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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE FOLLOWERSHIP AND FOLLOWER DISSENT EXPERIENCE OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE HEALTHCARE LEADERS

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A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of Black/African American Female Healthcare Leaders' Experiences of Followership and Follower Dissent

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Abstract

Although followership has traditionally been viewed as self-explanatory and innate, it is critical to leadership success and deserves equal scrutiny. Despite its recognized importance to leadership, followership theory remains underdeveloped and understudied, particularly in relation to intersectional factors, such as race and gender and the followership experience of individuals. This gap is particularly salient in today's diverse healthcare settings, where diverse representation and effective leadership and followership are critical for addressing pressing healthcare challenges, including health disparities. Black/African American women are disproportionately represented in entry-level roles compared to leadership positions within healthcare and often face unique challenges related to their social identities. Research on how these women navigate leadership roles is sparse, and even less is known about their experiences as followers. This interpretive phenomenological study involved an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders. Through interviews with nine healthcare leaders, the study addressed four key research questions that resulted in 140 codes that formed 13 themes. The themes included Cultivating Trust Through Relationship Building and Role Modeling; Navigating Identity and Cultural Dynamics; Proving Professional Legitimacy and Competence; Strategic Engagement; Feeling Misinterpreted; Respect and Ethical Followership; Strategic Communication; Navigating Intersectional Identity; Perceived Intersectional Challenges in Behavior Acceptance; Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-Management, and Response; Expressed Similarities; Expressed Differences as a Leader; and Expressed Differences as a Follower. The findings offer valuable insights into the followership experiences of Black/African American women in healthcare and provide practical implications for future research and organizational practices.

Keywords: Black/African American women, followership, intersectionality,

Dedication

First, I would like to give all Honor and Glory to God, who covers, strengthens, and sees me through all things. This dissertation process has been a journey that would not be possible without the love and support of family. First, I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother, Dieumanille Etienne, who immigrated to the United States from Haiti so her family could be afforded every opportunity for a successful future. Without her unconditional love, vision, familial sacrifice, and role modeling of what hard work and dedication looked like, I would not be where I am today. Although she is not here to rejoice with me, this dissertation is as much hers as it is mine. I also dedicate this work to my late mother-in-law, Ms. Felecia Williams-Moore, who was a pivotal source of strength and support for my family until her passing during this dissertation process. Her selflessness and unwavering love and support have enriched my life and that of my husband and children, allowing us balance and years of cherished memories.

To end, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Thomas, and my children, Kwest, Jaden, Jayce, and Zion for their support, understanding, and encouragement during this process. They have been my biggest supporters and sacrificed as much as I did for several years so I could get through this journey. I love you guys. We did it! If I can do it, you can too. I want you to know Education is Empowerment and Power, even in a world that tries to silence your power.

Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world.
-Nelson Mandela

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

A ubiquitous mantra deeply ingrained in society is the notion that one should "be a leader, not a follower." Being a follower is often perceived as less prestigious than being a leader who holds rank and authority, although more people will be in the follower role than the leader at any given moment (Mullen, 2016). The leader-centric focus has dominated perspectives, resulting in considerable emphasis and attention to the leadership status as glamorous and preferred (Baird & Benson, 2022). This higher regard for leadership has resulted in a multi-billion-dollar leadership industry dedicated to its study and development, overlooking followers and their development (Westfall, 2019).

Followers are crucial in carrying out actions that make leaders successful, yet followership has been portrayed as naturally intuitive and less significant than leadership, resulting in limited attention given to it from its critical lens in theory and practice (Agho, 2009; Atari & Bani Essa, 2019; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Meindl, 1995). The study of followership is a burgeoning field that offers a significant opportunity to explore and understand the behavior and experiences of followers from their perspectives (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). This area of research is particularly salient when considering the specific context of Black/African American women, a population segment that has been understudied in leadership and management (D. R. Davis & Maldonado, 2017).

Little is known about how race and gender social identity can influence experiences of advantage or oppression of Black/African American women in the follower context. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study involved an exploration of the followership experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders. In this research study, followership was conceptualized as "a relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives" (Crossman & Crossman, p. 484). The rationale for employing this definition is that it acknowledges the intricate relational dynamics present within followership that afford followers the capacity to exert influence over leadership.

As the body of research on followership theory continues to expand through ongoing study, further elucidation and refinement of its principles are anticipated and this study provides context from the intersectionality lens.

Background to the Study

The study of followership gained momentum after the influential writings of Kelley (1988), Chaleff (1995), and Kellerman (2008), which caused significant shifts in perspective on followership. The scholars of these seminal works recognized the crucial role followers play in the leadership process. They introduced various follower roles and types on the continuum of passive to proactive, demonstrating a difference in how followership can be enacted. Chaleff's conceptualization of the courageous follower included dimensions of courageous followership behavior, which aligned with being proactive in the role. The dimensions included (a) the courage to assume responsibility, (b) courage to serve, (c) courage to challenge, (d) courage to participate in transformation, and (e) courage to take moral action. The competitive environment calls for leaders and followers who embrace these proactive behaviors to affect leader and organizational performance (Carsten et al., 2010; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2023).

Organizations are experiencing unprecedented levels of change, necessitating a shift toward greater innovation, collaboration, and teamwork (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Pearce, 2004; Trenerry et al., 2021). Consequently, the traditional top-down dynamics between leaders and followers call for recognizing that followership is a pivotal role in the overall leadership process (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2018). Rather than passively obeying authority, proactive followers must recognize their role in influencing and shaping leadership practices as partners in leadership (Allen et al., 2022; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012; R. Sims & Weinberg, 2022; Suda, 2014). They must embrace the responsibility to voice their perspectives, question assumptions, and collaboratively co-create effective leadership approaches, thereby advancing organizational goals and objectives (Benson et al., 2016).

Perceptions about what constitutes an ideal follower and how they are expected to behave are influenced by a person's schema developed from their personal beliefs, assumptions, and early experiences with followership that shape their views on how it should be enacted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Lord & Maher, 1991). Both leaders and followers hold beliefs and assumptions about the ideal behaviors of followers, introducing complexity in interpreting what is expected of them. This outcome, in turn, can influence how others perceive followers and evaluate them, especially when there is a misalignment between expectations and actual follower behavior (Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010).

Follower behaviors can be enacted actively or passive and positively or negatively, depending on the level of engagement and initiative, impacting the overall leadership dynamics (Sy, 2010). Carsten et al. (2010) explored the social construction of followership and distinguished passive from active and proactive dimensions. They classified passive followers as those who obediently follow the leader's orders without question, active followers as individuals who abide by the leader's authority and speak up when given the opportunity, and proactive followers as those who see their roles as partners and take the initiative to challenge, voice their concerns, and offer solutions without being asked to do so. Per Chaleff's (2003) conceptual framework of courageous followership, a courageous follower is characterized by their behaviors in speaking up to challenge their leader appropriately and taking ownership of their actions and responsibilities. These behaviors, which are often identified as ideal characteristics valued by leaders, also align with the proactive follower behaviors (Benson et al., 2016; Burris, 2012; Larsson & Nielsen, 2021; Shahzadi et al., 2017).

Many contextual factors can influence the way an individual chooses to enact followership and how they are received, including the leadership style and preference, environment, and situational and relational contexts (Benson et al., 2016; Velez & Neves, 2022). For example, proactive follower behaviors may not be well received in instances where leaders possess an autocratic leadership style, wrongly assess followers, or feel threatened by follower actions, or when the work

environment is bureaucratic and does not support employee empowerment, limiting employee voice (Benson et al., 2016; Burris, 2012; Carsten et al., 2010). Encouraging employees to speak up requires the creation of psychologically safe environments where they feel comfortable challenging norms or expressing their thoughts (A. Jones et al., 2021). However, challenging leaders or going against norms as a minority in the follower role has its own set of considerations, particularly for Black/African Americans. Important to that context is the consideration of diversity climate, which can threaten psychological safety and proactive followership enactment if perceptions of social disparities exist in the workplace (Singh et al., 2013).

Diversity climate encompasses employees' perceptions on the degree to which an organization is fair, inclusive, and embraces and values diversity (Hofhuis et al., 2016; van Knippenberg et al., 2013). Singh et al. (2013) found that the relationship between diversity climate and employee performance was mediated by psychological safety and race was a moderator for extra role performance when assessing this relationship. When considering race, the study findings implied organizational environments with positive diversity climate and psychological safety were salient factors in shaping minority extra role behaviors such as employee voice. However, although race continues to shape social dynamics in the workplace, research into race and intersecting identities within leadership and followership scholarship has been limited, overlooking valuable insight this context can bring into leadership and followership theories (Chin, 2013; K. Y. Kim et al., 2022; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Yanow, 2003).

The intersectionality of race and gender is one dual identity context crucial to understanding leadership and followership practice and theory development, given the disparities experienced by women leaders in many industries (Derry, 2023; Rosette et al., 2018). Despite the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, the existing research on women in leadership has primarily focused on the singular aspect of gender, neglecting the intricate dynamics, experiences, and challenges within intersecting identities (Skouteris et al., 2023). For Black/African American woman leaders, studies have revealed that they still face similar issues

today from the past, including "intersectional invisibility," where their contributions and skills are overlooked or devalued due to both their race and gender, yet these experiences in various context are understudied in leadership and management (Coles & Pasek, 2020; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Sales et al., 2020; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

The experiences of Black/African American women leaders also have significant implications in healthcare leadership, particularly regarding the importance of diverse representation in addressing the growing diversity of patient populations, tackling health equity challenges, and combatting healthcare disparities among Black/African Americans (Betancourt et al., 2013; Nair & Adetayo, 2019). Despite women representing most of the healthcare workforce and evidence suggesting that gender diversity brings value to organizations (Fine et al., 2020; Hoss et al., 2011), leadership at the highest decision-making roles in healthcare continues to be predominantly occupied by White males.

There has been modest progress in promoting women leaders in the healthcare industry. However, a breakdown of the data shows a compounded disparity when race and gender intersect. Black/African American women face significant underrepresentation in chief executive officer (CEO) positions, holding 4% of these roles, although they make up 26% of entry-level positions (Berlin et al., 2023). In contrast, White women occupy 49% of entry-level positions and represent 28% of CEO positions (Berlin et al., 2023). Livingston (2018) asserted that minority professionals who reach higher level leadership positions often face concerns about how they are perceived or labeled, particularly when they are "the only" minority in the room (Holder et al., 2015). This underrepresentation is further exacerbated by various challenges and biases faced by women of color, fueling perceptions of them as non-prototypical leaders or less competent or suitable for leadership, which may result in them being overlooked or impact how they are evaluated or the support they receive from others in their leadership role (Gündemir et al., 2014; Rosette et al., 2008).

From the follower role and perspective, little is known about the Black/African American experience. This lens will be critical as the agenda for

courageous and proactive follower development is pushed (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018). Understanding the unique minority experiences, beliefs, and environmental considerations that can facilitate or limit proactive follower behaviors is critical. Research into the experiences in leadership has revealed that minorities may experience stereotype threat, described as expectations that they will be judged on their social identity and not on their performance, which can influence how they respond or engage (Block et al., 2011). However, the leadership perspective does not fully explain the dynamics in followership, particularly when considering that Black/African American women are more likely to be associated with subordinate or nonprofessional roles rather than the leader (Terhune, 2008). Racial bias can also impact minority workplace experiences and social exchange relationships (Berlin et al., 2019; Witt-Smith & Joseph, 2010; Zapata et al., 2018), as well as reactions to employee voice in speaking up in dissent (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018). Hence, there is a need to broaden the understanding of the factors that contribute to followership by considering diverse perspectives, such as internal viewpoints of those in the follower role (Whitlock, 2013; Zeng et al., 2023).

Exploring the similarities and differences between leadership and followership experiences, particularly among Black/African American women, can also offer valuable insight and contextual understanding of followership through a diversity lens. This lens is a significant viewpoint because proactive behaviors can be viewed as displaying elements of leadership, and individuals in this group have faced challenges in their leadership roles. Therefore, the specific focus of this study was on exploring the followership experiences of Black/African American women leaders in the healthcare industry, given their underrepresentation in leadership roles, and the significance of teamwork and employee voice in fostering a culture of high reliability and patient safety in the healthcare (Polonsky, 2019). The development of highly reliable and patient safety cultures in healthcare organizations depends on shared leadership, which requires courageous and proactive followers and leaders who nurture and encourage such behavior.

The complexities Black/African American women leaders experience in the leadership context necessitate the examination of followership, particularly when

exploring the potential risks and rewards associated with follower proactive and courageous behaviors and the implicit prototypes attributed to the self and others regarding expected roles and behaviors (Benson et al., 2016). However, despite the critical role of followership in the overall leadership process, the available research does not address how followership is connected to intersectionality and the unique experiences of Black/African American women leaders. The gap is of particular concern given the argument by scholars that research on Black women leaders is limited and that leadership conceptualizations should consider the lived experiences of leaders and followers in terms of their social identities in the leadership context (Chin, 2013; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

The existing literature on leadership and followership has also overlooked the nuanced experiences of Black women. These experiences, often referred to as "double jeopardy," involve the disadvantage and oppression Black women face due to their dual identities of race and gender (Beal, 2008; Chaney et al., 2021). To gain a deeper understanding of how race and intersecting identities impact the leadership and followership experiences of this group, it was essential to engage in further exploration because this perspective in research can help uncover blind spots or areas of unawareness within social groups, as scholars suggested (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

Therefore, the aim of this interpretive phenomenological research study was to understand the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders. By examining how these individuals navigate their leader and follower roles, the researcher sought insight into their unique experiences to contribute to followership literature and promote greater follower inclusivity considerations within individuals and organizations. By investigating the barriers they encounter and the strategies they employ, organizations can enhance the understanding of followership dynamics and develop effective strategies to promote inclusivity to promote the performance of organizations. This diverse perspective is also critical if organizations want to welcome proactive followership from all groups that will contribute to positive leadership outcomes (M. Kim & Beehr, 2018; Weiss et al., 2018) and facilitate a

culture of high reliability (Eriksson, 2018), patient safety (Whitlock, 2013), and inclusiveness (Amin et al., 2018) within healthcare systems, as well as attract and retain minority women at the highest leadership echelons. Healthcare organizations can build awareness by considering the distinct perspectives of the Black/African American women healthcare leaders who can provide valuable insights into addressing various challenges and leveraging opportunities for proactive followership development and the creation of supportive followership cultures that harness their courage and proactiveness.

Statement of the Problem

The specific problem addressed was the lack of followership research, specifically on the lived experiences of Black/African American female healthcare executives with followership and follower dissent, considering the intersectionality of race and gender. As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, it is necessary to acknowledge how workforce diversity impacts the workplace experience, including the perception of the self and others in workplace interactions (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). Workplace dynamics and interaction between leaders and followers are further influenced by context and individuals' conceptualization of leader and follower roles, as theorized through implicit leadership and followership theories that are formed by an individual's schema of those roles (Larsson & Nielsen, 2021; Lord et al., 2020).

Black/African American female leaders are often perceived as non-prototypical leaders and face unique challenges in the leader role due to stereotypes, biases, and discrimination. Stern (2021) posited that an element of leadership exists in courageous and proactive followership. However, followership research is developing and has been limited in different contexts, including understanding dynamics and differences in intersectionality (Dupree, 2024; Rosette et al., 2016). Furthermore, the study of Black/African American women leaders as a stand-alone group has been limited in the leadership literature (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This understanding is particularly significant for Black/African American female leaders in the healthcare

sector where they are underrepresented in leadership roles and must navigate between leading and following.

Although little is known about how Black/African American women navigate leadership considering race and gender social identities, even less is understood about their followership experiences in the role of a leader and a follower. The existing leadership literature has focused on exploring leadership roles or their development as they relate to followers, rather than focusing on followership experiences (Ford, 2015; Leach et al., 2021; C. Leung et al., 2018; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sfantou et al., 2017; Silver, 2017; Souba, 2004). Scholars have called for reversing the lens in leadership to explore and build more literature on followership (Carsten et al., 2014; Ghias et al., 2018; Riggio, 2014; Shamir, 2007) and increased followership research to expand the understanding of the theory from different contexts and perspectives to contribute to theory development (Baker et al., 2011; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

A literature search on followership did not reveal any studies on followership among Black/African American leaders, suggesting a gap in understanding how minority leaders experience followership. Scholars have posited that racial bias can impact social exchange relationships with minority leaders (Zapata et al., 2018) and employee voice to speak up in productive dissent (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018). Proactive and courageous follower behaviors enhance the leadership process. However, not fully understanding how followership is experienced in the leadership process creates blind spots in organizations, especially because followers significantly outnumber leaders and contribute to performance outcomes (Walthall & Dent, 2016).

This gap in research is also a missed opportunity to understand the unique experiences of Black/African American women leaders in navigating the dynamics of followership within diverse healthcare organizations. By exploring the intersectionality of race and gender in followership in Black/African American women healthcare leaders, the researcher sought to build a deeper understanding of their lived experiences within followership and highlight any similarities or

differences in their leadership experiences. This perspective is critically important because leaders and followers are closely interconnected, where effective followers can shape productive leader behaviors, and effective leaders can develop effective followers (Suda, 2014). It also enhances the understanding of followership dynamics from a diversity lens and can provide actionable insights for organizations to improve their practices in cultivating an inclusive organizational culture that embraces proactive follower engagement.

Purpose of the Research

In response to the call to address the need to increase followership research and expand followership understanding in the Black/African American woman healthcare leader context, this phenomenological research study involved an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders as they navigate leader and follower roles from the intersectionality perspective.

Research Question(s)

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?
2. How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role?
3. In what way does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and follower dissent?
4. What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?

Significance of the Research

This phenomenological research study encompassed an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the leader and follower roles. First,

exploring the concept of followership plays a crucial role in advancing leadership because followership and leadership roles can be fluid and need to coexist to impact leadership co-production (Gordon et al., 2015; Stern, 2021). At one point or another, every leader has had to follow, and every effective follower needs to recognize the element of leadership in their role that enables them to enact proactive followership that can influence and impact performance (Stern, 2021). However, many follower contexts, role orientations, and relational considerations affect the followership enactment, and it is an area ripe for empirical study and exploration from various perspectives (Gordon et al., 2015; Stern, 2021).

