010). The questions the researcher asked are consistent with those the researcher sought to answer regarding African American girls and their perceptions about the concept of leadership.

A grounded-theory qualitative research method involves deriving constructs directly from the immediate data the researcher has collected, rather than drawing on an existing theory (Gall et al., 2003). The grounded-theory constant-comparative method is a method of analyzing the data collected by the researcher. Using that method, the researcher coded the key points of the text, categorized the codes according to commonalities, then found themes based on the categories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified four stages in using the constant comparative method: (a) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory. These stages are not linear; rather, they overlap throughout the data-collection and -analysis activities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The grounded-theory constant-comparative method is an eight-step process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that the researcher used to analyze data for this study. Figure 1 shows an outline of the steps she took to analyze data.

After conducting all interviews, the researcher had all data transferred from audio tape recordings to digital files. This allowed for more clarity, better manipulation, and organization of data. The researcher read each transcript in its entirety; then manually created a master spreadsheet that captured the essence of each respondent's answer to each question. Originally, NVivo was identified as the method to analyze data. NVivo is a data-analysis software package that organizes and analyzes interviews, field notes, textual sources, and other types of qualitative data including image, audio, and video files (QSR International, 2014). However, as the researcher became more entrenched in the data, she felt it necessary to manually code instead of using any electronic software like NVivo. This allowed for more intimate work with the data resulting in a more comprehensive analysis. Upon further analysis of data, key themes began to emerge across respondents. These themes ranged from words that participants used consistently to activities in which respondents engaged, to frustrations they expressed. Using O'Connor and Gibson's (2007) model of coding and categorizing data, the researcher then coded themes into categories, shown in Table 4.

| Step 1 | • Researcher reads each interview transcript |
| Step 2 | • Researcher highlights common words and phrases in the interview transcripts. This is known as coding. |
| Step 3 | • Researcher commits to performing code/recode strategy. This calls for the initial coding to be discredited and the reading and coding process must be restarted from the beginning. |
| Step 4 | • Researcher rereads the interview transcripts |
| Step 5 | • Researcher codes common words and phrases in the interview transcripts. |
| Step 6 | • Researcher must compare the coded words and phrases from the initial reading against the coded words and information from the second reading. This is completed to determine agreement between the two sets of codes which is known as intra-rater agreement of data. |
| Step 7 | • Researcher uses the coded words and phrases to create categories that are the collective thoughts of the participants. |
| Step 8 | • Researcher creates theories and generalizations as it pertains to the phenomenon and research topic. |

*Figure 1*. Eight steps of data analysis. This figure outlines Strauss and Corbin's eight steps of analyzing qualitative research data.
Adapted from *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory,* by A. L. Strauss & J. M. Corbin, 1998, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Table 4

*Example of O'Connor and Gibson's (2007) Model of Coding and Categorizing Data*

| Question | Responses | Categories |
|---|---|---|
| 1. What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word "leader." | Courage to be uncomfortable, to listen and make decisions, hear feedback, courage to move forward. | Courage |
| | Courage, boldness, patience. Said again—courage. | Boldness |
| | Someone who shows others how to get things done but isn't afraid to ask for what they need in order to get things done. | Isn't Afraid |
| | People who are above other people and showing them what to do and how to do it. People who teach those beneath them how to be better people. | Helps people be better |
| | Responsibility; charismatic, well kept (kept up) | Takes the lead/controls |
| | Someone who is verbal and not afraid to say something. | Helps others |
| | Someone who is motivated and want to pioneer things and get things started in their own communities. Someone who is patient and willing to take advise AND give direction. | |
| | A person with great skills who knows how to lead a group and control life situations. | |
| | Someone who knows exactly what they want and not afraid to go for it. Make decisions on their own. | |
| | Someone in control of the situation. Helps others in time of need. They will say what's on their mind. | |
| | Does things without having to be told. Positive, helps peers. | |
| | Demonstrates good communication skills and helps in the community. | |
| 2. Think of two or three leaders (male or female) you admire and tell me what you admire most about them. | A mentor (woman) - demanded respect; listens; held us accountable. Principled. MLK—fought for everyone and alongside them. Lived what he spoke | Women lived what they spoke |
| | Community member X (man)—people oriented; knows how to connect with people. Teacher X (man)—lets you express yourself; forces you to go for what you want | Strong |
| | Mom—always had to get things done for herself. Strong in adversity. Co Worker (woman)—Hard worker doesn't take handouts | Helps/Fights for others |
| | My aunt X—She is smart, works hard and stayed in college to finish her degree. Mom—sweet and takes control | Hard worker |
| | My dad—handles his business, never lets anyone down, knows what he wants and puts everyone before him. Pastor cares for people and leads by example | Puts others first |
| | Mentor X (woman)—highly active and involved but outspoken. Mom—ambition, never gives up. | Accountable |
| | Mentor X (woman)—Very selfless puts others first. Mentor X (woman)—Responsible and accountable to others. And wants | Role models |
| | | Courageous |

| Question | Responses | Categories |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | to make a difference for others. | |
| | Mom—she always stays positive about negative situations. Grandmother - She knows how to calm people down and talk them through problems. | |
| | Gabrielle Union—strong, accomplished. Lupita—she looks like me and she is successful. | |
| | Beyonce—She is a business woman who doesn't let people run her over. Michelle Obama—she helps a lot of people. Grandma—helps a lot of people | |
| | Michelle Obama—Instead of complaining our nation, she took steps to change it. Grandmother—Despite obstacles she still achieved a lot of things in life. | |
| | Oprah Winfrey, my mother and MLK—People look up to them and they help people. | |

Once categories were identified as referenced in Table 4, the researcher created overarching themes of which the categories were subsets. For example, using the model shown in Table 4, one of the overarching themes was "the perception that leadership is risky or dangerous." As a subset of that theme, responses indicated "courage, strength, and hard work" as attributes of leaders the girls deemed admirable.

The researcher then recoded the transcripts as well as retaining an independent coder to check for intercoder agreement with the first round of coding. Intercoder agreement is the extent to which the second coder makes the exact same decision about the data that the original coder made (Multon, 2010). The second coder was a third-party independent coder, engaged to ensure an impartial analysis of the data. As the second coder drew the same conclusions as the first coder, intercoder agreement was reached, which increased the level of reliability of the study by bolstering confidence that the categories (having been coded, recoded, and supported by intercoder agreement) are trustworthy.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research is often questioned in the research

community, perhaps because concepts of validity and reliability cannot be measured and

addressed in the same way as in quantitative research. (Shenton, 2004). Guba and Lincoln

(1994) established a framework to help ensure rigor in qualitative research. They posited

that researchers establish trustworthiness based on four major criteria (as cited in Shenton,

2004):

1. Credibility—Findings are based on sound and reliable protocols and processes.

2. Transferability—Findings can be applied in other contexts.

3. Dependability—Findings are consistent and can be replicated.

4. Confirmability—Findings are based on and faithful to the data collected.

This qualitative research study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of African

American girls regarding the concept of leadership and followed a plan of action and

strategies to establish the trustworthiness in the four criteria.

**Credibility**

The researcher conducted pilot interviews. The pilot-interview study included

three African American girls who were engaged in a mentorship program at the time of

this research and agreed to be interviewed following the aforementioned protocol. The

researcher also interviewed two individuals who work with African American girls. One

is an adult youth leader in a prominent African American church and the other is a

director of a mentoring program for girls of color. These interviews allowed the

researcher to test the interview questions and protocol on the girls and those who work

directly with them. Pilot-study participants were able to offer suggestions, feedback, and information that helped the researcher redesign the questions and protocol.

**Transferability**

Some may believe that because the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are transferable to other situations and populations (Shenton, 2004). However, "transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites *readers* of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience" (Writing@CSU, 2014, para 3). In this way, groups that serve this very narrow population of African American girls may be able to make the aforementioned connections, which in turn can guide their decisions regarding programming, services, and perceptions.

**Dependability**

To maintain consistency, the researcher asked each respondent the same questions from the interview protocol and used the same method to prepare for each interview. Also, she conducted the interview (including same teleconference application), and recorded the interview for each participant.

**Conformability**

To ensure the neutrality of findings, an outside source was consulted to provide feedback and help the researcher uncover personal preconceptions and biases. Bringing a fresh perspective, this individual challenged the researcher's assumptions. Additionally, they allowed the researcher to view the study with greater objectivity.

**Ethical Issues**

The researcher did not require participants to engage in any unethical or dangerous actions, and as a measure of precaution, integrity, and respect, took the following steps:

- Respondents had a clear understanding of what the research was to be used for and that they could discontinue the interview at any point they felt uncomfortable

- Bracketing was used to suspend personal judgment

- Each participant was given an Invitation to Participate in Study Letter (see Appendix B), which provided an overview of the study and required their signature, consenting to their participation

- Each participant was reminded that they were under no pressure to answer questions and took care to maintain the integrity of the answers by reporting them authentically and accurately to the best of the researcher's ability

Additionally, the researcher concealed the identity of participants by using assigned abbreviations for their names. All participants were assigned pseudonyms such as "Respondent 6" (R6). The schools, organizations, and churches in which the participants assume leadership roles also remain confidential, as they may provide insight to the girls' identities.

Finally, all data collected were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's possession with only the researcher's access. Once data were collected, the researcher placed the data, data-analysis material, all related files, audio tapes, and documents under

security in a locked storage file cabinet where it will remain for 5 years in the

researcher's possession. the researcher will be the only one with access to it until it is

destroyed.

**Summary**

The current qualitative phenomenological research study explored the perceptions

and lived experiences of African American girls and how they came to define, perceive,

and express themselves as leaders. The study consisted of interviews with 12 African

American girls who were 18–19 years of age, and were currently engaged in leadership

roles in their schools, churches, or communities. The participants, who the researcher

obtained through a mixed method of purposive homogenous and snowball sampling,

resided in northwestern, southern, and eastern regions of the United States. Expanding

the study beyond the original intent to focus on a particular geographic region allowed

the researcher to learn that many of the attitudes, perceptions, and thoughts held by the

respondents were not specific to a particular region, but were common in different

geographic regions of the United States.

To validate the interviews used in this study, the researcher conducted a pilot test

with three African American girls aged 18–19, (who were not part of this study) and two

African American adults who work with girls similar to those in this study. The

researcher analyzed the data from the interviews using the grounded-theory constant-

comparative method, coding the key points of the text and categorizing the codes into

themes and theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once the data was categorized, it revealed

key insights on the beliefs, thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes of African American girls

and the concept of leadership. Chapter 4 contains information about these key insights

and overall findings of the data analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

**Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to give voice to African American girls to understand how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do African American girls define, perceive, and express leadership?

2. What do African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for their leadership development?

3. What do African American girls identify as motivators for them to express their leadership?

To answer these questions, the researcher interviewed 12 18–19-year-old African American girls who held positions of leadership. Using the grounded-theory constant-comparative method to analyze the data, she was able to capture many of the common perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, and ideas held by African American girls as they related to the concept and practice of leadership. This chapter contains an overview of the participants involved in the study, an examination of the common concepts and information related to each of the eight interview questions, discussions on the themes that emerged through the collective voices of the 12 respondents, and a summary of the findings.

## Participants

The researcher facilitates various leadership-development programs for African American girls in the northwest region of the United States. These programs range from an annual spring-break camp for middle school-aged girls, to a monthly networking group for college women, and a weekly "sister circle" or support group for high school girls. These programs are designed for African American girls and young women to come together in a safe space, share their experiences, and develop their capacity as leaders. The researcher identified 26 girls from her database of past Sister Circle participants. The researcher narrowed the list of 26 to nine who met the criteria for this study. Of those nine, three were available during the time of this study and agreed to participate. The researcher obtained the remaining nine respondents through referrals from the three participants through snowball sampling. The three purposive participants referred the researcher to parents, church members, and community organizations that recommended individuals who fit the criteria of the study and eventually agreed to participate in the study. Table 5 outlines the composition of participants by age, leadership role, and geography.