Second, the followership research gap in the healthcare industry has several implications because significant emphasis is placed on team-based work, and there is a shift from traditional hierarchical structures to more shared and distributive leadership (Gordon et al., 2015). Furthermore, the healthcare industry is embracing high-reliability organizational cultures that value subordinates speaking up, deference to expertise, and organizational learning, which are highly reliant on inclusion and contributions of all followers (Eriksson, 2018). Therefore, understanding the followership perspective is crucial for addressing some of the most pressing strategic and operational challenges in healthcare and for building a competitive advantage (C. Leung et al., 2018; Whitlock, 2013).

The patient population in healthcare is more racially and ethnically diverse, and health disparities and cost of care continue to pose challenges for leaders. Yet, diverse representation in healthcare leadership continues to be a challenge and the experiences of minority groups in healthcare leadership are understudied. Black/African American female healthcare executives are underrepresented at 4% of healthcare senior leader roles in healthcare administration (Berlin et al., 2023) despite representing 13.6 % of the U.S. population (United States Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d.) and 26% of entry-level jobs in healthcare (Berlin et al., 2023). The challenges of Black/African American women are multiplied due to their dual minority status of race and gender in leadership (Bailey-Jackson, 2021; D. R. Davis, 2016; Remedios & Snyder, 2018), yet followership in this context is not well studied or understood.

Finally, the study provides insights to followership research from the experience of Black/African American female healthcare leaders through the lens of intersectionality for continuous followership theory understanding and development. Although scholars have conducted some research on leadership challenges minority leaders encounter (Crews & Wesson, 2018; Gündemir et al., 2014; Stanford, 2020), an even bigger gap remains from the followership context (Da'as & Zibenberg, 2021; Riggio, 2014), inadvertently disregarding the experiences of minorities in their interchanging roles as leaders and followers. Understanding the followership experiences from the perspective of Black/African American women healthcare leaders may help develop awareness and boost the understanding of certain conditions that support or hurt building proactive followership cultures that facilitate inclusion, which is needed to attract, retain, and engage this traditionally marginalized group in co-creating leadership.

Conceptual Framework

This phenomenological study involved an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the role of leader and follower, considering their intersection of race and gender. The implicit followership theory (IFT) and intersectionality theory formed the framework for this study.

IFT is "defined as individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers" (Sy, 2010, p. 73). Sy (2010) asserted that followership can manifest in both positive and negative forms, classified as follower prototype or counter-prototype. The researcher indicated that individuals with positive implicit followership possess a positive mental model of behaviors and traits of the follower role and those with negative implicit followership hold a negative schema. These schemas are learned from their early and ongoing experiences, which form their internalized version of the behavior they associate with different contexts, forming their prototype of followership (Guo, 2018).

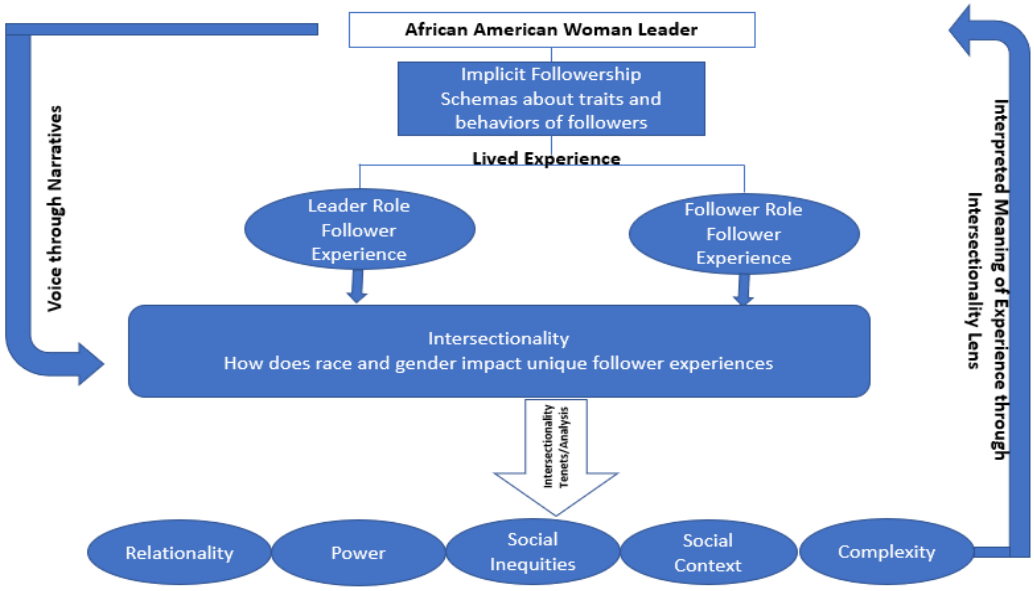
IFT was used in data analysis to examine the perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and associated behaviors of Black/African American female healthcare

leaders to assess how their beliefs connected to their enactment of followership and follower dissent. This exploration provided insights into their assumptions and beliefs in their roles as both leaders and followers experiencing followership. Exploring their experiences as a follower of superiors and as leader of followers resulted in a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between these perspectives.

Intersectionality theory also guided this study because it provided a framework for understanding how people can have multiple intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social, economic status, and disability, which affect their unique experiences of advantage or disadvantage, privilege, or oppression (Bowleg, 2012; Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2017). The intersections explored in this study were race and gender through the followership experiences of Black/African American women healthcare leaders because studies involving this population within the followership context are limited. The researcher used the intersectionality theory framework to develop the research and interview questions for the study and during data analysis to derive the interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations based on the distinct intersectional experiences of Black/African American women.

Figure 1

Research Study Conceptual Framework



Scope and Limitations

Although research involving Black/African American female leaders using intersectionality is modest in education (Curtis, 2017; Moorosi et al., 2018), politics (N. E. Brown, 2014; Scola, 2013), law and law enforcement (Posey et al., 2020), and healthcare and nursing leadership (Aspinall et al., 2023; Zeinali et al., 2022), studies focusing on the followership experiences from the intersectionality lens is scant and not well understood. This study provided insights into how this sample reported experiencing followership and follower dissent from direct reports and superiors and how that dual identity of race and gender manifests itself in their experiences.

The scope of this study was limited to recruiting Black/African American female participants who worked as executives or senior leaders in healthcare to participate in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. The recruitment lasted 3 weeks and involved soliciting leads on potential interview candidates from the National Association of Health Services Executives, a professional association with a mission to promote the advancement and development of Black executives. The rationale for choosing this organization for snowball sampling is that its mission is to serve the professional development of the target population. The researcher sought leads on potential interviews from known members or affiliates of the American College of Healthcare Executives. The approach was chosen because the researcher had limited access to Black/African American women in the healthcare senior leader role and the purposive snowball method would help generate referrals for a quick and easy reach of the target group.

It is important to acknowledge that the snowball purposive sampling used may introduce sample bias or exclude significant subgroups that are not associated with the individuals or organizations contacted (C. Parker et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it was deemed appropriate for this phenomenological research approach, where the focus is on specific criteria and traits (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For convenience and ease of coordinating schedules, the interviews occurred virtually. This method allowed participants from diverse geographic areas to

contribute, thereby aiding in achieving saturation within the limited pool of African American female executives willing to share their lived experiences.

As a qualitative phenomenological study, this research has several limitations. First, as its primary objective was exploratory, to gather detailed insights into the experiences of a small, targeted group, the findings are not generalizable to larger populations (L. Leung, 2015). Second, participant self-selection may have introduced sample bias that further negates generalizability (O. C. Robinson, 2014). Finally, it was essential to account for researcher bias, particularly because the researcher is a Black/African American female in healthcare leadership. The researcher employed bracketing to set aside personal feelings and perspectives, thereby ensuring an accurate representation of the intended meanings, perceptions, and experiences of participants (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are for the key terms used in this study to guide the reader in understanding the study.

Black or Black/African American: For this study, Black or Black/African American refers to persons of African descent, regardless of nationality, acknowledging that the Black experience is not monolithic and there is diversity within Black people, such as those born in in the United States, Black immigrants living in the United States, or first-generation Americans with immigrant parents (Okegbe, 2021).

Diversity Climate: "Organizational climate characterized by openness towards and appreciation of individual differences" (Hofhuis et al., p.1)

Follower: A subordinate with less power, authority, and influence than a superior (Kellerman, 2008).

Follower Dissent: Lower-status individuals in the top-down hierarchy voicing divergent ideas or thoughts from their leader (Urbach et al., 2021).

Follower Prototype: Follower prototypes are the schema individuals hold about follower traits used to form judgments, which include leadership assumptions

about their subordinate's followership, as well as the subordinate's expectations about their followership (Zeng et al., 2023).

Followership: "A relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives. It is primarily a hierarchical upwards influence" (Crossman & Crossman, 2011, p. 484).

Follower Voice: Follower words or actions that can influence a leader's behavior or decision-making (Morasso & Mierzwa, 2012).

Implicit Followership Theory (IFT): Individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers" (Sy, 2010, p. 73).

Intersectionality: The concept of intersectionality references the way social classifications, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, among other categories, work together to construe social reality rather than act as independent, mutually exclusive entities (Bowleg, 2012; Collins, 2015). Per the intersectionality theory, people are often disadvantaged by compounding sources of oppression, which can present its own unique set of experiences and understanding (Rosette et al., 2018). This study focused on the experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders at the intersection of race and gender.

Intersectional Invisibility: In the context of Black women, intersectionality invisibility references when differentiation is lacking between the unique experiences of Black woman at the intersection of race and gender because the prototypical woman is considered the White woman, and the prototypical Black person is associated with the Black man (Coles & Pasek, 2020)

Passive Followership: Passive recipients of leadership (Shamir, 2007). They are low in active engagement and are dependent, uncritical thinkers (Kelley, 1992).

Proactive Followership: Followers working to co-create the leadership process by taking initiative, voicing concerns, assuming ownership, and offering solutions (Shahzadi et al., 2017). They are active in co-producing leadership (Shamir, 2007). Proactive followers attempt to influence upwards (Kellerman, 2008).

Summary

In summary, a considerable gap exists in followership research, particularly from the perspective of Black/African American female leaders. These women frequently encounter stereotypes, stigmatization, and compounded challenges due to their intersectional identities of race and gender. Although effective followership behaviors are essential for co-creating the leadership process, the experiences of minority groups in followership are not adequately understood.

From a leadership standpoint, scholars posited that when minorities take on non-prototypical roles and behaviors, their experience can be impacted. However, little is known about the followership experience from the minoritized context of Black/African American female leaders in healthcare. Thus, this study encompassed an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in both their roles as leaders and followers.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the role of a leader and a follower, considering their intersection of race and gender to fill a gap in the literature. The goal was to bring a cultural lens to form meaning of followership from the voice of Black women leaders who continue to face adversity at work, yet their lived experiences have been limited in leadership and followership study (Holder et al., 2015; Sales et al., 2020). Followers play an indispensable role in the success or failure of leaders, particularly when followers are empowered and feel psychologically safe to engage proactively and courageously in the followership process (Bjugstad et al., 2006; Chiang et al., 2022; Currie, 2014; Kelley, 1992). Examining followership within the context of intersecting identities affirms the significance of this study. Specifically, the focus was on Black/African American women whose unique experiences have been understudied in leadership (Holder et al., 2015; Rosette et al., 2016). By bringing attention to this group in followership, the research goal was to introduce valuable insights into the complexities of followership within intersectionality to assess any similarities and differences between followership experiences and what is understood in leadership experiences.

In theory, effective followers embrace the element of leadership in their follower roles, and good leaders recognize when they need to step back and allow followers to take the lead (Baird & Benson, 2022; Peters & Haslam, 2018; Stern, 2021). However, in the practical experiences of Black women, they frequently navigate biases, criticism, and backlash when they exhibit proactive and courageous behaviors outlined in the theories of followership (Dupree, 2024). These responses often stem from stereotypes, such as being wrongly characterized as the "angry Black women," aggressive, or difficult, in response to their behaviors and actions being misinterpreted (Dupree, 2024; Motro et al., 2021).

Followership theory is developing and has received limited attention in research and scholarship in different contexts and among various groups (Bjugstad

et al., 2006; Chiang et al., 2022; Shamir, 2007; Tripathi, 2021; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). This study on followership offers a valuable opportunity to reverse the lens from leadership to explore it within context of Black/African American women to enrich the contextual understanding of followership from this lens, considering their social identities of race and gender. This perspective has been limited in research, and scholars have called for more research within marginalized groups (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018). Investigating followership experiences from this context can provide salient information that can inform theory and practice because the voices of the oppressed groups are often silenced by the dominant perspectives (Alm & Guttormsen, 2023; M. Y. Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

Black women, as a segment of the marginalized in society, have distinct experiences shaped by their social identities (D. R. Davis, 2016; Stanley, 2009). These experiences influence how they create meaning and cope with certain phenomena (Hall-Russell, 2017; Linnabery et al., 2014). They may have unique experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs of the self and others in the workplace as they encounter power dynamics in assuming roles and behaviors that involve leading, following, dissenting, or expressing divergent thought (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018; Randolph-Seng et al., 2016). These types of dominating behaviors displayed by Black/African American women leaders have not typically been well received from the leadership lens in the workplace, which is why this group was the focus of understanding the experiences from a followership perspective in the present study.

Current literature on followership has not specifically addressed the followership experiences of Black/African American women healthcare leaders, highlighting a gap in understanding their lived experiences, considering their limited representation in healthcare executive roles. By exploring and ascribing meaning to the followership experiences of Black/African American women in this study, the researcher attempted to build the groundwork for future researchers to explore a broader, generalizable understanding of Black/African American women healthcare leaders' experiences with followership and dissent in the workplace. This study not only contributes to advancing followership theory development, but

it also offers considerations from which to build future followership research from this intersectionality lens as the theory has established its place in the leadership literature from different diversity perspectives (Rodriguez et al., 2023; Rosette et al., 2018).

In this chapter, the literature review is provided, beginning with the definition and meaning of followers and followership to create a solid foundation of the topic. Diversity, leadership, and followership are then discussed to provide context for diversity considerations significant to framing the study. Subsequently, Black/African American leaders and women in leadership are discussed so that the lens can be reversed to explore Black/African American followers and women in followership in the literature. This understanding is followed by delimiting the significance of the context within the healthcare industry and specifically to the importance of the Black/African American women healthcare leaders, who are the specified target group for this study. A review of followership literature is provided to set the background for the evolution of followership as a concept to the modern understanding of behaviors and role enactment. This review includes a synthesis of the literature on follower influence behaviors that involve follower proactiveness, such as voice and dissent. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the theories and methodology that underpinned this study by exploring the literature on followership and intersectionality, as well as the phenomenology methodology, which is coalesced to form the study construct and theoretical framework.

Definition and Meaning of Followers

The conceptualization of followers and followership is equally if not more complex than leadership. In theory, effective followers require similar competencies as leaders, such as having initiative, being proactive, engaging, and displaying courage in interactions, despite not functioning as the leader (Bunin et al., 2022; Latour & Rast, 2004; Suda, 2014). The understanding of the follower and the concept of followership has a long history of being perceived as a passive condition of leadership influence. The lack of comprehension of the concept as a distinct area of study has also limited its development and led to diverse

interpretations that can be viewed from the role- or process-based perspective (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Early reference to the term follower considered it synonymous with subordinate, leaving a negative connotation and the impression that the role was passive and less important than that of the leader (Riggio, 2014; Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1992). Kellerman (2008) described followers as "subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors, and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line" (p. 19). The subordinate connotation in the term follower leads to views that the follower is one who engages in passive and blind obedience, deference, and submission under the authority of the leader in a hierarchy (Baker, 2007; Carsten et al., 2014; Kellerman, 2008). The use of this understanding has been perpetuated in the follower definition conceptualized within that paradigm, such as the Kellerman's definition of followers stated above.

The outdated reference of followers as subordinates, coupled with inadequate research on followership, has fostered a biased perception and delayed followership evolution (Carsten et al., 2014). Bunin et al. (2022) argued that passive follower inferences undermine the value and power of effective followership. This perspective has also hindered followers from recognizing when they are exhibiting effective and influential followership behaviors that demonstrate the reciprocal nature of the role, an oversight that obscures a complete understanding of leadership (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Scholars argued that the term follower was confining and suggested the need to shift referent language from followers to other verbiage, such as participants, collaborators, and partners (Suderman, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, Riggio (2014) advocated for embracing the use of the terms "follower" and "followership" in the literature, indicating that society would eventually shift its paradigm and accept the terms as common language, with a better understanding within followership theory (Riggio, 2014). Thus, in the present study, the term follower is embraced to facilitate that understanding and its acceptance from the contemporary perspective.

Progressive definitions describe the follower as a much more active and independent thinker capable of exerting influence in the leader process. Kelley (1992) described followers as “thinking for themselves, giving constructive criticism, owning their own person, and being innovative and creative” (Kelley, 1992, p. 93). Chaleff (1995) described followers as courageous people in the leader-follower relationship who take responsibility, serve, challenge, participate in transformation, and take moral action. Crossman and Crossman (2011) defined followership as "a relational role in which followers can influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives" (p. 484). Bunin et al. (2022) described followership as "the leadership practiced by individuals in positions of responsibility without authority, whereby they exert their influence to help execute the vision of their leaders” (p. 1).

There is a clear difference in how scholars define followership, which continues to create confusion and ambiguity with the theory. Anderson (2019) argued that research based on followers and followership is questionable due to the inability to hone down the definition of a follower when studying leadership. With the various meanings and understanding of followership, scholars asserted the need for a more complete analysis of the widely accepted followership definition (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; C. Leung et al., 2018; Rost, 2008). Utomo et al. (2022) conducted a literature review and identified 47 different meanings of followership categorized into four themes: (a) followership as a role and positional behavior, (b) followership as personal characteristics and abilities of followers, (c) followership as a process and condition of being a follower, and (d) followership as a macro perspective. Follower as a role and positional behavior was the category where most definitions fell, reflecting a wider agreement that followership is associated with behavior, roles, and position. Although a universally accepted definition does not exist, the most recent conceptualization of followership clearly moves away from the hierarchical perspective and embraces the reciprocal influence and the element of leadership in followership that allows co-producing leadership (Buffalino, 2018; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Stern, 2021).

Modern followership perspectives align with the process view of followership, which emphasizes the interactive nature of following. In this understanding, the follower accepts the influence of others and actively engages in a mutual influence to affect shared goals (Uhl-Bien & Carsten., 2018). This perspective challenges the outdated notion that followers are powerless subordinates and acknowledges the criticality of proactive and engaged followers in partnering to co-construct leadership (Aghaei et al., 2021; Carsten et al., 2014; Hoption et al., 2012). Thus, followership in the present study was viewed as a mutually influential process and the follower as an interchangeable role that is not limited to a submissive role in a hierarchy.