Table 5

*Study Sample Make-up by Age, Leadership Role and Geographic Region*

| Respondents | Age | Leadership role | Geographic region |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| R1 | 19 | Work—summer camp leader | Northwestern |
| R2 | 18 | Community organizer | Eastern |
| R3 | 19 | Gymnastics teacher | Northwestern |
| R4 | 18 | Church treasurer | Eastern |
| R5 | 18 | President of church youth group | Eastern |
| R6 | 19 | Community organization mentor | Northwestern |
| R7 | 18 | President of high school Black student union | Northwestern |
| R8 | 18 | Basketball team captain | Southern |
| R9 | 18 | Girl Scout leader | Northwestern |
| R10 | 19 | NAACP Youth Council leader | Southern |
| R11 | 18 | Church choir section leader | Southern |
| R12 | 18 | Captain of cheer squad | Southern |

*Note.* NAACP = National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

## Interview Questions and Key Concepts

The researcher asked a total of eight interview questions of all 12 participants. The questions appear below, along with the researcher's rationale and the key concepts that were shared among respondents.

**Question 1**

What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word "leader"? The researcher constructed Question 1 to obtain respondents' general thoughts about the concept of leadership.

Respondents indicated that *courage* is what came to mind when they thought of leadership. R3 stated,

When I think of a leader, I think of someone who can stand up to anyone. I also

think of someone who can stand up for anyone. When I was in school there was a

girl who other girls used to pick on because she was overweight and really shy. I

would be so mad because there was no reason to pick on her. She didn't do

anything to anyone. One day I just lost it. I walked up to four girls who were

messin' with her and told them, "If you say one more thing to her, I'm going to let

you have it". I didn't think I was a leader because I wasn't afraid, I was more

angry than anything else. But now that I think about it, I guess I was a leader

because I did something about it, instead of just watching.

Nine of 12, or 75% of the respondents, cited courage either directly with

statements such as, "I believe that it takes courage to be a real leader," or indirectly: "I

think of someone who isn't afraid to speak their mind." Overall, respondents described

leadership as frightening and as such, a leader must have the courage to overcome fears

associated with being in charge of a group or mission. Specifically, they conveyed the

need for courage to be able and willing to communicate one's needs or, as R6 stated,

"speaking up for the group."

**Question 2**

"Think of two or three leaders (male or female) you admire and tell me what you

admire most about them." Question 2 allowed each respondent to give direct responses

regarding her leadership perceptions and attitudes. By referencing another person, the

respondent was making indirect inferences about what she believed "admirable" or

perhaps "good" leadership is.

Question 2 revealed that African American women played a strong role of influence in the lives of respondents. R6 reported,

> My Mom, her sisters and my grandmother pretty much raised me. They taught me how to be a good person and a strong person. My grandfather was around, but we all knew that my grandmother ran the show. Even though grandpa worked while she stayed home and raised the kids, she was the one who taught us how to have character and be good people. Most of the women in my family went through a lot. My aunt was sick for a long time, my grandmother lost a son in a drive by shooting and my mom raised me as a single mother. But they still helped others and taught us to be forgiving and love God.

> Of the 12, 10, or 83%, indicated an African American woman was the first or second person they admired. They described these women as "strong," having "overcome" or "persevered through challenges and obstacles." Additionally, respondents characterized strength as demonstrating ambition or "hustle," equally balanced with a concern for helping others or "putting others before them."

## Question 3

"What leadership roles are you currently engaged in? Which of these roles feels most natural to you?" By referencing a "role," the respondent indicated what a leader is or does. Question 3 allowed the respondent to place herself in the role and reflect on her own positionality as a leader.

In response to this question, respondents overall cited communication as the most natural aspect of their leadership abilities. In particular, they frequently mentioned

listening as they spoke about their roles and what felt most natural. R1 stated, "I just listen because sometimes, you just have to let people get it all out." R5 shared, "When I repeat back what I heard, that helps me make sure that I am getting it right." and R12 asserted, "There's nothing worse than feeling like you need something and no one's listening." All respondents in some way referenced listening (or talking) to people as one of the primary and most natural aspects of their role as a leader.

Respondents also unanimously emphasized that "helping people" was an important part of their leadership role. R4 posed the question, "The whole reason of becoming a leader is to help others, right?" R8 expressed:

> When I think of myself as a leader, it makes me nervous, when I think of myself
> as a helper, I feel more laid back and in control. I just feel better when I help
> others. I feel good about myself and I don't feel like I need to prove anything.

**Question 4**

"Let's talk about your childhood and growing up. Tell me about a time(s) that you were told (or that you just knew) that you were a leader." Question 4 helped the researcher gain an understanding of the origins of respondents' leadership concept, in an effort to understand what experiences or people influenced their self-perception as a leader.

Based on their responses, three primary factors emerged as central to respondents' self-perception as a leader. First, 11, or 92% of the respondents, specifically cited either a family member or teacher as someone who held high expectations of them. They reported that from a young age, they were either (a) told directly that they were (or were going to

be) a leader, or "in charge," "the boss/bossy," or "a good organizer/manager," or (b) they were assigned specific roles of leadership such as being "the one always in charge of game night in our family" as was the case with R8. R7 recounted, "my teachers always asked me to do special duties like being in charge of things like the lunch line, or making sure games were put back."

Second, eight, or 66% of the respondents, engaged in extracurricular activities throughout their childhood. These activities ranged from church clubs or church youth groups, to athletics, Girl Scouts, cheerleading or drill teams, and martial arts or pageants. Engagement in these activities reportedly helped respondents develop skills in "working together," "depending on one another," "everyone focusing on one goal," and "communication."

Last, six or 50% of respondents, reported that someone in their family demonstrated leadership in some way. Whereas R6 recalled, "My grandmother inspired me so much by all that she did in the community. … Everybody loved her," R9 shared about her aunt who "ran her own business." R1 expressed pride that "both my parents got their bachelor's degrees and my mom just got her master's" and R7 credited her father as her biggest inspiration who "Showed us all by example to focus on your dream, work hard, be fair and help others. He set us up to believe."

**Question 5**

"Can you recall a time when you were faced with a challenge or struggle in a leadership position? What was it and how did you handle it?" Question 5 allowed

respondents to articulate any challenges they may have faced as a leader and what

leadership qualities they used to manage challenges.

Although for Question 3 respondents identified communication as one of the

more natural aspects of their leadership, Question 5 revealed that communication *during*

*times of dispute or resistance* was challenging for them. R9 addressed "gossip at school"

and her struggle to defend herself and others affected by the gossip. R7, who was

president of her high school's Black Student Union, shared,

> It was so hard to go to my principal to talk about racism. My hands were sweating
>
> and I just felt so tiny. I didn't think he would listen to me but it was my job to talk
>
> to him on behalf of BSU. I did it anyway. I kept getting frustrated because I had a
>
> list of things to talk about and he kept cutting me off and being rude. He even
>
> rolled his eyes. I finally just said, "If you aren't going to listen to what we have to
>
> say, then why do we have a BSU?" and then I stormed out. It was horrible.

Although others addressed challenges ranging from speaking to supervisors at

work, coordinating events with uncooperative teammates, or raising siblings in a

household with a sick parent, the predominant theme respondents said could have helped

during the challenge was related to better communication such as, "I would have asked

for help way sooner" (R1), "I would have written a formal letter to the administration"

(R7), or "I would have waited until I was more calm before I said anything" (R12).

**Question 6**

"Fill in the blank: I think more young African American women would be leaders if _____." Question 6 addressed respondents' understanding of the factors that can threaten and enhance their potential as leaders.

Question 6 revealed respondents' awareness of social media, television, and music portrayals of African American young women. In response to their awareness of these portrayals, 100% of respondents resoundingly mentioned a need for African American women to "step up" and "have our backs" as mentors and "role models," who should be willing to "come to the hood if you have to." R9 stated,

> Let's just be honest. When I walk through the door, people see a Black girl and who knows what they believe or think about me. Who knows what they have been watching on T.V. It's just so frustrating because I have good grades, never get into any trouble but I still have to prove myself when I walk into a class room or new place.

Respondents also shared a concern that hip hop music and mainstream television "makes us look trifling" or bad-mannered. In relationship to media in general, many respondents expressed a sense of helplessness to alter these perceptions without any major efforts led by African American women in particular.

**Question 7**

"Let's talk about your future. Do you plan on continuing to pursue leadership roles? What kind of roles do you see yourself engaging in? Why?" Question 7 allowed

respondents to express their leadership goals or dreams and examine why they are

choosing that vision.

In answer to Question 7, all respondents indicated they intend to assume

leadership roles in the future. However, only R1 could articulate what form of leadership

she saw for herself. R1 is one of two respondents (the other being R7) who are currently

engaged with a mentor in an official capacity, suggesting (for this group) that mentorship

may have positive effects on how a mentee perceives and pursues her future as a leader.

R11 stated,

> I know that I will continue to be a leader. I want to go to college and start my own
>
> non-profit and help girls like you do Ms. Michelle. I want to make a difference
>
> and help other girls like me who could have gotten into a lot of trouble. I want
>
> them to know that there is someone out there that believes in them. I want them to
>
> know that someone has their back.

Finally, although respondents stated they were unsure about the particular roles of

leadership they would assume, they expressed enthusiasm and hopefulness about their

future as a leader. "Our generation will change their minds," R9 shared. "I'm not sure

what I'll do, but I'm sure I'll make a difference," said R3. "I know many people will

judge me because I'm Black, but I'm going to make it so they judge me for the legacy I

leave," said R11 who echoed the collective sentiment that "no matter where I go, I will

lead."

**Question 8**

"You have an opportunity to voice yourself as a Young African American Woman in Leadership. What do you want people to know?" The purpose of this study was to give African American girls a voice. Question 8 was designed to do that.

Question 8 revealed that respondents wanted people to (a) believe in them, (b) not judge them by their skin color or what they see in the media, and(c) give them the chance to succeed. As the researcher designed this study to give African American young women voice, she found it essential to provide a more detailed account of what respondents said in their own voices:

R1: Believe in the capacity of every individual. Just believe that every girl is really able to succeed.

R2: Believe in us. We can do some great things if you believe in us.

R3: I am not my skin color. I am not a stereotype. I am not social media's ideas of a young Black woman. I am me.

R4: I am tough and can do anything if you give me a chance.

R5: Our skin color holds us back because we think we can't do something because of our history. But our generation will change their minds.

R6: We have to be the change we want to see. We can't sit around and wait for some else to do for us or fill the desire in our hearts. We can't be afraid.

R7: As an African American young lady, I have a lot of obstacles that I have to overcome. We too can have opinions that mean something and make an impact. I'm not mediocre—I matter.

R8: I'm a great person inside and out. You can't judge a book by its cover. All

Black girls aren't the same. Take time to know me.

R9: Just being an African American female is tough. Social media and the

Internet tell us we are nothing—let's prove them wrong.

R10: We are equal. We are the same as males. We are strong. A lot of us ARE

going to college and pursuing the dream job. Don't look at my mistakes, look

at who I become when I learn from them.

R11: Not all African American women are the same. Society judges us based on

what they see on TV. That's not fair.

R12: I just want us all to learn to bring out our leadership qualities because once

you get it out, you do nothing but good things.

### Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged from the data regarding the concept and practice of

leadership. The emerging themes, in order of significance and most frequently discussed

by respondents were (a) the role of family and upbringing, (b) the role of mentors, (c) the

role of negative images and portrayals in mainstream and social media, and (d) the role of

practical leadership skills.