The definition used in this study was that formulated by Crossman and Crossman (2011): followership is a relational role wherein followers can influence leaders and contribute to improvements and organizational goals. The relational aspect of followership in this definition is an essential component in trying to understand followership as a process and how followers enact followership, which was central to the current study. The view of leadership as a process involves the recognition that leadership is a mutual influential process, where leaders engage followers to influence followers to perform and contribute to shared organizational goals and objectives (Antonakis, 2012). Reversing to the followership perspective, followers assess whom and how they follow, their level of engagement, and the influence they exercise in social interactions with the leader (C. Leung et al., 2018).

Like in leadership, this followership research suggests that followership is deeply rooted in context of how it is enacted and received (Burak, 2018). Considerations that can affect the followership experience or enactment in practice that is different from theory, including personal identity and characteristics, beliefs about leadership and followership, and organization structure are acknowledged in research (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2016). With that understanding, the researcher aimed to differentiate the experiences of Black/African American women healthcare leaders through the lens of intersectionality. The intersectionality perspective accounts for power dynamics and inequalities that can impact the follower experiences of advantage or disadvantage. This consideration through a

diversity lens is crucial for contemporary organizations as they strive to employ inclusive practices to make optimal use of their diverse workforce.

Diversity, Leadership, and Followership

Today's competitive environment is characterized by increased workplace diversity, widespread availability of information, organizational competition, and the need to keep up with innovation (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Trenerry et al., 2021). Diversity encompasses many differences in the workplace, visible and invisible characteristics, and how people perceive themselves and others, which can impact interactions (Cui et al., 2018). Strong business imperatives have been presented for leveraging a diverse and inclusive workforce, including cost savings, business growth, financial performance, increased innovation, and the ability to recruit and retain employees (Gomez & Bernet, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2020; G. Robinson & Dechant, 1997). These conditions present prime opportunity for leaders to capitalize inclusive cultures that respect and optimize diverse talent and input, and collective intelligence of nontraditional teams (Pearce, 2004; Roberson, 2019).

Some scholars, however, argued that although organizations may publicize the perceived benefits and their commitment to organizational-level diversity, the benefits are only sometimes positive. Marginalized groups can experience social identity threats at team and individual levels, defined as the concern of being devalued based on their group membership (Branscombe et al., 1999; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). These experiences can manifest in the form of racial microaggressions, defined as conscious or unconscious daily slights, insults, or indignities that occur in the environment or when interacting with racial or ethnic minorities that can be perceived as demeaning (Sue, 2010). Sue et al. (2007) was the first to classify typologies for microaggressions, asserting that the indignities consist of microinsults, micro assaults, or microinvalidations.

Micro assaults are explicit verbal or nonverbal attacks intended to hurt the target, such as name-calling or intentional discrimination. Microinsults were described as rude and insensitive snubs that convey hidden belittling messages to a

person of color that often the sender does not realize they are conveying. Microinvalidation is defined as communication that obscures the thoughts, feelings, or reality of the experience of a person of color. Microaggressions can hurt the performance, productivity, engagement, and mental well-being of minorities (Costa et al., 2023). Qualitative studies on microaggressions have revealed that the recipient often creates meaning in these experiences, and the repetitiveness of these insults has resulted in them expecting the occurrences, feelings of exhaustion, and resorting to finding ways to cope (Holder et al., 2015; Krull & Robicheau, 2020). Microaggressions have also been associated with adverse effects on work engagement, which could impact work outcomes (Carney, 2021). D. A. Thomas and Ely (1996) posited that creating environments where diverse groups of people at work are encouraged to contribute their perspectives on how to carry out work, challenge assumptions, and share their ideas can benefit organizational growth and improvement.

The exploration of leadership from the race-ethnicity context has been marginal, with most leadership theories giving the impression that leadership is neutral, disregarding insights that the race context could bring (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Race can influence the perceptions of leadership and how it is enacted (Chin, 2013). The influence of diversity, intersectionality, and evolving practices of followership in today's environment remains largely unexplored within followership literature. This gap in knowledge signifies a noteworthy area that demands attention and investigation. This study contributes to this contextual understanding within the existing body of followership literature. Overcoming challenges related to diversity and inclusion remains an ongoing struggle for minority leaders and subordinates (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). By shifting the focus from leadership to followership, scholars can explore how followers navigate their social roles within the dynamics of race and ethnicity, considering the influence of assumptions and perceptions based on their social identities, which can affect their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs (Chin, 2013).

The Pew Research Center (2019) survey titled "Race in America" revealed that Black individuals indicated their race was essential to how they think about

themselves. The survey also revealed a big gap in the difference between how Blacks feel they are treated compared to how other groups feel they are treated, with 84% of Black respondents indicating being Black hurt their ability to get ahead because of discrimination, compared to 54% of Whites. In this survey, 74% of Blacks indicated their race or ethnicity was central to their identity compared to 15% of White, 59% Hispanic, and 56% Asian respondents. These perceptions imply that Black/African Americans encounter some unique challenges that are specific to their experiences and may not be shared or understood by other groups. Thus, the race-ethnicity context may provide valuable insights into the similarities or differences in how Black/African Americans experience followership, considering their vulnerabilities to imbalances of power and privilege and susceptibility to implicit and explicit bias (Braveman et al., 2022).

Black/African Americans and Leadership

Research has been relatively lacking on the race context in leadership, maintaining a traditional White Western perspective and creating a gap in understanding how diversity considerations influence the execution of leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Chin, 2013; Liu & Baker, 2014; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Race is an individual factor that illuminates racial and ethnic minority experiences to contextualize leadership (Gündemir et al., 2014; Redenius et al., 2023). Ospina and Foldy's (2009) reviewed race and ethnicity in the leadership literature, categorizing studies into leadership perceptions, enactment, and understanding of the social reality of race and how leaders and followers cope with it.

The limited leadership studies on perceptions within the context of race have focused on how others perceive leaders of color (Gündemir et al., 2014; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Rosette et al., 2008; Sy, 2010). Gündemir et al. (2014) found implicit bias for pro-White leadership in implicit association tests, where leaders were more likely to be presumed White. Others have demonstrated the existence of negative stereotypes and associations of Black leaders, leading to negative evaluations regardless of their performance (Carton & Rosette, 2012; Porumbescu et al., 2021). Qualitative studies have also indicated that Black/African

Americans in predominantly White organizations have described disempowering encounters, such as exclusion, challenges to their authority, questions of their legitimacy as leaders, and negative experiences with labels and stereotypes (M. Byrd, 2009; Pitcan et al., 2018).

When Black/African Americans rise to formal leadership positions, they may still receive pushback from colleagues or subordinates because the power and privilege dynamics are still at play regardless of their position in the organizational structure (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Thus, the intersectionality of race and leadership context is pertinent for developing new insights currently masked by mainstream leadership conceptualization. Ospina and Foldy (2009) suggested that members of racial groups face complex challenges in the leadership context, requiring them to navigate a delicate balance between honoring their authentic identities effectively, while trying to resonate and connect with the dominant group. The flexibility required in leadership has noteworthy implications for followership. Stern (2021) argued that effective followership contains elements of leadership. Although this may be true in theory, this perspective in practice overlooks the potential constraints and challenges that a marginalized group of followers may face in embodying leadership behaviors in followership.

The current study followed a perspective from the contemporary leadership paradigm that views leadership as a mutually influential co-created phenomenon. In reversing the lens to followership, the study positioned followership in the same light, bringing in the context of race and gender to explore followership. The exploration extended beyond traditional inquiries of followership, moving away from the one-size-fits-all dominant perspective. As workplaces evolve into more diverse environments and strive to cultivate inclusive cultures, the dynamic nature of roles between leaders and followers becomes increasingly prevalent, marking a fundamental shift in organizational dynamics (Chin, 2013; Randolph, 2021). The aim of this study was to elucidate insight that will help frame the experiences of intersectionality and followership among Black/African American women.

Black/African American Women Leaders

Leadership studies have predominantly focused on White men and women in the Western world, with limited literature addressing race, gender, and leadership (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). The Black women's unique experiences in the leadership space have been masked within the context of White women in gender research. Scholars called for more sociocultural research theories and frameworks to explain the experiences of Black/African American women at the intersection of race and gender that can lead to a better understanding of these experiences (M. Y. Byrd & Stanley, 2009). Scholars have argued for the necessity to study the specific leadership experiences of Black/African American women because they are shaped by their unique socialization experiences at the intersection of race and gender in the workplace, which may inform how they enact leadership and the specific strategies they use to navigate the work environment (P. S. Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; C. M. Sims & Carter, 2019).

Twenty-seven years ago, P. S. Parker and Ogilvie (1996) developed a model based on the experiences of U.S. African-American women. They asserted that Black/African American women shared the traits attributed to the agentic qualities of the White man and communal traits of the White women, which presented a unique cultural leadership style, considering race and gender. P. S. Parker and Ogilvie advocated for more studies to provide insights into the nuances of Black/African American women's leadership behaviors that drive their success. They also encouraged future researchers to consider more cultural complexities in leadership behaviors that can help frame strategies and behaviors in interactions.

P. S. Parker and Ogilvie's (1996) theoretical framework was a culturally distinct model that helped explain the leadership strategies Black/African American women executives employed as responses in leadership while operating within a dominant culture. The responses include biculturalism, avoidance, and confrontational strategies. Biculturalism among Black/African Americans is described as the way minorities learn how to navigate between the dominant culture and their culture effectively and fluidly, adjusting in their social context to increase chances of acceptance for career success (Bell, 1990; Curtis, 2017). The

avoidance and confrontation strategies in P. S. Parker and Ogilvie's framework referred to strategic responses Black/African Americans used in different social situations to address challenges. C. M. Sims and Carter (2019) asserted that although the P. S. Parker and Ogilvie model is still relevant today in explaining Black/African American women's cultural distinction in leadership, it needs to be updated. They suggested replacing the avoidance and confrontation strategies in the framework with the microaggression process model to better reflect today's sociocultural context. Additionally, the model did not speak to followership, and it is undetermined whether it can be used to explain followership experiences.

Women and Leadership

To gain full understanding of Black/African American women in followership, it is necessary to comprehend the broader context of women in leadership who face various challenges and consequences of inequality in compensation, decision-making roles, and professional advancement (Belingheri et al., 2021). Society's continued perception of men as the ideal prototype for leadership hinders gender diversity in senior roles and places constraints on women's access to such positions, despite some modest progress for women as a collective group (Hill et al., 2016). According to the findings from the Lean-In Women in the Workplace 2023 study, men currently occupy 60% of management positions, whereas women hold 40%. The report also highlights progress, with women representing 1 in 4 corporate executives. However, considering race and gender, the report revealed that representation in executive positions significantly decreased to 1 in 16 for women of color. In the healthcare industry, women comprised 75% of entry-level positions and only 32% of C-suite positions (Berlin et al., 2023). Although some studies have indicated that women leaders bring specific interpersonal strengths and benefits to leadership, such as their tendency to lead in a participative and inclusive manner, there is a tendency to judge women based on gender roles with favoritism toward male leaders as effective (Powell, 2012; Rhee & Sigler, 2015).

Women leaders face several challenges, including gender stereotypes and biases that lead to judgments that make it difficult for them to attain or advance their leadership careers (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Leaders have traditionally been associated with masculinity, with male leaders linked to more agentic traits and behaviors, such as being aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, and confident, making them more disposed to being seen as leaders (Koch et al., 2015; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). In contrast, women have been associated with more communal traits, such as concern for others, being kind, nurturing, affectionate, and emotional, making them less likely to be viewed with leadership characteristics (Castaño et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2015).

Scholars have studied role incongruity theory in the gender context to explain the consequences of mismatched perceptions of female leaders and their leadership behaviors, which have been found to lead to negative evaluations of women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Research has revealed that perceptions of gender roles have a significant impact on attitudes and behaviors toward female leaders. Studies have indicated that women are often penalized for displaying assertive qualities that diverge from tradition gender norms (Rudman et al., 2012). These established gender norms have predominantly been shaped by Eurocentric viewpoint, often overlooking the cultural and societal factors affecting Black/African American gender identities (M. K. Jones et al., 2018). This outcome is evident through the limited research in this context in leadership, as well as followership.

Black/African Americans and Followership

The study of followership within the context of Black/African American experiences is significantly underrepresented in the existing literature. This dearth of research presents opportunity for scholars to explore how cultural perspectives, specifically those related to how Black/African American identity shapes the Black woman's engagement with and perception of followership processes. Factors, such as a legacy of slavery, racism, social and economic disparities, discrimination,

stereotypes, and bias play a significant role in shaping the multi-faceted experiences of Black/African Americans (Adejumo, 2021; Banaji et al., 2021; J. M. Davis, 2020). Examining followership through the social identity and intersectionality lens is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding that extends beyond historically dominant perspectives to develop more culturally aware frameworks within followership theory.

According to the McKinsey & Company 2021 survey, 'Race in the Workplace," Black employees were overrepresented in the frontline or entry-level positions and 1.4 times less likely to advance into management roles. The report demonstrated a significant drop in Black employee representation when reaching middle management and senior executive positions (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Additionally, among those who participated in the survey, Black employees felt less included than their peers at most levels. Adejumo (2021) posited a need for organizations to not only create diversity within their structures but to create environments where individuals feel like they belong, an enormous task considering much of the organizational culture has been built from the perspectives and experiences of a predominantly White context, resulting in a mismatch with the expected in theory versus actual realities of the experiences of Black/African Americans (Adejumo, 2021).

Black/African American followership from the context of race has been difficult to locate within the literature. This gap stems from the fact that there is already a dearth of research from the race-ethnicity context in leadership study and, therefore, leads to a lack of attention to this context in followership research, which is in its infancy of being explored from different perspectives and contexts (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Although no studies could be located that focused on the experience of racial and ethnic minorities within followership, scholars have studied followers from the cultural context and found that culture plays a role in leader-follower relationships and followers' proactive or passive behavior (B. A. Blair, 2016). This finding is relevant insight worthy of exploring from the lens of race and gender, considering those social identities continue to affect experiences of double minoritized groups, such as Black/African American women.

Scholars have also explored trust between different supervisor and subordinate dyads that differ in race and gender, finding significantly less trust when White subordinates report to Black leaders and Black subordinates report to White leaders than when Black subordinates report to Black leaders (Jeanquart-Barone, 1996). Culture was also found to moderate the relationship between leader-follower dyads, impacting follower behaviors, such as speaking up or expressing opposing insights or thoughts (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018; B. A. Blair, 2016). These differences are also blatant in gender roles in leadership, as women face more inequalities in leadership compared to men. This context may affect how women are received in followership roles as they assert themselves as active and proactive followers.

Women and Followership

Research on women and followership is limited. The leadership literature on followership context has been overshadowed by leader-centric studies considering gender, which has focused on the underrepresentation of women in leadership, gender roles, and leadership style differences (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Kulkarni & Mishra, 2022; Rosener, 1990). Considering the gender bias women face in leadership, the followership perspective may bring a critical perspective because scholars have demonstrated that women are viewed positively in the followership roles, often stereotyped, and evaluated less favorably in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Braun et al. (2017) found that individuals associated the ideal follower with the female gender role and posited that this perspective of followers is linked to the communal expectations and gender congruence of the follower role. However, when there is incongruence with gender roles in organizational cultures or with role orientations, women may be disadvantaged in how they are evaluated, including likeability (Raymondie & Steiner, 2021). The incongruence in gender role orientations may have implications for active followership, especially in cases where women have more individualistic and agentic orientations in collective organizational cultures. Scholars have also posited that consideration should also be

given to the effects of female roles at the intersection of identities, which has implications for the Black women's experiences at work, whether in the leader or follower role (Rosette et al., 2018).

Black/African American Women Leaders and Followership in Healthcare

Historical stereotypical images of Black/African American women have presented images of them as either domestic or supportive types, aggressive or domineering, immoral or uneducated through representations of the mammy, sapphire, or jezebel archetypes (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Although these stereotypes pertain to the multiple intersecting identities of race and gender, viewing the Black/African American woman leader's experience from the lens of intersectionality has been limited in healthcare research (Zeinali et al., 2019). This perspective needs to be assessed and critically adopted in research to continue to address gender equity and improve health systems and their outcomes because studies have suggested the way diversity is engaged has implications for patient care quality, financial outcomes, addressing health inequities, and access to care for people of color (Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Zeinali et al., 2022).

The healthcare industry has been a significant employer of Black women, with more than 1 in 5 Black women working in this sector (Dill & Duffy, 2022). Although Black women are well represented in healthcare entry-level positions, they remain underrepresented in healthcare executive roles, which are dominated by White male leaders (Berlin et al., 2023; Camp-Fry, 2021). The research on Black/African American female healthcare executives has been sparse, with a few studies geared toward underrepresentation of Black/African Americans in healthcare leadership and challenges faced with career advancement (Bijou, 2023; A. L. Brown, 2015; Camp-Fry, 2021; Dunkley, 2018; Florence, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023), coping with discrimination (Bailey-Jackson, 2021), perceptions on healthcare leadership diversity's impact on health disparities, and access for people of color (Silver, 2013).

In Eure's (2022) qualitative inquiry focusing on Black/African American female healthcare leaders navigating the intersection of race and gender, significant

attention was given to unique challenges and barriers they encountered in their professional environments. The study underscored the prevalent biases, microaggressions, and stereotypes that impacted their experiences. Noteworthy themes that emerged from participant narratives included the isolating experience of being the sole minority, hindrances posed by unsupportive organizational cultures, the pivotal role of mentorship, and the significance of cultural intelligence in fostering inclusive and empowering leadership environments.

In their research, Eure (2022) emphasized the importance of further exploration into the career experiences of Black/African American female healthcare executives, particularly in relation to the complex interplay of race and gender. The current study contributes to this area of inquiry. Additionally, although Eure's study highlighted the Black/African American women healthcare executives' leadership experiences, the study was not scoped to examine these experiences from a followership lens. Consequently, the current research study addressed a research gap through the exploration of the followership perspective. Both leadership and followership involve the essential element of influence in co-creating the leadership process. Without considering the intersection of race and gender in understanding the experiences of Black/African American female healthcare executives, the comprehension of this marginalized group as healthcare leaders remains incomplete.

The literature search for this research study could not reveal any previous research exploration that addressed the target group of this study within followership. Addressing this gap is critical, considering the widely agreed notion that followers are essential to leadership, and leadership is virtually nonexistent without followers. Thus, this phenomenological research study encompassed an exploration of the experiences of Black/African American healthcare leaders with followership and follower dissent, considering their intersecting identities of race and gender. Given the challenges this group faces in leadership contexts, the researcher used the narratives of Black/African American female healthcare leaders to elucidate their followership experiences. Within the healthcare organization, this demographic of leaders navigates roles that involve both leadership and

followership, a dynamic heavily reliant on collaborating with diverse groups and incorporating team members' expertise. The study contributes to a relatively unexplored area of followership, adding to the understanding and highlighting the need for further exploration to advance both theory and practice.

Followership in the Healthcare Context

Healthcare organizations are responsible for upholding a culture of safety and high reliability in providing services. Employees are a critical piece in the high reliability cultures as systems rely on them to speak up and provide input in operational and care delivery processes (Chassin & Loeb, 2013; Eriksson, 2018). Thus, effective followership is critical because there are more followers than leaders in the healthcare industry, and much of the work is conducted in team-based environments that rely on the expertise of diverse teams (Crawford & Daniels, 2014), yet followership is more popular in the business literature than in healthcare research (Boothe et al., 2019).

Followership studies in the healthcare context have been sparse (Spriggs, 2016). Compared to the healthcare leadership context, there have been a limited number of studies on followership among healthcare clinicians (Alanazi et al., 2021), nursing (Boothe et al., 2019; Crawford & Daniels, 2014; Ghislieri et al., 2015; Honan et al., 2023), medical trainees (Gordon et al., 2015), and interprofessional healthcare teams (Barry et al., 2023). Some studies conducted over the last couple of years that have focused on followership from competency development (Bonica & Hartman, 2018) and leader-centered perspectives and practices that empower followership (Stewart, 2019). However, more explorations of followership among healthcare executives are needed.

A study by Agho (2009) was the only study located that focused on followership incorporating healthcare leaders. The researchers explored the perceptions of executives on effective leaders and followers, finding that leaders perceived the characteristics of each role to be different. The participants agreed that the leader and follower roles were interrelated and learned and could influence performance and outcomes when effective. However, this study was limited to

exploring leader perceptions of follower roles and was not scoped to investigate the participants' lived experiences with followership. The study included not only participants from the healthcare field but also leaders from various other industries. Furthermore, the researchers did not examine the impact of race or gender on followership, an aspect addressed in the current research to offer scholarly contributions to the evolving body followership literature as the field develops.

Evolution of Followership

Followers have been recognized or mentioned for a long time, but followership as an area of research has only recently emerged (Carsten et al., 2014; Hoption et al., 2012). Historically, followership has been disregarded as a passive condition of leadership, with little attention given to it (Agho, 2009; Kellerman, 2008; Oc & Bashur, 2013; Suda, 2014). Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) argued that building followership understanding was vital to fully understanding leadership and called for advancing followership theory, which they defined as the study of followers and following in the leadership process. Consideration of both followership and leadership theories from a dual perspective is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding in the evolving contemporary context. Modern leadership paradigms call for a shift toward more engagement of active and proactive followers; they have evolved from a range of perspectives: leader-centric, follower-centric, shared and distributive, and followership as its own theory and construct (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). To frame the followership lens in this study, it was essential to grasp the diverse range of perspectives from which followership in research has evolved.

Leader-centric Views

Meindl (1995) labeled the dominance of the leadership perspective as leader-centered. From this unilateral, top-down outlook, leaders were viewed as the primary motivating condition affecting followers, whether through their characteristics, personality traits, styles, or actions (Bass, 2008; Shamir, 2007; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Examples of these leader-centric theories that have dominated research paradigms include transformational, charismatic, servant, and authentic

leadership theories (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). These leadership perspectives place the leader at the center of influencing and empowering followers to perform effectively and underplay the interdependence and reciprocal roles both leaders and followers have in co-creating leadership and its outcomes (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019). Through the leader-centric lens, scholars conceptualized followership as the process of subordinates recognizing their responsibility to support, comply, or follow the leader's directives and guidance (Bjugstad et al., 2006; Hollander & Webb, 1955; Townsend & Gebhart, 1997). This perspective has been heavily criticized because it undervalues followers as passive under the confines and influence of leadership and overlooks the significance of the follower and their ability to engage in upward influence, impacting outcomes (Kellerman, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985; Riggio, 2014).

Follower-centric Views

Follower-centric views emerged because the leader-centric focus oversimplified leaders as the primary contributors to organizational and leadership success, failing to give credence to followers (Tee et al., 2013). Contemporary leadership scholars acknowledged that effective leadership was more than heroic leadership, arguing that followers are just as active and influential in shaping leadership outcomes as leaders (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Shamir, 2007). These assertions led to more follower-centric considerations in leadership study, which focused on the mutual influence, thoughts, follower self-concept, traits, and roles to attempt to understand leadership through the follower perspective (Reicher et al., 2005; Shamir, 2007; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The follower-centric perspective acknowledges followers' needs, where leaders create supportive and empowering environments so that followers can develop and thrive in contributing their best as essential actors in the leadership process and the organization's success (Armstrong, 2021).

Shared and Distributive Leadership Views

The workplace has become increasingly complex, requiring knowledge sharing by leaders and followers as no single person can have all the information and expertise required to operate in a rapidly changing, information-rich

environment (Baird & Benson, 2022). Pearce and Conger (2003) defined shared leadership as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in work groups in which the objective is to lead one another to achieve group goals or both" (p. 1). Shared leadership is the opposite of the traditional hierarchy structure, where leadership is concentrated at the top levels (Martin, 2015). In shared leadership, followers engage in an interactive lateral influence process (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Baird and Benson (2022) posited that although leadership and followership are complementary, measuring followership should be considered in shared leadership research. Shared leadership is neither leader-centric nor follower-centric because leadership is viewed as a fluid function or activity that can be shared among interchanging roles of leaders and followers (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Shamir, 2007).

Followership Theory

Research on followership as its independent study area has previously been limited, although it is gaining momentum (Carsten et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers have been historically downplayed in the leader-centric perspective, where many viewed followership as instinctive and somehow less important than leadership (Agho, 2009; Howell & Shamir, 2005). Several scholars rejected the heroic lens of leaders as the primary influence in the leadership process, encouraging awareness-building and continued study of followership, including effective follower roles and their influence on leadership (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Howell & Shamir, 2005). Carsten et al. (2010) advanced that it was critical to understand follower styles and behaviors to expand leadership understanding. Several followership scholars also agreed that followership study was distinct from follower-centric studies in leadership, pointing out that followers in followership research are separate actors in leadership that bring their own sense-making and enactment to the role that requires understanding (Carsten et al., 2018; Hoption et al., 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) conceptualized followership study as the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process, which could take role-based or social constructionist

approaches. In the role-based approach, followers are viewed relative to their leaders in a hierarchy, whereas in the social constructionist approach, followers are considered co-creators of the leadership process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Role-based Approaches

The role-based approach shifts the focus from leaders and emphasizes the typologies, characteristics, and behaviors of followers, whether they are functioning in formal or informal roles in the hierarchy (Coyle et al., 2023; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In 1988, Robert Kelley first introduced followership theory and follower typology, attracting criticism from those who believed it did not deserve this separate attention because they saw the follower role as existing to be leader-led (Riggio, 2020). Pioneering scholars challenged this limited perspective of followers, arguing that the follower role was an essential and influential one worthy of exploration as they studied followers, behaviors, and styles that influence leadership (Chaleff, 1995; Kelley, 1988; Meindl, 1995). Followership researchers acknowledged differences in how followers defined and enacted followership and identified significant opportunities to contribute to scholarly knowledge in this area (Carsten et al., 2010, 2018). Leadership scholars have conceptualized follower styles (Carsten et al., 2010; Chaleff, 1995; Kellerman, 2007; Kelley, 1992), explored role orientation and enactment, styles (Gesang, 2022; Goswami et al., 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), context (Gilani et al., 2020; Küpers, 2007; Riggio et al., 2008; Stegmann et al., 2020), social construction (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), and implicit followership theories (Braun et al., 2017; Lord et al., 2020; Sy, 2010).

Follower Types and Styles

Kelley's (1988) seminal work was a significant launch for followership in the literature when they conceptualized the qualities of effective followers based on two dimensions: their independent thinking and active engagement. Independent critical-thinking followers were described as individuals who think for themselves by analyzing information, forming their judgments and feedback, and questioning leaders in the leadership process as necessary (Kelley, 1992). Kelley (1992)

described active followers as those in followership who take initiative, actively engage, and contribute to leadership and decision-making.

Kelley (1992) used the two-dimensional model to define five follower styles: exemplary, conformist, passive, alienated, and pragmatist. Kelley described exemplary followers as individuals with a high level of engagement and independent thinking, where they work proactively to accomplish goals and offer their independent opinions and thoughts even if they differ from those of the leader. Conformist followers were described as "yes-people" with high engagement and low independent thinking because they completed their job as directed, without questioning the leader and preserving their authority (Kelley, 2008). Passive followers were described as low in engagement and highly dependent critical thinkers who took on the role of sheep because they lacked initiative and must be constantly guided and told what to do (Kelley, 2008). The alienated followers were described as critical and independent thinkers who were often cynical, passive, and seldom opposed leaders in their follower roles (Kelley, 2008). The pragmatist follower was described as the survivor because they kept the middle ground, had a moderate level of engagement and critical thinking as they fluctuated between styles depending on the situation or context (Kelley, 2008). Kelley used these follower types to establish the Kelley Followership Questionnaire to help followers identify their type, which has been significant to the followership study. However, scholars argued a need for continued empirical support of the Kelley Followership Questionnaire to address the methodological, consistency, and validity of the model, including the proposition that the model could have more than two dimensions (Gatti et al., 2014; Lignon et al., 2019; Lynn, 2023). Although Kelley's (1988) popular work on followership contributed to interest in followership study and the interchanging roles of the leader and follower, the model did not consider cultural dimensions.

Chaleff's (1995) followership typology was another pivotal contribution to the followership study. They moved away from categorizing followers as active or passive and effective or ineffective to focusing more on the ideal courageous behaviors of followers who support and challenge leaders. They asserted that the

follower's alignment and role in the mutual influence of providing support and challenge to leadership was necessary for organizational and leader success. Like Kelley (1988), Chaleff created a similar two-dimensional model that intersected high or low support behaviors with high or low challenge to create four types of followers: Resource, Individualist, Implementer, and Partner. The follower identified as a "Resource" had low support and low challenge, whereas the "Individualist" demonstrated low support and high challenge to leaders.

In contrast, the follower role on the high support labeled the “Implementer” showed high support and low challenge. The "Partner” demonstrated high support and high challenge. How followers enact their roles depends on their beliefs about how leadership is co-created and how they view their roles in the process (Goswami et al., 2022).

Kellerman (2008) offered a different perspective on their follower typology, focusing only on one dimension: the level of engagement. They developed a scale with five follower types ranging from no engagement to full active engagement, identifying the Isolate, Bystander, Participant, Activist, and Diehard followers. On the one extreme, the isolated follower was entirely and purposefully detached from the leader and their work. Bystanders were followers who observed but did not engage. Participants engaged to some extent in the form of support or opposition. The Activists were described as eager collaborators vested in their leader and organization who would act accordingly to support or challenge them when necessary. On the other end of the extreme, the Diehards held firm beliefs and unwavering commitment to leaders in followership. It is unclear the role intersectionality plays in associations with the different follower types.

Constructionist Approaches.

The constructionist approach in followership studies does not ascribe followers to a set role or position in a hierarchy but conceptualizes followership as a social process between people where they create meaning in those interactions to co-construct the elements of leadership, followership, and outcomes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). DeRue and Ashford (2010) posited that the co-construction of leadership in the constructionist

view is an interactional process of claiming and granting, where individuals claim their leader or follower role, and the other takes the respective role to support them in the leadership process. How individuals socially construct followership is complex, with several considerations, including the follower schema and context (Carsten et al., 2010).

Followership schema is described as generalized knowledge a person forms that sets the basis for how they believe the follower role should be socially constructed and enacted in their following behavior (Velez & Neves, 2022). For example, suppose a person's schema is that followers should be passive and subordinate. In that case, they may engage in submissive and deferent behaviors, whereas a person with an active follower schema may be more outspoken and challenge leaders for the greater good.

Context refers to conditions based on the organization's environment that may impact the enactment of followership behavior, such as leadership style, organizational climate, and hierarchical versus flat organizational structures, among other things that are yet to be explored (Carsten et al., 2010). Scholars have emphasized the necessity of comprehending the intricate social processes underlying followership, with specific attention to the construction of followership by individuals (Carsten et al., 2010). However, the literature on followership theory lacks an exploration of the impact of social identity in followership beliefs or experiences, specifically through the intersectionality lens. Hence, the methodology employed in this study was interpretive phenomenology to explore the personal experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders in followership, contributing to a relatively unexplored domain.

Followership Enactment and Role Orientation

The enactment of followership can be influenced by various factors, and examining its context allows a more nuanced understanding of how followership is shaped, including follower beliefs about their role in following and their approach to fulfilling their role in the leadership process (Bastardoz & Adriaensen, 2023; Carsten et al., 2010; S. K. Parker, 2007). Scholars have categorized role orientation

into active and passive extremes (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Carsten et al., 2018). Active followers are viewed as co-producers of the leadership process, whereas passive followers are seen as submissive recipients of leadership (Kelley, 1988; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Follower orientations also translate into different behaviors and interactions in the workplace, such as speaking up and expressing one's ideas and thoughts proactively or quietly existing to do as told without the desire to share opinions or ideas in the process (Coyle & Foti, 2022). Carsten et al. (2010) explored proactive followership, which aligned with active followership. They asserted that effective followers engaged in proactive behaviors, such as taking ownership, offering opinions, taking initiative, and acting as partners in the leadership process.

Some scholars argued that role orientations are complex and cannot be simplified into the active or passive dichotomy, asserting that other follower dimensions may be relevant, encouraging continued study (Baird & Benson, 2022; Carsten et al., 2010; Gesang, 2022; Kelley, 2008). Gesang (2022) supported the differentiation of the follower role orientation as proactive or passive and asserted that other factors, such as the leader or work environment, can impact role orientation. They combined looking at role orientation, traits, and behaviors and identified three follower profiles: Anti-Prototype, Moderate Anti-Prototype, and Moderate Prototype. Followers with these prototypes varied in role orientation, behavior, and traits, with the moderate prototype associated with the highest role orientation related to active work ethic, work attitude, and high cooperativeness toward the leader (Gesang, 2022). In this study, the proactive and passive orientations or behaviors used in followership were identified from the target group's narratives of their experiences.

In theory, the effective follower orientation plays a crucial role in how they fulfill their active and proactive roles and behaviors (Carsten et al., 2018; Inderjeet & Scheepers, 2022). However, in practice, various leader and follower variables can come into play, impacting the overall experience or acceptance of behaviors (Matthews et al., 2021; Oc & Bashur, 2013). Behaviors that align with beliefs and observed behaviors of leaders are likely to be positively received (Zhengde et al.,

2017). However, a misalignment between the leader and follower lens misalign can impact the quality of relationship or interactions (Coyle & Foti, 2022). An essential aspect of comprehending the followership experience in the present study entailed investigating how followers view, engage with, and encounter followership in their interactions.

The lens for establishing leader and follower expectations and attributions of the roles is formed by the individual's cognitive representation of ideal leader or follower behaviors and enactment, explained and studied through implicit theories of leadership and followership (Schyns & Riggio, 2016; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). When there is a discrepancy between leaders' expectations of followers and the actual behaviors exhibited by followers in their roles, the proactive behaviors of followers may not be well received, leading to potential challenges or distinct experiences (Campbell, 2000; van Gils et al., 2010). This outcome is particularly relevant when considering complexities introduced by different diversity considerations, including race and cultural factors (Roberson, 2019). However, existing literature lacks a thorough exploration of how race and social identity within intersections influence follower behaviors or their schema.

Race plays a salient role in the workplace as it can inform the understanding of factors that shape an individual's experiences, interactions, and behaviors (Plaut et al., 2014). Conditions, such as a lack of representation, stereotypes, bias, power dynamics, and organizational culture have a significant impact on marginalized groups in the workplace (J. Smith & Joseph, 2010). However, how race impacts beliefs and the enactment of followership have not been discussed in the current available literature. Plaut et al. (2014) emphasized the need for more research to explore novel experiences that have not been previously examined to give marginalized groups a stronger voice and uncover additional themes relevant to their workplace experiences. Thus, this qualitative phenomenological research offered a unique perspective of followership experiences within the intersectionality of race and gender. Additional themes pertinent to the followership experience of Black/African American female healthcare leaders were identified, which are crucial for understanding how proactive and courageous follower

behaviors—such as influencing leaders, speaking up, and dissenting—are perceived and experienced, including the reactions of others in these encounters.

Follower Mutual Influence, Voice Behavior, and Dissent

Followership scholars have mainly studied followership from the classic role-based perspective in which follower roles are viewed as static, lower-power individuals in a hierarchy (Bastardoz & Adriaensen, 2023). Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023) asserted that the fixation on followership role-based exploration in the literature has created a gap in understanding the mutual influence aspect of the followership process and dynamic following behaviors that work to co-create leadership, including the upward influence of followers and downward following of leaders.

In contemporary research, followership has been conceptualized as a mutual influence process, where followers are viewed as active actors who actively interact with leaders, engaging in upward influence, co-constructing leadership (Oc & Bashur, 2013; Tripathi, 2021; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Tripathi (2021) asserted that understanding what contributes to upward influence in followership is pertinent to advance its theory development within the realm of leadership. The researcher developed a model using a resource-dependence lens that considered individual and relational factors that contribute to upward influence as leaders and subordinates depend on each other. Tripathi acknowledged other contexts that may hinder the upward influence process, such as the challenges minority groups face, and encouraged exploration of critical issues from the race and gender perspective. Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023) asserted that followership studies should evolve from viewing followers as subordinates in a hierarchy to acknowledging its complexities and directing focus on the fluid upward influencing behaviors and the downward following of leaders in leadership. In the social constructionist lens, followers play more than a passive role. They are a source of social influence in leadership, and their voice in speaking up and dissent contributes to better decisions and organizational performance (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Oc & Bashur, 2013).