**Family and Upbringing**

All 12 participants alluded to the importance of the role of family and upbringing

in their development as leaders. Researchers showed that African American parents and

family are instrumental in helping their children develop a positive self-concept and

identity (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents,

2008). Largely, participants recognized the support, and the lack thereof, from parents as a primary factor in their leadership development. Whereas one respondent said, "My dad set me up to believe that I could be whatever I chose," another said, "My mom got sick, so I had to step up and help basically raise my brother and sister and be responsible for them."

Although most participants identified themselves as lower to middle socioeconomic status, all but four engaged in extracurricular activities throughout their childhood, which they stated helped them develop leadership qualities such as interdependence, communication, and collective effort toward a common goal. Four participants in this study did not participate in any extracurricular activities during their childhood, citing financial reasons or the need to assume care for younger siblings due to a sick parent. These four participants attributed their leadership qualities to the responsibilities they held, necessitated by the circumstances of their home environment. One participant stated, "I can handle a lot as a leader because I had so much pressure as growing up."

In general, participants spoke of a family environment that fostered cultural and racial pride. R12 reported,

> We celebrated Kwanzaa and had all kinds of African stuff around our house. My
> mom was in a sorority and every year they had a celebration of African American
> women in achievement. We didn't watch T.V. because my mom said it made us
> look bad but we watched a lot of documentaries and stuff like that. I always knew
> that being Black was something to be proud of so I didn't care what people said.

African American children and adolescents who have messages of race mediated by parents, peers, and other important adults are less likely to have negative outcomes and more likely to be resilient in adverse conditions (APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008). Respondents expressed directly or alluded to the notion that being proud of their Blackness helped them with self-confidence and a positive self-identity.

Finally, participants mentioned a central person who held high expectations of their greatness or success. Sentiments regarding high expectations included, "both my parents had their bachelor degree so it wasn't an option for me not to go to college and do well," "My grandmother always said, whatever you do, do it with excellence," and "My Mom always told me that I was supposed to go above and beyond any of her achievements." Overall, parental and family influence was most often mentioned as a foundational aspect in respondents' leadership identity, concept, and practice.

**Role Models and Mentors**

Every participant discussed the concept of role models and mentorship . All 12 respondents mentioned mentors and role models in one of two ways. Either they expressed the difference that having a mentor or role model made in their lives as they grew up, or they expressed their awareness of the *lack* of healthy positive role models from whom them could learn. Two, or 16% of participants, engaged in an official, structured mentor relationship at the time of this study.

In a national longitudinal study examining mentoring relationships and their consequences for youth development, "Those who reported having had a mentoring

relationship during adolescence exhibited significantly better outcomes within the

domains of education and work, mental health, problem behavior, and health" (Rhodes &

DuBois, 2008, p. 254). Respondents alluded to similar experiences to those in the 2008

longitudinal study, reporting that they felt they could "talk out issues," that they were

"not alone," and that "I knew she was always watching so I had to think twice before I

just reacted."

Finally, respondents described mentors who were predominantly African

American women who were members of their family; the exception was teachers who

were from different races and cultural backgrounds. On occasion, respondents mentioned

a male family member or community members who were usually affiliated with a

community or church-based organization. R4 shared about her school counselor:

> The thing I loved about her was that she was a Black woman that was so different
>
> than the women that I grew up with. Like, she was proper, and smart, and she
>
> would always ask me questions. Everyone else told me what to do, but she would
>
> just ask me what *I* wanted to do, or how *I* felt about things. She would just listen
>
> to me and let me say things. Sometimes, I would get so frustrated about stuff I
>
> was talking about, I would accidentally cuss, but she never made me feel bad.

In summary, respondents shared that their lives were positively impacted by

mentor and role-model relationships. They expressed a desire to see more African

American women assume roles of mentorship for younger generations. One respondent

stated, "It seems like they are just leaving us hanging out there," and another said, "come

to the hood if you have to."

**Images and Portrayals in Mainstream and Social Media**

"We are not what you see on TV," "Don't judge a book by its cover," and "I am not a stereotype": these responses from participants expressed their fervent appeal to be known outside the domains of mainstream and social media. Respondents spoke of media, and in particular the hip hop culture that they collectively agreed derogated African American women. R3 believed,

> Media does not help us at all. I can't stress that enough. I am so tired of seeing these reality T.V. shows that make us look ignorant and that we can't get along. I just hate it, but since there is nothing I can do about it, I just do my best to be a good example and keep it pushin'.

Whether directly expressed as "I am not social media's idea of a young Black woman," or alluded to with the statement, "Take time to get to know me," a predominant theme for all respondents was a desire to be known as an individual. Specifically, their collective sentiment revealed a hope that people would believe in them and appreciate their value, or as one respondent stated, "Believe in us. We can do some great things if you believe in us."

**Practical Leadership Skills**

The final theme that emerged pertained to practical leadership skills that respondents felt they lacked. For Question 5 of this study, the researcher asked respondents to share a challenge they faced in their leadership role and how they handled it. A subquestion was, "If you had it to do all over again, what would you have done differently?" All respondents indicated *communication* in some way as the primary factor

that would have produced a more positive outcome had they possessed the skill to convey

their intentions, feelings, or needs more effectively. R10 affirmed,

> I just wish I knew how to just say what I needed to say without being afraid or
>
> nervous. When I am with my boyfriend I get all weird when I need to ask him a
>
> question that might make him mad. Or, sometimes when I need something, I get
>
> all tongue tied when I need to ask for it. I don't know why that is, but I wish I
>
> could communicate better.

Whether they would have asked for support, shared feelings of being

overwhelmed, stated what they wanted, or been truthful about their commitment to the

project or team, they all mentioned their unwillingness or inability to communicate

authentically as the leadership skill they lacked. Other practical leadership skills for

which respondents expressed a lack were being organized, being reflective of their

responses and behavior, making choices based on friendships rather than function or

goals, and following through.