Employee Voice Behavior

The workplace has become increasingly complex due to rapid changes and the demand for innovation in a highly competitive environment. Some organizations rely on flat structures that capitalize on employees' skills and knowledge, giving them more autonomy and involvement in decision-making (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Fraihat et al., 2023). Scholars posited that proactive employee behaviors, contributions, and feedback are critical for creating a competitive advantage today (M. Kim et al., 2017).

Van Dyne et al. (1995) conceptualized a typology for extra-role behavior, grouped into affiliative and challenging behavior categories, where they contrasted promotive and prohibitive behaviors and affiliative and challenging behavior to form four different extra-role behaviors: Stewardship, Helping, Blowing, and Voice. Stewardship was identified as affiliative and prohibitive, serving to protect those with less power. Helping was identified as affiliative and promotive, valuing relationships and cooperation in assisting others. Whistle Blowing was identified as challenging and prohibitive, where dissent was based on principles. Voice was labeled challenging and promotive behavior that facilitates organizational improvement or change.

Voice in the supervisor-employee dyad is considered proactive behavior critical in co-creating leadership and impacting performance (Detert & Burris, 2007; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; Zhang et al., 2020). Bashur and Oc (2015) identified that employee voice contributed to better decision-making, innovation, and lower organizational turnover. Although there have been positive outcomes linked to employee voice, organizational behavior studies have not focused on the organizational culture context that creates or inhibits voice, which includes how voice behavior is shaped by diverse social identities, such as gender, race, or sexuality, resulting in the silencing of some voices outside the mainstream or a lack of understanding of the different ways minorities experience expressing voice (Morrison, 2014; Syed, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2018).

Employee Dissent

Employee dissent is a form of employee voice where employees speak to express their differences of opinion or disagreement with workplace practices, policies, or operations (Kassing, 1997). Scholars have posited that although employee dissent is often viewed negatively, it is a value-added feedback mechanism to organizations and a good indicator of variance in workplace engagement (Goldman & Myers, 2015; Kassing et al., 2012). A. Blair and Bligh (2018) argued that employee dissent or opposing thoughts often lead to better decisions and innovation.

The historical perspective of dissent has, however, been criticized for being narrow-focused, positioning dissent as adversarial and limiting the perspective to management and governing entities while overlooking other stakeholders in the dissenting process (Kassing, 1997). Kassing (1997) model addressed employee upward dissent to managers, lateral dissent to co-workers, and displaced dissent to friends and family outside of the work environment. In upward dissent in the workplace, employees speak to supervisors and management to complain about or disagree with a work situation (Kassing, 2002). However, the decision to dissent can be challenging for employees, who must consider whether they will be perceived as constructive or adversarial and balance those considerations with the risks of the response they might receive (Kassing, 1997).

Minority dissent is an important factor that allows outnumbered or lower-status group members to engage in proactive followership to influence decisions (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018). Differences exist in outcomes between the minority team member versus the leader who introduces dissenting ideas, where internalized change is likely to occur when introduced by a minority team member and compliance when introduced by a leader (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018; Nemeth & Goncalo, 2012). Thus, the nuances around how and why one expresses dissent can be complex, including social identity and in-group acceptance considerations. Social identity acceptance as an in-group member and prototypes within group norms impact how one perceives their role or carries out dissent or silence and how it is received (A. Blair & Bligh, 2018; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Hogg et al., 2012).

The implicit conceptualization of roles can significantly influence an individual's decision to voice their opinions openly or dissent within the follower role.

Implicit Theories

Lord and Maher (1991) laid the groundwork for addressing perceptions based on social cognitive approaches that form the basis for implicit leadership and followership theories. Individuals develop schemas based on their experiences and interactions over time stored in memory, allowing them to make associations and quickly categorize large volumes of information (Epitropaki et al., 2013). These beliefs can affect inferences toward others and impact how individuals judge others and situations, make decisions, behave, or interact (Canevello, 2020; Lord et al., 2020). Implicit theories exist for leadership and followership, conceptualized as cognitive structures where individuals hold personal beliefs on what characterizes a leader or follower (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010).

Implicit Leadership Theory

ILTs are based on sociocognitive and information processing, which allows a person to make their subjective impressions of what categorizes someone as a prototypical leader (Junker & Van Dick, 2014; Lord & Maher, 1991). Empirical studies have indicated that a person's perceived prototypical characteristics about a leader affect whether they attribute them to that role or evaluate them favorably (Bray et al., 2014; Lord & Maher, 1991; Shondrick & Lord, 2010). Race is one of the factors associated with implicit associations of leaders in research. Rosette et al. (2008) connected race and leadership prototypes, demonstrating that business leaders were presumed White more frequently and were more likely to be evaluated favorably than Black/African American leaders. The study highlighted the need to explore racial differences' complexities in leadership further. Ubaka et al. (2023) challenged Rosette et al.'s findings, as their study did not empirically support leaders being assumed White based on descriptions. They suggested that increased diversity in the workplace eliminated associations that leaders were most likely to be presumed White. Petsko and Rosette (2023) replicated Ubaka et al.'s study and confirmed their findings when participants were explicitly asked and self-reported

leader associations, suggesting socially desirable responses impacted the previous results. However, they conducted two other experiments that used implicit association, which supported the finding of increased White-leader associations when imagining leader versus follower mental pictures. Implicit associations and bias may affect who is perceived as a leader, impacting minority representation and how some minorities are received at the highest levels (Gündemir et al., 2014).

Implicit Followership Theory

Implicit followership theory (IFT) research focuses on personal assumptions and perceptions of either leaders or followers on follower traits, which can be complex because those assumptions may not necessarily reflect reality (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Lord et al., 2020). In IFT, individuals classify followers and enact followership based on the qualities and traits that depict a follower according to their schemas or core beliefs on followers and followership (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010). An individual's schema is formed from their social experiences and interaction with environmental factors, which define the various contexts in which they enact followership (Guo, 2018; Junker et al., 2016; Rosch, 1978; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Sy (2010) conceptualized IFTs as including both the leaders and followers' assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers, which set their positive or negative prototypes or what they believe makes a follower or anti-follower. Personal assumptions and beliefs about followers influence how individuals behave, judge, and respond in followership, which can impact leader-follower interpersonal outcomes (Goswami et al., 2022; Sy, 2010). Lord et al. (2020) indicated that contextual factors, such as a person's emotions, race, ethnicity, gender, appearance, group, or task context, can impact dynamic information processing in forming schema in different situations. Guo (2018) also identified several antecedents that can impact mental models of followership, including environmental factors and individual factors.

Environmental Factors. As individuals continuously interact with the environment, that interaction is crucial in developing an individual's schema for implicit followership (Guo, 2018). Environmental factors, such as family, supervisor support, external market conditions, and internal organizational structure

can influence what individuals believe about followers and followership (Derler & Weibler, 2014; Wang & Liang, 2020). Parental rearing has been identified as an environmental factor contributing to forming an individual's followership prototype, where they can have positive or negative outlooks on followership depending on their experiences with different styles of parenting that form early conceptualization of the role (Guo, 2018; Keller, 1999). Environmental factors within the organization, such as organizational climate or leadership styles, can also influence implicit followership in the internal environment. For example, a transformational leadership style is positively associated with positive followership whereas a bureaucratic leadership style breeds a more passive orientation to followership (Busari et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Individual Factors. Individual factors include race, gender, age, and personality (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010). Scholars have posited that race continues to play a role in creating social meaning at the community and individual levels. Therefore, race also plays a role in leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). In leadership studies, scholars have found that race was associated with leader categorization, where leaders were assumed White (Rosette et al., 2008). Other studies have revealed that when leaders' observable traits or attributes matched subordinate prototypes, they were endorsed and viewed more favorably (Barreto & Hogg, 2017).

Considering the individual factor of age, Stegmann et al. (2020) found that older adults perceived they compared less favorably to their supervisor's IFTs than younger employees. From the gender perspective, Braun et al. (2017) found that women were implicitly associated with being a follower more frequently than men. Thus, the individual consideration perspective demonstrates a level of implicit bias in who is viewed as a follower and the qualities and behaviors they are expected to exhibit, which may affect how followership is experienced. Although implicit bias is often associated with the individual factor of race in leadership (Gündemir et al., 2014; Ubaka et al., 2023), no studies could be identified related to the individual factor of race and implicit followership to determine the nuances related to that context within the environment. Individual factors for the present study

encompassed the intersection of race and gender, which formed the lens for the study and shaped the research questions.

Intersectionality

Black women often contend with the interconnected impacts of racism and sexism. The aim of the intersectionality framework is to acknowledge the multifaceted distinctions and compounded effects of factors, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Bowleg, 2012). These interlocking layers of identity contribute to differing experiences of privilege or oppression, serving as a focal point for research for effecting social change (Shields, 2008). Throughout history, Black/African American women have grappled with invisibility, particularly in the shadows of the experience represented through the conditions of Black men and White women, with their specific experiences dismissed, ignored, or overlooked (Billups et al., 2022; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 2017; Remedios & Snyder, 2018; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Intersectionality focuses attention and gives a voice to those experiences and addresses concerns that standalone research has ignored among groups who face greater risk of marginalization.

Kimberly Crenshaw, a legal scholar, originally coined the term within Black feminist theory in 1989, as an attempt to explain the experiences of Black women at the intersection of race and gender, which shapes their identity and forms its own set of oppressive issues and challenges when conjoined rather than when masked in homogenous grouping. Although the intersectionality was originally conceptualized to frame the Black woman's experience, scholars have extended the intersections making it applicable to a wide range of intersecting identities (Bowleg, 2012). In this study, the intersectionality focus was on race and gender and was integrated into the study design, methodology, and analysis.

Choo and Ferree (2010) categorized the intersectional approaches into group-centered, process-centered, and system-centered. Group-centered approaches integrate the experiences of marginalized groups into the research content to understand the inequalities (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Windsong, 2018). The process-centered approach in intersectionality research involves comparative analysis of

different intersections of social identity to understand better how they relate and the structural and organizational processes underlying inequality (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Windsong, 2018). The system approach to intersectional research considers how intersectionality is related to inequality embedded within systems. In this approach to the research, gender and race are viewed as crucial components of systems inequality that play a significant role in shaping and impacting organizational structures (Choo & Ferree, 2010). This study adopted a group-focused approach to explore the experiences of the specific target group, Black/African American female healthcare leaders.

Intersectionality has been widely used in qualitative research, proving to be valuable as both a theoretical concept and methodological approach (Abrams et al., 2020; Nash, 2008). As a theoretical framework, intersectionality is based on the argument that understanding human experience requires considering social position of race, gender, class, in relation to one another, rather than independently (Bauer et al., 2021). Collins and Bilge (2020) proposed that critical inquiry and praxis of intersectionality should contain six core tenets: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice. Misra et al. (2021) argued that conducting intersectional research can be an accomplished using various approaches, and careful consideration must be given to the selection and design of methods to achieve comprehensive and well-developed insight within an intersectional framework.

From their sociological outlook on intersectionality, Misra et al. (2021) argued that although intersectionality research can take different forms, it is characterized by key methodological attributes, which they developed by merging some of dimensions developed by Collins and Bilge (2020) and adding their own. These six attributes include the researcher's recognition of "oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction" (Misra et al., 2021, p.3). In their conceptualization of the tenets, Misra et al. described oppression as recognizing the connection between power and inequality. They described complexity and context as the need to demonstrate how experiences reflect complex nature of a person's socially constructed identities and how they

are rooted in various context that that shape outcomes. Their description of relationality involves the examination of how oppression interconnects the advantages of privilege with the disadvantages faced by marginalized groups. Comparison was described as the need for researchers to consider the comparative differences. Lastly, deconstruction requires the researcher to breakdown societal constructs of difference.

Begeny et al. (2021) argued that the leadership space tends to be imbalanced due to the dominance by the White race and the male gender. They emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of minority groups in the framework of their social identities. To enhance research on gender, race, and leadership, they advocated for an intersectional approach, encouraging scholars to examine these concepts in an integrated manner rather than in isolation. The lived experiences of Black/African American women at the intersection race, gender, and social class can significantly shape the leadership and followership perspective through an alternative lens distinct from the dominant narrative. The intersectionality research perspective is notably underrepresented in the study of leadership and even less prevalent in the examination of followership. This perspective has the potential to provide valuable insights, particularly regarding the challenges Black/African American women encounter in leadership roles. These women are often not implicitly associated with the role of the leader and are more commonly linked to follower or subordinate roles. This misalignment between societal perceptions and the behaviors expected of them, rooted in their identity, can result in tensions during interpersonal interactions (Lord & Maher, 1991; Rosette et al., 2008). The literature highlights that the intersection of race and gender further complicates their experiences, as they must navigate both stereotypes and biases that can undermine their career aspirations, authority, and effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Phenomenology

Several studies have been conducted based on phenomenology to study the lived experiences of Black/African American women in leadership within the last 5

years focusing on the specific challenges these women faced navigating career growth and advancement at work (Bailey-Collins, 2023; Burgess, 2021; Eure, 2022; Goodwin-Myton, 2023; Griffin, 2021). However, the literature in which this approach has been used to study and fully describe, explain, and interpret experiences of this target group in followership is limited.

No studies could be located that addressed leader lived experiences with followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders, considering intersectionality, which may have implications for representation and engagement of this group in leadership. Therefore, an exploratory approach using phenomenology was taken to explore followership and intersectionality context among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the role of a leader and a follower to fill a gap in the literature. Using phenomenology inquiry, the researcher dived deeper into understanding the nature and essence of the target group's followership experience by exploring the lived experiences and subjective perspectives of Black/African American female healthcare leaders, thereby describing and attributing meaning and significance to these experiences, as Souba (2004) described.

Summary

The literature review included a summary and synthesis of key concepts, meaning, and evolution of followership in the literature, reversing the lens from leadership to followership to provide scholarly perspectives of minority experiences. The chapter also comprised a presentation of key themes and arguments related to leadership and followership, considering the intersection of race and gender and explicitly exploring studies and implications related to Black/African American female healthcare executives' experiences in the workplace. Their unique experiences are often masked within the homogenous group of being a woman or being Black. The literature review revealed a clear gap in the study of Black women leaders, including the experiences of these leaders at the intersection of race and gender and in the healthcare space and within followership. Only one study by Eure (2022) could be located that specifically

focused on the experiences of Black/African American healthcare leaders at the intersection of race and gender. The scholar identified themes of exhaustion as being the only, unsupportive culture for advancement, the importance of mentors and sponsors, and being culturally intelligent. Although the study included the intersectionality perspective, it did not address followership. Eure encouraged continued intersectionality studies to give a voice to this marginalized group, which has implications for diversity and inclusion in healthcare leadership and followership.

In healthcare, scholars have posited that diversity in leadership can result in positive outcomes for health systems, including strengthening efforts to address health disparities among minority populations (Poole & Brownlee, 2020). However, Black/African American women are underrepresented in healthcare leadership and continue to make little progress in rising to the senior leader ranks (Nair & Adetayo, 2019). Black/African American women leaders often confront barriers to advancement and struggles when they make it into senior leadership, including gender and racial stereotypes, bias, isolation, and workplace slights that can impact their experiences (Livingston, 2018).

The experiences of Black/African Americans in leadership have been explored to a minimal extent in the leadership literature. However, the study of Black/African American leader experiences within followership has been even more limited (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), with no studies found on the unique followership experiences among Black/African American female leaders. Effective leadership and followership have similarities, as there is an element of leadership in followership (Bunin et al., 2022; Stern, 2021). Black/African American female leaders have typically faced unique challenges related to power, privilege, and oppression in leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Consequently, a gap in leadership persists due to a limited exploration of followership from the intersectionality context, which is crucial for an effective and inclusive leadership process.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology and procedures used in this study. The research purpose was to explore the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the role of a leader and a follower. The objective was to use one-on-one interviews to expand the understanding of the followership experiences of this marginalized group. The chapter contains an explanation of the methodology and procedures used to manage this study, including an outline of the research questions, methodology and design, bracketing process, participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and potential study limitations.

Research Questions

In phenomenological research, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon is at the core of obtaining rich descriptions and insights to create meaning (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Therefore, the research questions were formed to attempt to capture in-depth qualitative data on the experiences of followership and follower dissent of Black/African American female healthcare leaders through the lens of intersectionality. The research questions explored were as follows:

RQ1: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?

RQ2: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role?

RQ3: In what way does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?

RQ4: What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?

Methodology and Design

The research questions for this study guided the selection of the qualitative method and design, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon to capture rich qualitative data (Punch, 2014). Employing the interpretive phenomenological framework and using interviews, the researcher explored the lived experiences and ascribed meaning to the phenomenon under study, as Neubauer et al. (2019) explained. The researcher interviewed participants and served as key component of the interpretive process (Tuffour, 2017). The phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to facilitate dialogue through semi-structured interview questions to explore the experiences and perceptions of Black/African American female healthcare leaders with followership and follower dissent. The interviews were closed one-on-one format, a design that allows participants to openly share their stories and experiences in a private setting (Seidman, 2006).

Bracketing

Researchers often bring their personal backgrounds, biases, and values into their interpretation of study data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given that the researcher in this study is a Black/African American female working in healthcare leadership, reflexive bracketing was used to minimize researcher bias. This technique involves setting aside preexisting knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences related to the topic to avoid compromising the accurate representation of the participants' lived experiences, thereby ensuring the validity of the data collection and analysis process as recommended by scholars (Ahern, 1999; Chan et al., 2013).

Participants

The participants in this study were Black/African American women working in healthcare leadership roles, recruited through connections provided by the National Association of Health Services Executive, a professional organization that serves to advance and develop Black healthcare leaders in the industry. The researcher also contacted several members and affiliates of the American College

of Healthcare Executives for suggested referrals. Purposive snowball sampling was used to intentionally obtain participants because the research focused on a specific targeted group meeting certain criteria and traits, and the group of leaders was not easily accessible or available (see Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

The purposive sampling process is commonly used in qualitative research to identify specific groups that meet the inclusion criteria (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; O. C. Robinson, 2014). For this study, the participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- Black/African American female;
- Employed with a healthcare organization;
- Work as a healthcare leader;
- Has experienced followership and follower dissent in leadership role; and
- Willing to be interviewed one-on-one.