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to hear the voices of African American girls in an

effort to understand how they came to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders.

The researcher asked 12 African American girls eight questions that addressed their

thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences relating to the concept and practice

of leadership. The analysis of these questions revealed four themes.

*Family and upbringing* was the most influential aspect of each respondent's self-

perception as a leader. In particular, extracurricular activities, individuals who held high

expectations of success, and positive family narratives about cultural and racial pride

were factors of influence as well. *Mentors and role models* were highly valued among the

respondents. Respondents expressed a need for more engagement by mentors as a means

of providing support and to counteract the effects of the third theme—*mainstream and*

*social media* on their self and public perceptions. Finally, respondents' overall

acknowledged challenges with practical leadership skills such as communication,

organization, and decision making that they felt hindered their leadership development.

The four aforementioned themes were consistent with the review of literature in

Chapter 2 of this paper. However, two concepts emerged that were inconsistent with the

literature regarding African American girls and leadership. First, much of the literature

suggested that African American girls from two-parent households fare much better than

those from a single-parent household. The researcher found an abundance of literature

that suggested that "Among … children, those living with no biological parents or in

single-parent households are less likely than children with two biological parents to

exhibit behavioral self-control" (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014, para 2), whereas

"children living with two married adults (biological or adoptive parents) have … fewer

emotional or behavioral problems than children living in other types of families" (Child

Trends Data Bank, 2014, para 2). Of the 12 participants in this study, two grew up in

two-parent households. The remaining 10 participants were raised in single-parent homes

where the mother was the primary caregiver. Although this study was not meant to be

generalizable to the population at large, it does paint a picture of African American girls

who grow up in single-parent homes who demonstrate the capacity, willingness, and attributes of a leader.

Second, upon initial analysis of the data and how leadership develops, the researcher discovered that some leadership traits were learned "by fire" or through adverse circumstances experienced by the respondent. For example, the four respondents who were unable to engage in extracurricular activities due to financial or circumstantial reasons all shared stories of having to serve as a caregiver for a sick family member, plan and prepare meals, coordinate schedules for younger siblings, manage their school responsibilities, and sometimes obtain employment to help support the household financially. Although researchers often referred to these experiences as "adverse childhood experiences" that are potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being (Child Trends Data Bank, 2011, para 3), respondents in this study credited these experiences as having taught them leadership qualities such as accountability, management skills, integrity, collaboration, helping others, and planning. As a result, the researcher adopted a modified perception of these types of childhood experiences that framed them as possible opportunities to strengthen leadership capacity (as reported by the respondents) rather than as necessarily obstacles that hinder leadership development.

Chapter 5 directly addresses answers related to the research questions that guided this study, the implications, strengths and limitations, a summary of conclusions, and reflections.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS & reflections

**Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to hear the voices of African American girls and their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding leadership. The secondary objectives were to identify themes and patterns that can be used to predict, cultivate, and advance leadership potential. Also, the researcher aimed to provide an apithological (healthy) view of African American girls that disrupts many of the pathological (unhealthy) and stereotypical representations of African American girls and their capacity as leaders. The researcher interviewed 12 18–19-year-old African American girls in leadership positions. Using the grounded-theory constant-comparative method to analyze the data, the researcher was able to capture many of the common perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, and ideas held by these African American girls as they related to the concept and practice of leadership.

**Research Questions**

The questions that guided this study follow:

1. How did African American girls define, perceive, and express leadership?

2. What did African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for their leadership development?

3. What did African American girls identify as motivators for them to express their leadership?

Through interviews with 18–19-year-old African American girls in leadership, the

researcher obtained the following answers to these three guiding research questions.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question of the study was, How do African American girls

define, perceive, and express leadership? This question was essential to the purpose of

this study—to create a platform by which African American girls could share their lived

experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and thoughts about leadership, and in particular, *being*

a leader. Also, by allowing African American girls to express what they thought, felt, and

believed *in their own words* about the concept and practice of leadership, organizations

and individuals who work in leadership development with youth may be able to use the

findings from this study to enhance program planning and curriculum, especially for

African American girls. Through the analysis of the data, the researcher was able to

determine the following answer for this first research questions.

The African American girls in this study defined, perceived, and expressed

leadership in terms of *courage* and *helping others.* For courage, they echoed the

sentiments of Hackman (2010) that "leaders may need to challenge existing norms and

disrupt established routines and can engender resistance so intense that it places his or her

own job at risk" (p. 224). Hackman (2010) agreed that "such behaviors require courage"

(224). In general, the girls believed leadership was a function of one's ability to act

courageously on behalf of the group or goal, to speak courageously in defense of an idea

or vision, or to be able to handle conflicts courageously when communication has broken

down.

When asked Interview Question 2—"Think of two or three leaders (male or female) you admire and tell me what you admire most about them"—respondents cited acts of "boldness" or "courage" in most instances. "My aunt was always the one that had to speak up for the family," said R12. R5 shared, "My grandmother was a manager at a company and when she got fired for standing up for everyone to get a raise, the whole department quit."

In helping others, respondents expressed that "making a difference" and "helping people become the best they can be" were among the most important traits of a leader. Spears (1998) described these traits as servant leadership.

> The best test to determine if someone is a servant leader is to ask: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged? Will they benefit, or, at least not further be deprived? (Spears, 1998, p. 19)

Similarly, respondents described leaders they admired as, "always putting others before them," "taking everyone into consideration," and "having everyone's back."

**Research Question 2**

The second research question of the study was, What do African American girls recognize as threats to and opportunities for their leadership development? This research question is important because it provided insight into how African American girls could be best supported in developing as leaders: by mitigating the threats and increasing the opportunities that affect them as leaders. Social scientists historically viewed

communities and individuals of color through a deficit lens (Stevens, 2002). With more

research regarding *resiliency* and other theories that address the strengths of Black youth,

this study (and this question in particular) allowed African American girls to state

directly what *they* feel threatened or strengthened their capacity as leaders. By

uncovering some of these threats and opportunities, programs and services that serve

these girls can take more deliberate actions that best support African American girls in

their growth as leaders.