These requirements ensured the study target group was recruited based on the research question to capture their personal experiences with followership and follower dissent. A nine-question prescreening tool (see Appendix A) helped screen and collect the demographic information of potential interviewees. Individuals who passed the prescreening were invited to participate in the interview with the researcher. In total, nine individuals participated in the interviews, and their roles consisting of one Chief Executive Officer (CEO), one President/SVP, three Chief Operating Officers (COOs), one Chief Nurse, one Assistant Director, one Department Director, and one Dental Director. Each participant received a consent form (see Appendix B) to read, complete, and sign prior to interviewing. The interviews occurred virtually via Zoom for convenience and ease of flexibility in connecting with participants from various areas of the United States.

The initial sample size for this study was six, and saturation was reached with nine participants. Saturation is used to assess data adequacy in purposive sampling to the point where no further gains in new information are identified (Morse, 1995, 2015). Scholars have empirically supported that saturation in

qualitative research is frequently reached between six and 12 interviews of a homogenous group (Guest & Bunce, 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data Collection

Four research questions guided the data collection for this interpretive phenomenological study. Open-ended semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix C) were used to facilitate the discussion related to each participant's experience of followership and follower dissent and clarifying or probing questions were used to obtain additional information or to facilitate expanding on thoughts or clarifying examples. Open-ended interviews are a popular qualitative research tool used in social and behavioral science to collect data from participants who have similar characteristics that relate to the topic (Bevan, 2014). Using this method, the participants can provide detailed responses to gain context and interpret meaning. Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to ask probing questions for clarification and deeper input during data collection (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The researcher used an interview protocol for each interview, comprising detailed procedures, information shared with the participants, and a list of semi-structured interview questions by research questions to maintain consistency across all interviews (see Appendix C). The question format consisted of an introductory question to be acquainted with the participants, followed by a transition question to facilitate their engagement in sharing their thoughts. Key study questions followed, organized by research questions, concluding with an ending question to close the interview (see Bevan, 2014). Before the beginning of the actual research interviews, the researcher held a pilot interview session to test the interview questions for optimal use as Majid et al. (2017) suggested. The pilot interview did not reveal any changes needed to the interview questions and was incorporated into the sample.

For each participant interview, data were collected through recorded Zoom meetings. The durations of the interviews ranged from 32 minutes and 36 seconds to 1 hour and 27 minutes. Transcription of the recorded sessions followed using Otter.ai. Following transcription, the researcher conducted a thorough initial read of

each transcript for familiarization. A subsequent review occurred to redact sensitive information and ensure participant anonymity. Finally, the researcher uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 14 to initiate the coding and data analysis process.

Data Analysis

The method of data analysis for this study was inductive thematic analysis to examine and elucidate the patterns and themes in the followership and follower dissent experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders, thereby generating an understanding and deeper meaning of the unique experiences from the intersectionality lens. Inductive thematic analysis helped analyze the transcript data for this study, which is a popular strategy in phenomenological research (Guest et al., 2011). This section contains details of the data analysis methods used in each step in this study, beginning with organizing the data, coding the data, and, and the process used to develop themes.

To start the coding process, an initial structure was established, where the researcher established buckets for each research question. The buckets were labeled as follows: (RQ1) Followership Experiences, (RQ2) Dissenting, (RQ3) Intersectionality Considerations, and (RQ4) Followership and Leadership Similarities and Differences. After organizing the research questions into these categories, the researcher began the coding process, beginning the first round with In Vivo coding. The approach captured the participants' significant words that emerged during the initial round of descriptive-focused coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The second phase of coding involved process coding, where gerunds or "-ing" words were used to denote actions, reaction, or interaction within qualitative data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The last review encompassed open coding to interpret meaning and identify any missed codes.

Upon completion of coding all transcripts, the researcher downloaded the data from NVivo to organize by code count under each theme. Then, the researcher created a word document with four columns to begin the process of grouping codes, starting with dominant codes and adding related codes. Further grouping of these codes by relationship helped develop clusters of patterns that were

subsequently synthesized into themes for each research question. The researcher repeated this process for each research until themes were identified for all four research questions to interpret results within the context of the research questions. The analysis of the codes for themes and grouping them into meaningful segments followed to develop overarching themes to interpret results within the context of the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed in this study, including consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, and risk of harm (Sanjari et al., 2014). To ensure study participants were informed, the researcher provided them with an informed consent ahead of the scheduled interview. Each participant was required to submit a consent with their signature to ensure they were aware of the purpose, format, and details of the research study and informed that participation was completely voluntary with ability to withdraw at any point (see Walker, 2007). The researcher also referenced and explained the consent on the day of the interview to ensure participant understanding and clarify any questions.

Second, the issue of confidentiality and anonymity was critical in this research to protect the participants from being identified or having their information accessed (Walker, 2007; Wiles et al., 2008). The researcher included the participant confidentiality statement in the written consent and verbally reiterated the processes for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity during and after interview sessions. For anonymity, all participants' names, companies, or other verbiage that could make them identifiable were redacted from the transcripts with the participants identified by numbers. The researcher also stored all Zoom interview recordings, saved transcripts, and scanned notes on a password-protected computer behind a locked home office door with written notes shredded after scanning.

Lastly, given that the research involved interviews with human subjects, additional risks required careful consideration. Although risks were minimal within the context of the study, the researcher took measures to ensure respectful, open,

and transparent interactions with the participants throughout the study. The aim of this approach was to prevent misrepresentation and ensure that the participants felt comfortable and fully understood their autonomy and their right to withdraw from the study or refrain from sharing information that brought discomfort (Warusznski, 2002).

Potential Study Limitations

This qualitative research study had several limitations. First, because the focus of qualitative research is on gathering information and meaning on lived experiences from a small sample, the findings cannot be generalizable to larger population (Crimanati, 2018). Second, purposive snowball sampling was used to identify participants for interviews; this approach may result in a sample that is not representative and may introduce selection bias or participant bias that further negate generalizability (Collier, 1996; Galdas, 2017).

Third, the researcher also functioned as key research instrument for data collection and analysis, incorporating a human element. Therefore, accounting for researcher bias was a critical factor to consider because the researcher is a Black/African American female who works in healthcare leadership. The researcher had to make use of qualitative research rigor to manage processes and assumptions, which can introduce bias (McCaslin & Scott, 2003), such as use of bracketing to set aside personal feelings and perspective to accurately represent the intended meaning, perceptions, and experiences of participants (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders, considering their intersection of race and gender. This chapter contained a discussion of the research methodology, including study design, the process of bracketing, participant selection, data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations and inherent limitations of this type of study. The methodology was primarily guided by the research questions to

ensure the project's credibility. Using a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to gather detailed, nuanced information that could not be adequately captured through a quantitative approach, thereby providing deeper insights into the experiences of the target population for coding and development of themes and interpretation of findings that are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Results or Findings

The aim of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the role of a leader and a follower, considering their intersection of race and gender to fill a gap and contribute to followership research from this intersectional lens. In Chapter 4, the study results from thematic analysis using NVivo 14 based on the study's four research questions are presented. The research questions included the following:

RQ1: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?

RQ2: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role?

RQ3: In what way does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?

RQ4: What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?

The researcher conducted interviews with the participants to explore the research questions to the point of saturation, where no additional insights could be uncovered. Saturation resulted in nine completed interviews. Qualitative researchers have empirically demonstrated that saturation is often reached in qualitative studies using interviews with homogenous groups, typically within six to 12 interviews (Guest & Bunce, 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), consistent with the sample size for this study. The results include descriptions of the participants' lived experiences with followership and dissent, considering intersections of race and gender, in their own words and the themes derived from codes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the participants' descriptions.

Participants

Black/African American female healthcare executives were recruited for this study using snowball purposive sampling. Participants were recruited through

contacts of the National Association of Health Services Executive, and from connections made at the annual American College of Healthcare Executive Congress on Healthcare Management held in March 2024. Each potential participant was invited to complete a prescreening form to screen for whether the participant was a Black/African American female, currently working in healthcare leadership, and had experienced followership as a leader and a follower. In total, 11 participants were screened; two participants completed the screening form and met the study criteria, but did not complete the interview process, leaving nine participants who completed the semi-structured interviews for the study. The participants' ages ranged from 35 to 55+ years, and they came from a various role in healthcare leadership, including two CEOs/Presidents, three COOs, one Chief Nurse, one Assistant Director, one Department Director, and one Dental Director. Five participants were from the public healthcare sector and four were from the private sector. All participants had higher-level degrees, with the lowest level being a Master's degree (see Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics).

Table 1

Demographics Descriptive Statistics

Demographics	*N*	Percent
Age Group		
35-44	2	22%
45-54	3	33%
55+	4	44%
Role		
CEO/President	2	22%
COO	3	33%
Assistant Director	1	11%
Chief Nurse	1	11%
Dental Director	1	11%
Admin Department Director	1	11%
Sector		
Private	4	44%
Public	5	56%
Education		
Doctoral or Equivalent Degree	5	56%
Master's Degree	4	44%

Note. $N = 9$.

Data Collection and Analysis

Nine interviews were scheduled and conducted within a 4-week period between April and May 2024. The interviews occurred via Zoom, with the longest interview lasting 1 hour 27 minutes and the shortest 32 minutes 36 seconds. The researcher followed an interview protocol (see Appendix C) for each interview and incorporated eight semi-structured interview questions associated with the four research questions, as well as a bonus question that required the participants to identify the followership style that best resonated with them as followers. Each Zoom video was transcribed using Otter.ai. A review of the transcripts followed in four phases. The first phase entailed the researcher reading through and familiarizing with the data captured. The second phase was listening to the audio while reviewing the transcript to ensure the accuracy and completeness of statements and to clean up errors. The third phase was rereading the transcripts to sanitize them for anonymity. After sanitizing and anonymizing the transcripts, the researcher uploaded them into NVivo 14 for the inductive coding process.

The initial structure for categorizing codes was set up using NVivo 14 software by setting up groupings for each research question. Following that process, the researcher used In vivo coding, a process where the participants' own words emerge as meaningful for the initial round of descriptive focused coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The second round of coding was completed using process coding, in which gerunds or "-ing" words are used to signify action within the qualitative data. The last review involved open coding to interpret the meaning and identify any missed codes.

After coding all the transcripts, the researcher downloaded the information into a spreadsheet. The next step was creating a Word document to categorize codes under each research question, grouping and categorizing common codes starting with dominant codes. The codes were grouped by relationship to develop clusters of patterns that were then developed into themes for each research question. The researcher identified 13 themes: four themes under RQ1, three themes under RQ2, three themes under RQ3, and three themes under RQ4. Table 2 contains a summary of the themes that emerged for each research question.

Table 2

Emergent Themes and Research Questions

Research question	Themes that Emerged From the Question
RQ1. How do Black/African American female healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and the follower role?	Theme 1: Cultivating trust through relationship building and role modeling Theme 2: Proving professional legitimacy and competence Theme 3: Strategic engagement Theme 4: Navigating identity and cultural dynamics
RQ2. How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader and follower role?	Theme 1: Ethical followership and respect Theme 2: Strategic communication Theme 3: Feeling misinterpreted
RQ3. In what ways does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?	Theme 1: Perceived intersectional challenges in behavior acceptance Theme 2: Navigating Intersectional Identity Theme 3: Strategic workplace navigation, self-management, and response
RQ4. What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American female healthcare lead	Theme 1: Expressed similarities Theme 2: Expressed differences as a Leader Theme 3: Expressed differences as a Follower

RQ1 Coding and Findings

RQ1 addressed how Black/African American female healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and the follower role. There were two interview questions associated with RQ1: (a) “Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience with people you have to lead.” and (b) “Considering your race and gender as Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience with the people who are leading you.” These interview questions produced 238 codes among nine cases that were categorized into four themes based on clusters of code relationships: (a) cultivating trust through relationship building and role modeling; (b) navigating identity and cultural dynamics; (c) proving professional legitimacy and

competency, and (d) strategic engagement. Table 3 depicts a summary of RQ1 themes and codes.

Table 3

RQ_1 Themes and Associated Codes and Evidence

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
Theme1: Cultivating trust through relationship building and role modeling	Represents the role modeling behaviors and careful measures participants to took build so they can be perceived as trustworthy	9	45	-connecting and building relationships (14) -building trust (7) -parental influence (6) -mentoring and coaching (5) -actively communicating and listening openly (4) modeling behavior (4) -servant leadership (3) -other minorities (2)
Theme2: Navigating identity and cultural dynamics	Represents participant experiences navigating the complexities of their social identity and various cultural encounters they experience.	9	51	-embracing identity (10) -hurtful comments (8) -avoiding stereotypes (7) -overcoming cultural disconnect (6) -feeling unsupported by other minorities (4) -feeling judged (2) -bringing awareness to cultural blind spots (2) -calling out behavior (2) -desiring inclusion (2) -displaying strength and belief in self (2)

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
				-being aware (2) -experiencing passive aggressiveness (1) -avoid speaking for all Black people or women (1) -power differences (1) -pushing through (1)
Theme3: Proving professional legitimacy and competence	Represents the conscious and extra effort to participants expressed taking to demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and/or abilities	8	51	-being challenged (6) -being ethical (3) -being solutions based (1) -delivering and achieving results (1) -exuding confidence (2) -managing up (7) -proving and convincing -competency (30) -self-growth (1)
Theme4: Strategic Engagement	Represents the deliberate approach and actions participants expressed to effectively navigate their social encounters considering their intersecting identities of race and gender	9	92	-aligning (20) -creating the environment (16) -being mindful in engagement (13) -coping (9) -mindset (6) -setting expectations (6) -implicit followership (4) -parting ways (4)

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
				-making them feel comfortable (those leading you) (3)
				-navigating (3)
				-acceptance (1)
				-being calculated (1)
				-being transparent (1)
				-evolving followership (1)
				-knowing how to be led (1)
				-misinterpreted engagement (1)
				-prepared for the worst (1)
				-pushing through (1)

Note. Number of cases represents the number of participants associated with the code. Code Count represents the total count of reference codes associated with each theme.

The subsequent section contains a presentation of each theme using direct quotes from the participants. For ease of following the coding patterns for each theme, the first narrative section includes bolded text that highlights the keywords or phrases leading to a code. Next to each bolded text, the specific identified code is provided in brackets. This process ensures transparency in how the researcher interpreted the participants' responses to derive codes.

Theme 1: Cultivating Trust Through Relationship Building and Role Modeling

The interviews revealed that the followership experiences of the Black/African American female healthcare leaders involved taking extra measures so they can be accepted as trustworthy. The strategies involved dedicating time to building connections with others and trying to role model behaviors in their interactions to establish credibility and trust in the followership process in both the leader role with subordinates and in their follower roles with their leaders. Participant 1 added significance to this context in the leader role by indicating the following:

> So back to the people that are older than me and look different than me. It is very hard to lead people unless you **find a way to connect** [Connecting and building relationships], and so, often times the good thing about where I work and the mission of my organization. I'm a military brat. A lot of my staff are veterans no matter what their age is, and no matter what their role is, and so because we have that in common, and we can share that, that really helps us.

Referencing the follower role, Participant 5 expressed the following:

> I think the biggest challenge is being led as a Black woman, more than so leading people because when I lead people, then I have the opportunity to set the tone and to set the culture and to engage them as individuals and **develop the relationships** [Connecting and building relationships].

The participant perceived that being a Black/African American female in the follower role was more challenging than being a Black/African American leader in the leader role experiencing followership with direct reports. One specific approach used to facilitate connections and gain trust was through involvement in

mentoring relationships as a leader and a follower. Participant 2 expressed the following:

> Two of the **mentors** [mentoring and coaching] that I felt most closely aligned with are White men. They just did a phenomenal job kind of showing me how things work and partnering with me. They were comfortable in their skin. They didn't have a concern about my questioning or challenging or seeking to understand. They were able to receive that well.

Participant 6 shared, "Most of my bosses have been my biggest supporters, my **biggest mentors**, **sponsors** [mentoring and coaching], helped me get jobs." In the leader role, Participant 1 shared:

> I do **make myself available to mentor and develop folks** [mentoring and coaching] … if they aspire to be greater than what their organization has for them or sees them as, and so my role is going to be that example of what could happen if you're willing to step outside of that status quo and be that better person.

In addition to references on the significant role mentoring relationships played in helping establish deeper relationships with leaders and followers, five of the cases referenced the role of parental influence in shaping their behaviors and perceptions of how they displayed and role modeled followership. Participant 1 shared, "I treat you how I expect you to treat me, and I will accept nothing less. I know that I have standards, **I get that from my mother** [parental influence]."

Participant 8 shared:

> I think for me, just from an early age, I know that **my dad modeled** [parental influence]. that for me. He had a company for 54 years, so I've seen how he's really made **relationships the key to everything** [connecting and building relationships].

The words expressed through these examples reflected the value the participants placed on building meaningful and supportive relationships and role-modeling positive followership behaviors. The participants appeared to place considerable effort in this area to help manage how they were perceived and received.

Theme 2: Navigating Identity and Cultural Dynamics

The theme of navigating identity and cultural dynamics refers to participants' experiences navigating the complexities of their social identity and the various cultural encounters they experience. The theme captures several aspects of their experiences, including trying to avoid stereotypes while embracing their identity and authentic selves and overcoming cultural disconnect in encounters with others. Participant 2 described trying to navigate struggles with her leaders in the follower role when exhibiting strong and directive behaviors, which she believed were necessary to be a strong administrator but misaligned with the leader's expectation of her follower role in interacting with them. She stated the following:

> The ones who I struggled with were people who could not handle my being strong. And so, part of the **stereotypes** [avoiding stereotypes].
>
> , I think, play out. And so, if you're too vocal, if you are too direct, I literally had a leader say to me, I've just never worked with anyone like you before. And like, what do you mean by that?

Participant 6 expressed frustration and similar perceptions about labels and stereotypes as a Black/African American woman leader in the followership process and trying to overcome, especially when being the first in some of her roles. Her comments reflected the following:

> You know, it's something about **that combination of Black/African American woman that when you respond certain ways, it's like you're angry. You're defensive. You know, you've got some kind of chip on your shoulder** [avoiding stereotypes]. But if other people respond in different ways, they're just brushed off. That's just how they are. So, my thing is, okay, well then just brush me off because that's just who I am. So, you know, it's just really trying to overcome a lot of stereotypes. And I think that over the years, I've **been effective in overcoming those stereotypes** [avoiding stereotypes] and kind of breaking some of the barriers because a lot of the positions that I've been in over the years, I've been the first Black/African American female to be in those positions.

In the evidence provided, the participants seemed to be conscious of the stereotypes attributed to them of being "defensive" or "angry Black woman" and proactively worked to avoid being seen in that light. They often navigated encounters carefully and helped reframe things for others to avoid being villainized or placed in a box.

Several participants expressed experiencing cultural disconnect and receiving hurtful comments that seemed to be a manifestation of the stereotypes and negative images of Black women, perceptions of the role they should play, or how they should show up in the workplace. Participant 1 shared her experience that not only revealed her race and gender as challenges she had to overcome with followers in the leadership space but also her age, being in the 35–44 age bracket. She indicated the following:

> Being that I am younger than most of the people that work for me, and it is often a challenge for them. I'm also a woman, I'm also a minority. Also, I've oftentimes **had to overcome a lot of cultural issues** [overcoming cultural disconnect]. I think sometimes the hardest times I have is actually with other Black females to be honest, and or other Black people in general in the professional realm because we oftentimes undercut each other.

Participant 1 went on to share a specific experience with other Black/African American women in the workplace who made comments to her about her hair and how she presented in "White spaces." She expressed:

> I've had several people that I looked up to, or that were inspirational, that **have said things to me about my hair and how I look and how I present in White spaces** [hurtful comments]**.** And it's two-fold. So, one, I know that they meant well by that. And I also know that they never had the ability to push back in the ways that younger generations do and still do … I took it for what it was at the time, and I knew that the person meant well, even though the delivery was hurtful and somewhat demoralizing.

Participant 9, a Black/African American healthcare leader, who is a lighter skinned woman with light eyes, expressed a similar sentiment as she shared her experience working in a majority-Black healthcare organization in the South and

having to overcome colorism among her Black/African American peers and followers. She shared:

> And the things, I had to overcome were, one what I look like. Coming back to the southern region of the country, being reintroduced to those cultural, historical cultural vantage point of colorism with the Black/African American diaspora. It still exists, not as prevalent, as it once was, you know, I think we've come a long way. But it was shocking to me that in 2018, how I look as far as skin tone, eye color, hair texture, was an issue for some people. And **my ethnicity was questioned and there were comments, not positive comments about it** [hurtful comments].

Participant 7, also one of the younger Black woman leaders in this study, in the 35–44 age bracket, shared her experience with a follower when she was promoted to a new leadership role within her organization. She shared the following:

> I had a meeting with one of my section [leaders], it was our first one because I knew I was going to have some resistance with her. And **she basically told me, it wasn't appropriate for me to be her boss because I was too young, and I was a Black woman** [hurtful comments, feeling judged]. And I remember, like, you know how, you can think it, but **you don't really think somebody's gonna say it to you [**hurtful comments, feeling judged]**.** You think that it's just going to be the elephant in the room, and it's not going to be talked about.

The participants highlighted their followership experiences, emphasizing the challenges of navigating identity and cultural dynamics. Their experiences involved not only overcoming stereotypes and verbal slights from White colleagues but also managing cultural disconnect with other Black individuals. Two of the participants also shed light on age as a consideration to the compounding followership experience in considering intersecting identities, particularly from the perspectives of the younger Black/African American woman female healthcare leaders who were interviewed.

Theme 3: Proving Professional Legitimacy and Competence

The theme proving professional legitimacy refers to the conscious and extra effort the participants had to put into demonstrating their skills, knowledge, and abilities as both leaders and followers in the followership process. The theme captures several aspects of their experiences, including convincing others of their competency, being challenged, and making concerted efforts to manage up in the follower role. Six of the nine cases interviewed referenced feeling the need to prove and justify competence in their experience with followership from both the leader role with followers and as followers of their leaders.

Participant 4 shared her experience with followership from the leader role trying to prove competence to followers and by going the extra mile and trying to align to high-reliability organization principles and servant leadership approaches:

> So, in light of my race of being Black and being a female, which is a double minority, it has often been a struggle. And not that I have not utilized many different techniques, many different ways of leading different groups. I feel that as a leader, with a double minority, I have to do extra and more things to **prove myself as a reliable leader, as a trustworthy leader, and three, as a competent leader [**proving and convincing competency]**.** I feel that all three of those are challenged very often because of being a double minority. And you know it doesn't feel good, but knowing that, I still just work and to get it done.

Participant 3, in the 55+ age bracket, who worked as a Chief Nurse expressed that she felt her competency was much more challenged the higher up she went and was much more susceptible to questioning compared to her White counterparts. She shared:

> I have found it actually seems to have worsened the higher up I go, I find myself **having to constantly justify myself [**proving and convincing competency] … but all it takes is one follower to question me or to comment about me and that confidence in my ability to lead a team erodes, and then I find myself **having to reconvince [**proving and convincing competency] the person who just hired me that I was the right person, that

> they made the right decision. So, the onus is never on the follower. The **onus has always been on me to prove myself [**proving and convincing competency], whereas with colleagues that are White, I've actually seen where they would literally crash and burn and would almost have to do something really damaging before there was a question of whether or not they were the right person. So, it's an interesting dynamic.

The need to prove competency to leaders in the follower role resulted in participants expressing strategy to manage up. Participant 1 shared, "I **spent a lot more time trying to manage up** [managing up], than allowing someone above me to manage down and I've done that in all my roles." Participant 8 shared her approach with a leader that she described as "not someone that can lead me well". She indicated, "I am just going to have to **spend more time with him expressing in a way that he can receive it** [managing up] on how to really manage me." Participant 9 expressed a similar approach from the followership perspective, with a boss where there was a disconnect. She indicated:

> Some days, I have to, I guess I call it **lead from the front and make the initiation** [managing up] and you know give her the information, and say can we meet today? You know, I haven't talked to you this week, can we meet to have that interaction.

The experiences shared by the participants provided insights into the additional challenges these Black/African American female healthcare leaders encountered in trying to prove their legitimacy as leaders in the followership process, as both leaders who have followers and followers of their leader. Their experiences involved putting extra efforts into being perceived as competent, managing up, and purposeful communication to maintain connections to manage the perceptions of competency and legitimacy.

Theme 4: Strategic Engagement

Strategic engagement was the most dominant theme for RQ1, with 92 code references represented by all nine cases. The theme refers to the deliberate approach and actions the participants expressed to effectively navigate their social encounters, considering their intersecting identities of race and gender in the

followership process. They referenced building alignment, setting expectations, and being mindful of engagement.

Participant 2, a CEO in the 55+ age bracket, expressed her focused and purposeful approach to alignment and pointed out instances in her experiences where followership alignment worked out and where it was misinterpreted as a race and gender issue. She shared:

> I've had the pleasure of having amazing working relationships with people of all races gender, everything, right. Conversely, I had some that you're like ok this didn't go well … So, the ones where it works well, there is an **intentionality around aligning with the goals** [aligning], seeking clarification on how we're going to get there, thinking about what a person's unique contribution can be … The other side of the coin … I thought it was race and gender and it wasn't. There was a guy working for me, he was older than I am, Black/African American male … So, I described what I wanted to accomplish and shared with him what I needed from him for us to accomplish the goal. He said OK, but never met the goals … so, I did the DISC survey with him … turns out I'm a "D" and he's a "C" on the DISC, totally different approaches to life.

Participant 2 described an example when there was a breakdown in alignment that did not work out when she was a younger executive that was related to her experience as a Black/African American woman leader. She shared the following:

> And so, I'm talking with, he was the director of HR and we're just not connecting. And it's like, **we seem not to be aligned** [aligning] What exactly is going on for you? His exact answer for me was, I don't know what you expect from me. I'm a middle-aged White man from the south. And so, I said that's an interesting response. Guess what, I'm expecting you to do your job, I don't care where you're from. I don't care what your race or ethnicity is, quite frankly, I'm still your supervisor. You are responsible for a book of business for us, and I need you to execute on that. If you're unsuccessful in executing on that, we can go down the performance

> improvement planning process and I can help you exit the organization. It's your call. He exited. It was too difficult for him to wrap his head around needing to take direction from a younger Black/African American woman.

Participant 5, a President/SVP in the 55+ bracket, referenced her intentionality in building alignment with her boss. She shared:

> I'm just **trying to understand them and what makes them tick** [aligning] and how, what's important to them, how they like to see the work done, what their expectations are of me and of my team, because my role and my goal is to help them be successful.

Reflecting on her followership experience with leaders, Participant 6 shared:

> Over the years, I'm sure, I've **worked for people who probably never even had neighbors that were Black, let alone people that worked with them, or people that they socialized with. So, I've always kind of kept hat in mind. That you know**, **I may be setting a certain** bar [being mindful in engagement], a certain level, a certain standard for their understanding as to what should be expected when they hire people like me. Because what I want is not only for them to hire people that look like me, when I leave that position, I want them to equally consider people that look like me when they hire people.

Strategic engagement was a prevalent theme under RQ1, evidenced in the participants' examples of their calculated and mindful approaches to followership to fulfilling their responsibilities with followership in the leader and follower role to create productive environments, so that they do not limit opportunities for themselves or others.

RQ_2 Coding and Findings

RQ2 addressed how Black/African American female healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role. The two interview questions associated with RQ2 were (a) "Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience when there is a

difference of thought or difference of opinion with the people you lead?" and (b) "Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience when there is a difference of thought or difference of opinion with your leader?" The interview questions produced 105 codes among nine cases that were categorized into three themes based on clusters of code relationships: (a) ethical followership and respect, (b) strategic communication, and (c) feeling misinterpreted. Table 4 contains a summary of RQ2 themes and codes. The following sections include a discussion of the analysis findings for each theme through the participants' words.

Table 4

RQ_2 Themes and Associated Codes Supporting Themes

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
Theme1: Respect and Ethical followership	Represents the value placed on respect and the reliance ethical followership to guide dissenting and aligning	9	37	-being open to disagreement (leader role) (12) -valuing respect (both roles) (9) -navigating disrespect (6) -making it comfortable to speak up (5) -following ethically and morally (3) -being assertive (2)
Theme2: Strategic communication	Represents the deliberate and meticulous communication strategies participants employed during interactions within the followership process in both in their roles as leader and follower	9	49	-being strategic in communication (18) -speaking up (13) -co-existing (5) -building relationships (3) -considering politics (2) -reserving thoughts (2) -seeking clarity (1) -filtering through dissent (1) -justifying dissent with facts (1) -learning from mistakes of others -modeling behavior (1) -navigating leader insecurity (1)

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
				privately (1)
Theme3: Feeling misinterpreted	Represents participant feelings of being dismissed or misinterpreted when speaking up, providing differing opinion, or dissenting in followership.	7	19	-feeling dismissed (5) - misinterpreted dissent (4) -trying to understand dissent (2) -feeling frustrated (2) -feeling uncomfortable (2) -being challenged (1) -experiencing consequences of speaking up (1) -leaning on spirituality (1) -seeking mentor advice (1)

Theme 1: Respect and Ethical Followership

The theme of respect and ethical followership in the context of this qualitative study refers to how these Black/African American women placed a high value on mutual respect and relied on their ethics and moral values in dissenting and aligning, particularly as followers of their leaders. The dominant sub-code that emerged under this theme was "valuing respect," referencing the comments of eight of the nine participants. As leaders of their followers, the participants expressed embracing dissent from followers and creating environments where they welcomed dissent as long as it was respectful. Participant 1 shared:

> I'm always open to disagreements, and I tell my staff all the time, I don't need you to agree with me, I need you to give advice, you can advise, you can make recommendations … But I will not let them be disrespectful. And that's key for me … Disrespect is unacceptable, but disagreement, that's par for the course.

Similarly, Participant 5 shared, "I try to make it comfortable for people to understand that it's ok with me if you disagree with me. So, I'm gonna need you to be ok when I disagree with you." Participant 3, a Chief Nurse, expressed experiencing dissent from direct reports negatively compared to her White colleagues. She shared:

> I sometimes believe the organization is not even sensitive to the fact that individuals are allowed to be more disrespectful to me, if you will, than it would be tolerated for my White colleagues. And so, for instance, I've been in meetings where my followers would just say something disagreeable as, I don't have to listen to you, or um, that's your opinion. And somehow you know that's okay. I'm told you know, that's just that person, deal with it, don't make a big deal about it. That didn't mean anything ... I'm trying not to put up with it, but I'm encouraged by my leadership and HR to ignore it, basically. So obviously, there are differences in what is expected of me as a Black/African American woman leader in terms of how to even set group norms, group rules, of engagement, to ensure that there is some modicum of respect.

When experiencing dissent with leaders, the participants expressed disagreeing with their leaders in a respectful way but deferring to their leader as the ultimate decision-maker whether they agreed with them or not, if it was ethical, legal, and moral. Participant 7 shared:

> Even though I think my opinion, my thought, and my recommendation may be the best, he's still my boss, and what happens still falls on him. So, you know, just respecting his, you know, whatever his final decision is, is his final decision.

Participant 2 expressed:

> But at the end of the day, if they say we're going that way, if it is not unethical, immoral, illegal, they say we're going that way, whether I want to go that way or not, if they're the leader, I'm going that way. Because it's our responsibility to follow if we want people to follow us, we have to be willing to follow others.

Overall, respect and ethical followership were a salient principle for the women. They valued mutual respect in interactions with followers, as well as their leaders. They encouraged dissent from their followers and engaged in dissent with their leaders, but ultimately believed their role was to follow accordingly if following was grounded in ethical considerations.

Theme 2: Strategic Communication

Strategic communication emerged as a dominant theme under RQ2, as highlighted by 49 references from all nine participants. This theme encapsulates the deliberate and meticulous strategies employed by the Black/African American female leaders interviewed during their interactions within the followership process, regardless of whether they were in a leader role or as followers. Their experiences included navigating social and cultural dynamics, discerning when to voice opinions or hold back, justifying dissent with facts and data, and figuring out how to coexist effectively. Participant 5 expressed the following approach she took when speaking up or dissenting:

> I try to use tentative language … I have learned over the years how to do it in a way that is more thoughtful questioning, what some of the office called

> humble inquiry, so that you actually are really and truly seeking to better understand, why, where persons are coming from, why they have the position they have, as opposed to being dogmatic and not having people really hear anything that you have to say.

Participant 6 shared her experience in strategically reserving thoughts and communicating with decision-makers as opposed to larger groups:

> I think I've matured, as a leader, I used to just say stuff, just to make sure my say is out there, but now it's like, I just save it. It's like, if it's something important, I'll say it, if not, I just won't because I know that it's going out unto, just float out into the air. If I really need to say something, I try to just say it to the people who actually make the decision, and not to the crowd that feels that they have to weigh in on what I'm saying.

Participant 7 indicated feeling she must come up with more justification to dissent. She stated, "I feel like if I'm going to rebuttal, or if I have a difference of opinion or I think something needs to be done differently, I have to make sure I actually have concrete facts." Participant 9 pointed out a difference she believed existed in speaking up and being received compared to White males. She expressed the following:

> It's like the White male comes in and just feels like they're already part of the club. I'm feeling like I gotta earn to be part of the club. And maybe club is not the right word, but what I'm meaning, like, earn my seat at the table. They already have a seat at the table. You know, whatever they contribute, how big or small, it is valued. I perceive that it has to be valued. Like, I'm gonna say something, but I want to contribute to the conversation, add value to it. So, I'm doing a lot of listening more so than talking.

Participant 5 expressed considering stereotypes in the process of speaking up. She shared:

> I'm never going to be labeled the angry Black woman because that's just not my persona. You know, people say, I lead with a smile. That's since I was a child. So that's not something that I worry about. But as a woman, people want to call you emotional and you know, what's passion for them,

> it's emotional for us. So, trying to be measured in how I present my position and being forceful without being aggressive and just you know being a bit tenacious.

The participant was mindful of how she could potentially be perceived within stereotypes of being a woman or being Black to balance her communication approach in a way that challenged stereotypes and perceptions but still allowed her to assert her position and professional role. The relationship aspect of communication was also expressed as a consideration in dissenting. Participant 6 expressed that speaking up or dissenting was positive when there was a level of relationship established. She shared:

> I think one of the benefits of choosing your boss, and having that right relationship with your boss, where you trust your boss, your boss trusts you, that usually when I have a difference of thought or opinion, my boss's door is wide open. He'll listen, he'll actually take my feedback.

However, there was an expressed difference when dissenting or providing differing opinion where there was no relationship or dissent was given in an open meeting. The negative encounters ultimately led to feelings of frustration, reserving thoughts, or figuring out strategies to coexist. Participant 1, a younger executive, shared a story about being in a meeting with a leader who was ill-advised and she spoke up. She shared:

> Somebody advised my leader, and I know it was bad information, so I made that known … I was like, oh, sir, just to let you know, you may want to look at such and such that might not be the full spectrum, and I kind of left it at that. And in that moment, I think he felt that I was trying to underserve his authority or tell him what to do. And so, he made a very disrespectful comment in front of everybody, and they started laughing. And it was rude, and unkind, and unnecessary.

Participant 2 shared an interaction with her leader, who she perceived was not open to her opinions, which led to frustrations, as exhibited in her comments to him:

> I've come to the conclusion that you don't really want to know what I think. And so, this is how I'm going to proceed. I'm going to do me, you know, within my sphere of influence, I'm going to lead into what it is I believe I need to do. When it is time for me to interact with you, if it is not unethical, or you know it's not going to break a law or a rule, I'm going to ask you , what would you like, and if I can live with what you'd like, I'm gonna give you that because that's the way we're gonna be able to coexist … Because you seem to struggle whenever I give you an opinion that's different. So, I just won't share my opinion. And as long as what you're doing isn't breaking the law, you're not asking me to do something unethical. Okay, I'll give you what you want in that space.

Overall, participant responses under RQ2 highlighted that strategic communication was a critical consideration in navigating dissent for the Black/African American female healthcare leaders interviewed. These leaders expressed having to navigate social and cultural nuances, which required them to adjust their communication strategy when voicing dissent. They had to manage these dynamics proactively, consider balanced approaches to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and negative perceptions and devise strategies to coexist professionally amid potential disconnects in the followership process.

Theme 3: Feeling Misinterpreted

The theme of "feeling misinterpreted" refers to the experiences shared by some of the participants in the study, who expressed that their intentions in speaking up, providing differing opinions, or dissenting were often dismissed or misinterpreted in followership. Seven out of the nine participants in the study conveyed references related to this theme. A prominent code within this theme related to the perceptions of dismissive encounters or response toward their differing opinions or thoughts. For instance, Participant 1 recounted an experience with a leader who misinterpreted her efforts to speak up in a meeting. After the interaction, she made significant preparations to meet with him privately to clarify her intentions, including consulting a mentor, praying, and meticulously planning

what she was going to say. Despite these efforts, the interaction left her feeling dismissed. She shared the following:

> So, I proceeded to give him the regulation, contract, and the directives, that all said what I said was correct and that I did not lie to him, I was keeping him out of court and saving him time and money. And so, he of course laughed it off. Oh, well, you know, that was yesterday, and I didn't even think about it. That's all well and good, but I did, and so I had to let you know what was going on, and why I had to let you know why I said the things that I said.