Threats to leadership development, reported by respondents, were the pervasive

stereotypes and perceptions perpetuated by mainstream and social media. For African

American women, mainstream media provides a lens by which their experiences,

behaviors, and attitudes are portrayed as "racially charged stereotypes and images on

self-perception and well-being" (Townsend et al., 2010, p. 273). This sentiment aligned

for the African American girls in this study who reported they were aware and adversely

affected by these stereotypes. "One White teacher said to me, 'I ain't playin' that,'" said

R10. "As if that's how I really talk," she continued. R4 reflected,

> I remember when I was arguing with a classmate. She was Filipino. She started
>
> getting loud, so I got loud too. The teacher sent me to the principal's office for
>
> intimidating my classmate. I overheard her telling another teacher that I was
>
> acting ghetto.

Overall, respondents shared they believed that the way they are portrayed in media

negatively affects their ability to be understood and to be offered the resources and

opportunities to develop their capacities as leaders.

Other threats reported by respondents were a lack of goals and focus, lack of access to opportunities and resources, and lack of certain practical leadership skills. As they reported, all of these threats can be mitigated by mentors and role models. Respondents reported that their greatest opportunities for leadership development were mentors and role models. Unanimously, respondents stated that either someone in their family served as a role model to "show me the way" or demonstrated "through example." They also mentioned a teacher or community member who served as a mentor and "took me under their wing" in a more active and structured way to support the respondent. Respondents emphasized the importance of their role model and mentor relationships as having had long-lasting, indelible imprints on their lives and leadership formation.

According to Stevens (2002), African American girls, in particular, "are not only receptive to mentoring, but require healthy mentoring relationships with older individuals" (p. 116). The respondents identified overcoming the aforementioned threats through the support of a mentor or role model. In particular, they expressed the need for mentors and role models to help counteract the negative effects of mainstream and social media. As R7 stated, "Sometimes you just need someone to tell you that you're not those things and that you're ok because [otherwise] after a while you start to believe it." Mentors can help girls get focused and clear about goals, connect them with resources and opportunities, and help them develop practical leadership skills. Additionally, when the girls reflected and shared thoughts about their mentor and role-model relationships, they more often spoke of intangible benefits such as "engaging in a warm and secure relationship with an important other person" (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 1529), or about how the

relationship affected their attitudes of self-acceptance and appreciation (Homan &

Cavanaugh, 2013).

**Research Question 3**

The third research question of this study was, What do African American girls

identify as motivators for them to express their leadership? This research question was

vital in being able to identify the factors that inspire African American girls to *desire* and

*assume* positions of leadership. Collectively, girls shared motivators in what Kurzman

(2010) called meaning making. How one makes meaning can be framed in two ways:

from an individualistic standpoint such as, "how they make sense of what they are feeling

or experiencing at the time" (Kurzman, 2010, p. 5), or from a collective or cultural

perspective by which meaning is framed by "ready-made interpretations that allow

people to assimilate information into socially established categories of understanding"

(Kurzman, 2010, p. 5). Some respondents, such as R3, expressed the collective meaning-

making position when she stated, "I am very much motivated by high expectations by my

family and teachers." In contrast, R1 and others spoke to more individualistic meaning-

making, stating, "When I help people I just feel good about myself."

Other statements were, "I feel like I am somebody when I am in charge and

running the show" said R9. "I think it's important to have influence" expressed R2.

"Don't you do things better when people are watching you? I sure do," stated R5. In

summary, girls expressed that the meaning behind being or acting as a leader was the

primary motivator for assuming such roles.

The concept of mentors and role models was prevalent throughout this study. With a supportive mentor, African American girls are more likely to succeed and develop a stronger sense of confidence (Stevens, 2002). Not only can mentoring increase the likelihood that a girl will overcome threats that thwart her development, but through mentorship, African American girls may have increased access to the resources that become available through the network and knowledge of their mentors. Finally, as African American girls are continuously creating meaning through lenses of race, class, and gender, having an adult who can help them navigate these various perspectives can prove beneficial in their overall self-perception and identity as leaders.

## Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to give voice to African American girls to understand how they come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders. The findings from this study have implications for current and future practices of programs that serve African American girls. The following recommendations may enhance practice for such organizations:

1.  Include more open and positive narrative regarding Blackness and being Black. As this study revealed, African American girls who grew up in homes with healthy narratives regarding race and Blackness had healthier self-perceptions and identities regarding their leadership capacity (Nicolas et al., 2008). Applying more culturally relevant teaching practices and curriculums in classrooms is one way to do this. Other organizations that could include healthy narratives regarding Blackness would be girl-centered organizations

such as Girls Inc. or Girl Scouts, as their primary mission is to "inspire all

girls to be strong, smart, and bold" (Girls Inc., 2014) and "build girls of

courage, confidence, and character who make the world a better place. (Girl

Scouts of Western Washington, 2014). Finally, churches and religious

organizations can further reinforce healthy narratives by discussing matters of

race and diversity in youth groups or Sunday school.

2. Incorporate a mentorship component as part of program design. As a major

theme that emerged from this study, mentorship showed positive effects on

respondents' self-confidence as leaders. Including a mentorship component

may mitigate, at the very least, respondents' stated perceived threats to their

development as leaders, such as the focus of pathology versus apithology.

3. Acknowledge and confront issues of mainstream and social media.

Respondents were quite well aware of the perceptions held about them in

mainstream and social media. Being able to have dialogue about these

perceptions can be instrumental in supporting African American girls and

their ability to de-identify with such negative portrayals. Programs should

encourage media awareness and initiatives to label and confront continuing

negative portrayals.

4. Include practical leadership skills. Whether through schools, community

organizations, clubs, churches, families, or mentorship programs, leadership

skills can develop in many ways. Incorporating practical and tangible

leadership skills could help African American girls in their overall leadership capacity.

## Implications for Future Research

Although this study has added to the existing body of research related to African American girls and leadership development, additional research may prove beneficial, recommended as follows:

1. More research that focuses on African American girls and their leadership development needs to be conducted because so little can be found in current literature. A larger sample size would provide a deeper understanding of this group. Future researchers may want to consider exploring how other differences, such as race and socioeconomic background, could affect leadership perceptions among African American girls.

2. As mentorship was a predominant theme in this study, the researcher recommends a mixed-methods study focusing on mentorship for African American girls. Such a study may include a pretest and posttest to gauge mentorship effectiveness, along with interviews to supplement data with rich narrative.

3. Respondents shared that throughout their childhood, they encountered many defining moments or experiences that strongly impacted their self-perceptions as leaders. Looking deeply into these defining moments or experiences at earlier stages of development could prove to be quite insightful for future researchers. Therefore, expanding research to include African American girls

K–11 may be helpful in furthering understanding of how African American

girls come to define, perceive, and express themselves as leaders.

## Strengths and Limitations of the Study

### Strengths

This study had several strengths. First, a review of literature substantiated the

need for this study on African American girls and the concept of leadership. Second, this

study allowed African American girls to share their lived experiences, attitudes,

perceptions, and beliefs about themselves as leaders and the concept of leadership as a

whole. The review of literature confirmed that very few studies address this subject

matter, suggesting that this study may play a significant role in expanding the narrative

and understanding of African American girls as they relate to the concept and practice of

leadership. Third, participants in this study represented different geographic regions of

the United States, which may suggest that commonalities among African American girls

may be based on gender, race, and age, rather than geography. Fourth, the researcher

piloted and refined the interview used for this study prior to data collection to ensure

clarity and effectiveness of the questions. Fifth, the researcher interviewed every

participant and provided each the same interview script and protocol, ensuring

consistency among all respondents. Sixth, two coders analyzed the data and reached

intercoder agreement from the interview data.

### Limitations

This study also had limitations. First, the small sample size precludes this study

from being generalizable to the entire population of African American girls in this age

range. Second, the composition of the sample was narrow in age, race, and

socioeconomic status. Expanding this study to include a wider sample of girls, such as

those who are younger, immigrants of African descent, or of higher socioeconomic status,

may prove to be beneficial in gaining a deeper understanding of how the concept of

leadership differs among these varying populations of African American girls. Finally,

this study used interviews as the data-collection method. Other means of data

collection— surveys, observations, or questionnaires—may have added to the richness of

the data collected and the resulting findings.

## Conclusions

For this study, the researcher examined African American girls. The researcher

aimed to discern how, through their lived experiences, they came to define, perceive, and

express themselves as leaders. Although the sample size was small, study results

indicated family, mainstream and social media, practical leadership skills, and most

importantly, mentors and role models have a strong effect on African American girls and

their self-perceptions as leaders.

The significance of using a qualitative phenomenological methodology for this

study should not be overlooked. The lack of research related to African American girls

and leadership necessitated a study that not only illuminated their proficiencies as leaders,

but allowed them to have a voice to share their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about the

concept and practice of leadership. Respondents expressed what they felt they needed to

become stronger leaders. The researcher believed interviews were the best way to achieve

these outcomes.

Implications for current and future practice build on feedback provided by the 12 participants in this study. Their feedback could prove useful to organizations and programs that serve African American girls by implementing some of the suggestions participants offered. Further research should be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of African American girls and their perceptions of leadership. Specifically, the researcher recommends a study with an increased sample size and expansion of the sample composition to include more variations of African American girls, such as K–11 girls, immigrants, and families with higher socioeconomic status.

Although more representations of African American girls are available for consumption in the mass media than ever before (Stephens & Phillips, 2002), African American girls are still not seeing many positive images of who they are and what they can be (West, 2008). The findings from this study show that African American girls are keenly aware of the perceptions and stereotypes that are held about them. In response to this awareness, they unanimously voiced a need for African American women to engage with them as mentors and role models, who can not only help them develop as leaders, but can support them in counteracting the damaging effects of these perceptions. As R4 stated, "There are a lot of Black women doing it big time. You would think that they would remember what they went through and want to help us." This study and future studies similar to it can serve as a basis for more deeply understanding African American girls and how to best support them in their development as leaders.

**Reflections**

As an African American woman who facilitates programs for African American girls and young women, I have forged strong relationships with many of them. They have shared personal stories of challenges, victories, interests, hopes, and dreams that have allowed me to see the resilience and fortitude they bring to life. The review of literature as part of this study showed that these African American girls, during adolescence, are more likely to claim and assume a leadership role than their White counterparts (Baek et al., 2011). Despite the negative images leveled against them from the media, despite the lack of role models and mentors, despite the lack of access to activities and programs that develop them as leaders, they still pursue and assume roles as leaders.

Throughout this study, I relied heavily on bracketing to address my personal biases as a researcher. Through reflexive journaling and peer interviews it became important for me to have an outlet to voice my hopes, fears, love, appreciation, respect, and frustrations regarding the respondents. I used an interview guide to keep me faithful to the questions for the sake of consistency. Every so often, I had to refer to my interview guide, not because I forgot the next question or did not know what to ask next, but because I was so moved by their responses that I found myself speechless.

Conducting this study with these girls has restored my hope and renewed my faith in the future of African American girls. I believe that the courage they spoke of is already in them. The desire to be a leader is also in them. Their awareness of the challenges they face as African American young women is keen. They merely need a mentor or trusted adult to say, "You can do it and here is how." They have requested it. They need it. My

hope for this study is that more African American women will answer the pleas of these

young women and began to show them the way. This study has strengthened my resolve

to continue to advocate for African American girls through mentoring, programming, and

resource development for organizations that do the same.

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