Participant 8 shared an experience with a boss who did not value her opinions and expressed her thoughts about being in that position and leaning on the comfort of knowing the decision to remain or leave was always hers to make. She expressed the following:

> If you're in a place where you don't have a voice, it's hard not to have a voice. It's hard to feel like your opinions don't matter, that you're not being respected for what you bring to the table, so then you have a choice.

Participant 9 expressed similar sentiments of feeling dismissed by her leader:

> We were in the meeting; I gave my recommendations and suggestions. They're still going that way. She dissented against me in the forum. I didn't say anything and then when we had a private meeting, I said, I just want to reiterate these vulnerabilities that we may experience if we pursue this. I understand the decision will be made, but I just want everyone to understand, because this is what the agency is accepting as viable, worth it risks if we pursue this. And I just outlined it for her again, and then I just said, I'm gonna just let it be what it's gonna be. You know, those microaggressions. Not sure that it was received well, probably what I was feeling was like, I don't know why we are talking about it, just move on.

Participant 8 recounted an experience in which she felt her response was misinterpreted as being emotional, though she believed she was merely expressing valid concerns about an unexpected leader turnover in the company. She explained

her interaction with the new leader who moderated the initial meeting with the news as follows:

> So, he called and checked on me last week. And he's like oh, you seem less emotional today. I was like emotional. You know that's normal right...when he told me I was like, less emotional, I was thinking, that's not the word you're looking for, but I just said to him, I said, you agree that there is a reason to have those concerns. And I said everyone else felt the same way, I just was the one that verbalized it.

The experiences of the Black/African American female healthcare leaders under the theme "feeling misinterpreted" highlight instances of feeling misunderstood or dismissed when they spoke up, dissented, or offered differences of opinion in the follower role. In the leader role in the followership process with subordinates, the participants shared few accounts of being misinterpreted by subordinates. However, one participant shared her experiences of encountering significant resistance until she was given the benefit of the doubt related to their knowledge, which corresponds with the proving competence theme.

RQ_3 Coding and Findings

RQ3 focused on how intersectionality manifests itself in the experience of Black/African American female healthcare leaders in relation to followership and dissent. The interview questions associated with this research question were (a) "Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience compared to others of a different race and gender in terms of leading others?" and (b) "Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience compared to others of a different race and gender in terms of being led?" Responses to these questions generated 106 codes from nine cases. These codes were categorized into three themes based on clusters of code relationships: (a) perceived intersectional challenges in behavior acceptance; (b) navigating intersectional identity; and (c) strategic workplace navigation, self-management, and response. Table 5 contains a summary of RQ3 themes and codes. The following sections include a discussion of

the analysis findings for each theme, incorporating the participant's own words to elucidate the findings from their described experiences.

Table 5

RQ3 Themes and Associated Codes Supporting Themes

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
Theme1: Perceived Intersectional challenges in behavior acceptance	Represents the perception of double standards, where behaviors accepted of dominant groups in followership and dissenting becomes problematic or create other consequences when exhibited by Black/African American women.	9	24	-male leader variability (being led) (9) -follower behavioral variability (6) -proactiveness not well received (2) -encounters with other women of color (2) -differences of opinion hindered (1) -hard to be heard (1) -positive treatment early in career (1) -power dynamics with physicians (1) -White men mentors (1)
Theme2: Navigating Intersectional Identity	Represents the nuanced, strategic, and intentional navigation required by participants, considering their intersectional identities and desire to be seen in a positive light.	9	66	-navigating stereotypes and labels (12) -being the first or only (7) -assumptions (6) -comfort level (6) -conscious about how you show up (6) -generational difference (6) -making the relationship easier (5) -worrying about appearance (4) -proving trustworthiness (4) -feeling overlooked (2) -pushing forward (2) -creating opportunity (1) -proving -feeling tokenized (1) -following through multiple identity (1) -having to do more (1) -stop thinking about other's perceptions of me (1) -validating experience (1)

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
Theme3: Strategic workplace navigation, self-management, and response		7	18	-looking to the future (3) -deciphering between behavioral issues and need to educate (2) -leaning on spirituality (2) -shift in support (2) -thinking about words (2) -considering when race at play (2) -being on guard (1) -being strategic (1) -filtering leader approaches (1) - speaking up for what's right (1) -sponsorship (1)

Theme 1: Perceived Intersectional challenges in behavior acceptance

The theme of "Perceived Intersectional Challenges" pertains to the Black/African American women leaders' perception of double standards in their experience of followership and follower dissent, where behaviors are accepted of dominant groups in followership and dissenting becomes problematic or leads to other consequences when exhibited by them. The theme consisted of 24 references from over nine cases. The participants expressed perceived differences concerning male leaders in followership. Participant 4 expressed the following:

> I do see a difference between how the male leaders at the same level are being led than the female leaders. So, the male leaders, they can come to meetings late. There's no issue. If they don't like something, they don't care, they can get up and walk out. There's no issue. They can say what they want.

Participant 6 shared her beliefs that things would be different if she was a male in her role: She shared, "If I was a male, in this position right now, either White or Black, people would look at me differently. They would respond to me differently. They would automatically, you know, show more deference to my opinions." Participant 7, a younger executive, reflected on her experiences and shared, "Are there certain experiences that I have had that I'm like well, would my White European male, older, mid 50, 60 counterparts have that same experience? And I don't think so." Participant 2 shared:

> I think it's a lot easier for White men, I just do. They are automatically assumed to be competent; they are automatically assumed to be right. They're automatically assumed to be brilliant, whether they are or they're not. And it is still very often as a Black/African American female, I have to repeat myself a little more than other people would have to, I need to make sure people understood what I was articulating, even though I think I'm pretty clear. I say, oh, perhaps I didn't present that in a way that was clear for you. Let me offer you another way to present this information. White men don't have to go through that. I would say that women, Black and

> White women sometimes have that same struggle, right? Because it's just hard to be heard as a woman.

From the perspective of the leader role guiding followers, Participant 1, a younger executive in the 35–44 age bracket, shared:

> I do think that people don't do the same things in front of White males that they do in front of women, and especially older women. I feel like with me being a younger ELT member, people are probably more apt to try and test the boundaries a lot more.

Participant 9 expressed the following:

> I can't see me being able to tell my boss what I'm not going to do in front of my peers in a meeting? Oh, I'm not doing that. I don't think it would be received well. But everyone, they talk, you know, they talk so freely, and they say what they are and aren't going to do.

Another aspect of perceived intersectional challenges shared was related to when they exhibit proactiveness in followership. Two of the participants reported that their proactiveness is not always received well. Participant 3, a Chief Nurse, shared, "That's another thing that I have experienced as a Black/African American woman, I sometimes feel like I'm ahead of my leader and my team, and that has proven not to be well received." Participant 4 also shared:

> Sometimes I think my proactiveness is looked upon as being cocky and arrogant because sometimes I'm so quick to respond when I'm sure about myself. And I know it, rather than just kind of letting the team kind of mettle and fumble…So, I think. Sometimes it may come across as being arrogant or cocky. And I'm learning to sit back and not always be the answer person.

Considering intersectionality, the participants described perceived differences in their follower experiences as Black/African American females that they believed their White male counterparts, or a male counterpart in general, would not encounter. They articulated a distinct perceived contrast in the level of acknowledgment and respect accorded to their authority by leaders and followers, elevated the experience of having to prove competence, and noted certain behaviors

accepted of their White male counterparts and believed they would be scrutinized if they exhibited the same behaviors as Black/African American females.

Theme 2: Navigating Intersectional Identity

The theme of "Navigating Intersectional Identity" emerged as a dominant theme in response to RQ3, supported by all nine cases with 66 references. The theme captures the experiences of Black/African American female leaders, as they maneuver their intersecting identities within the healthcare sector, where they are significantly underrepresented at the highest leadership levels. The theme includes the strategies these leaders used to overcome unique challenges they encountered in the followership process as leaders and followers, without compromising their authenticity or well-being. The participants expressed their experiences of being the only or the first, navigating stereotypes and labels, and remaining conscious about how they showed up.

For example, Participant 5 shared her thoughts about the difference she saw between female and male bosses, observing a difference in the confidence of the men, who did not seem to display the impostor syndrome as much as the women. She discussed a strategy she took in seeking out male leaders to learn more from their perspective. She shared the following, referencing impostor syndrome in the leader role when being the only female leader:

> Because you don't see a lot of people like you there you feel like how did I get here? And am I, should I be there, what exactly am I going to have to do to stay here because, you know, I'm the only one who's here and you know, it can be a little lonely because you don't really have someone that you can talk to who really understands and is going to give you that specific advice. I have sought out White men as mentors because they do have a different perspective on the work environment, and I want to understand their perspective and why it is that they have the confidence that they do and what would they do differently than I would do and just try to understand that.

Being the only or the first also seemed to put added pressure on the participants to ensure they are representing appropriately to be perceived in a

positive light and breakdown any stereotypes or labels presumed of them. Participant 6, expressed, "And it's just breaking down stereotypes and breaking down those barriers, you know, one door at a time, you know, one day at a time. So, do I overdress where I go, sometimes, most of the time I do." Participant 8 articulated the awareness and consciousness she brings to her role as a follower, aiming to challenge assumptions and influence shifts in perceptions. She emphasized integrating this awareness of social identity nuances into her navigation of followership. She shared the following insight:

> So, I just always been socially and culturally aware of the impact that I can make by doing my best and by being present. So as a follower, I don't ever want to be someone that they consider to be difficult if that makes any sense…because sometimes they will look at you through a different lens because you are that, you know, they would consider you with a certain set of attributes, because you look a certain way. So, it's always reframing it for them. So, I try to do a good job with that. So, as a follower, I'm kind of aware that people are judging people who may look like me by what I bring to the table, so I try to do my absolute best and keep it moving without too much stirring the pot and making too much drama because, I do sometimes, I would say, hold back, but I do take my little notes. And I'm always like, you know, like chess, almost like chess, if that makes any sense with certain things and how I'm gonna roll it out and how I'm going to balance it and what I'm gonna say.

Another significant consideration in balancing and navigating social identity in followership was the complicating factor of age for the younger executives interviewed. The two younger executives described some differences in their experiences unique to their age, which seemed to be a compounding factor for them. Participant 7 recounted an instance where she disagreed with a supervisor's direction, which she believed was wrong, so she felt compelled to report it to another leader higher in authority. She shared the following response she received from her immediate supervisor:" He basically told me, because of you know, your age and your years in [Redacted organization], if I tell you that the sky is purple,

you're just supposed to agree with me and say that its purple." Participant 7 also expressed frustration as a younger leader in the follower role, noting that she is more frequently expected to have additional time and is subsequently forced to volunteer for projects. She articulated her experience as follows:

> People have said stuff like, well, like you don't have family at home, or you're not married, so you should have time to do XYZ. You're like, yeah, but I still got a life. I still got other things I'm trying to do in life.

Participant 1 discussed her experience as a younger executive on an all-woman team, which is an anomaly. She noted:

> I'm on an all-female executive leadership team, there are two Black females, two White females and ultimately, I'm the youngest of ever everybody … I think the biggest difference, I think more than anything is the generational gap versus race and gender … I feel with me being a younger ELT member, people are probably more apt to try to test the boundaries a lot more.

Under Theme 2, the narratives of Black/African American female healthcare leaders highlighted the nuanced and strategic navigation required to manage intersectional identities within followership as leaders and followers in their professional environments. Central to their experience was overcoming stereotypes and labels while striving to be perceived positively. These women expressed bringing heightened awareness and intentionality in interactions, managing what was within their control in how they showed up, and adapting strategies to help them push forward despite challenges. The perspectives of younger executive participants underscored the additional complexity introduced by age and generational differences in navigating compounded intersectional identity within followership.

Theme 3: Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-management, and Response

The theme of "Strategic Workplace Navigating, Self-management, and Response" represents the proactive and introspective measures the Black/African American female leaders adopted to manage themselves and their responses while strategically navigating the workplace elements and interactions out of their

control. This theme consisted of 18 references of experiences by seven of the nine cases interviewed. The key elements under this theme involved participants looking to the future as they navigated things in the present, finding external strength, whether through spirituality or sponsorship, and being reflective and careful in their assumptions and responses.

Participant 6 shared the following thoughts on her outlook for the future while navigating the conditions of her present:

> You know some of the barriers that we're breaking down right now will help that next generation of leaders, just like, you know the things that our ancestors have done for us to get us to where we are today. So, a lot of times, I don't think like real time today. I'm not really concerned about today. I'm really more so concerned about making enough of the impact to change the thought process of our current leaders so that when people behind me come, that they'll have a better opportunity.

Reflecting on her career, Participant 2, a sitting healthcare CEO, expressed seeing a shift in support the higher she tried to go. She shared:

> At the point, I shifted from being middle management, to senior executive, that all changed because everyone was fine with me being the best version of myself, as long as, I didn't try to move too high. At the point, I started propelling myself into the C-suite level of the organization, totally different experience. Well, are you sure you want to do that? Do you think you'll be happy in that space? Are you ready for those assignments? So very distinct from, you know, when you're first moving up, everyone wants to help you, as long as you don't try to go too far … but somehow that next chair gets a little harder to get into.

The narrative conveyed a perceived lack of support and doubt on her ability to excel at the highest level. This aspect made it even more poignant for her to represent others in those high-level spaces once achieved. Participant 8 echoed these sentiments, sharing how she imparts the importance of representation to her daughter. She emphasized the obligation to excel in underrepresented spaces, not

only for oneself but also for those who will come after. She articulated the following:

> And I talk to my daughter as well, like you're representing yourself, but there's someone who's gonna want to come behind you. So, you don't want to burn bridges, burn the whole place down, leave them with a bad taste. And so, I always say to her, like, you want to do your absolute best because somebody fought hard for you to be there in the room, in that class, you know at that university, some lost their lives, and there's somebody coming behind you, that's gonna want to follow in your footsteps, so make the path smoother. So, I'm conscious.

For Participant 1, looking to the future meant not only considering those coming after but also recognizing when it was time to move on from toxic environments that feed into stereotypes and limit progress. She expressed, "I've learned not to spend time in those environments at all, if possible, because it's not beneficial to my growth and development."

Participant 5 discussed her experience with a Black Chief Nurse in her career, who functioned as a sponsor for her when she was coming up, an experience that opened her eyes to where she could take her career. She shared:

> I worked with [Redacted], who was a Chief Nurse a [Redacted] many, many years ago, and she really facilitated me in getting my first vice president role. And that was her being a sponsor and helping me to make sure that I have visibility in the organization that I worked with the leadership team and got involved in things that were important to the organization.

Mentors and sponsors were critical to the participants' roles as leaders and followers. The participants conveyed using this support system to gain insight and navigate difficulties. Their narratives of their experiences also illustrated that they operated strategically and on purpose, including taking steps to check their assumptions and approach. For instance, Participant 8 indicated, "I'm always, you know like chess, if that makes sense with certain things and how I'm gonna roll it out and how I'm gonna balance it and what I'm gonna say."

Participant 7 also expressed her stance of not automatically jumping to conclusions about race and gender as the reasons for her setbacks, indicating leaning on her faith and getting feedback when career opportunities do not work out in her favor. She expressed.

> I could always be like well, maybe it's because I'm a Black woman, but I'm always like, well maybe that's a door God just hasn't opened for me yet that I'm not supposed to take or maybe there's certain things that I need to do in order to be up at that level or get that experience. So, I'm also not the one person afraid to ask like, okay, understanding I didn't get it this time, but can you tell me what are some areas of improvement needed for me? …. my culture of having that religious base to me of like, I know what I'm destined for, and if that means if that door closes, that means that's not where it's at and so I have to be ok with that and continue to push forward.

Overall, the insights gleaned from participants under the theme "Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-Management, and Response" highlighted the challenges and mindset the Black/African American female healthcare leaders in the study adopted to help them navigate the workplace, considering intersectionality and the types of issues they encountered. The participants articulated focusing on the future for those coming behind, finding internal and external sources of strength, such as spirituality and sponsorship to make sense of and maneuver through workplace elements out of their control. They also adopted a measured approach to their actions, critically examining their assumptions to avoid attributing every challenge to race and gender and aligning their strategies with deliberate and reflective caution.

RQ4 Coding and Findings

RQ4 was intended to explore the expressed similarities and differences in the followership experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders when engaging in both leadership and followership roles. The corresponding interview question was, "Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you compare the similarities and differences in your

experiences as both a leader and a follower?" Additionally, each participant was asked the following supplementary question: "Of the three types of followers (Passive, Active, and Proactive), which one resonates with you the most? Can you explain why this type of follower resonates with you the most?" The purpose of this supplementary question was to identify which follower type the participants most closely aligned with and to further explore their thoughts and beliefs.

The codes for this research question were then categorized into three buckets: (a) expressed similarities in leader and follower roles; (b) expressed difference as leader (participants in leader interacting with their followers); and (c) expressed difference as follower (participants in follower role interacting with leaders). Codes were then distributed into each of the three categories to elucidate the dominant code as a focus of the main similarity or difference in each theme. Table 6 depicts a summary of RQ4 themes and codes. The following sections include a discussion of the analysis findings for each theme, incorporating participant's own words from transcripts to elucidate support for the meaning of the findings.

Table 6

RQ4 Themes and Associated Codes Supporting Themes

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
Theme1: Expressed Similarities	Represents participant thoughts on similarities in the leader and follower role.	8	12	-proving self (3) -being strategic and situational (3) -intersectional experiences in both leader and follower roles (3) -focusing on goals (1) -managing up (1) -needing sponsors and support (1)
Theme2: Expressed Differences as Leader	Represents participant thoughts on the differences experienced in the leader role interacting with followers compared to in the follower role.	8	31	- feeling more in control (10) -being sensitive to follower treatment (4) -having to exude more confidence and competence (4) -purposeful and strategic questioning (3) -being watched closely (2) -setting culture in environment (2) -having to go above and beyond (1) -being clearer and more coherent (1) -experiencing more scrutiny (1) -feeling stressed (1) -making connections to neutralize pre-judgement (1)

Themes	Description	Cases	Code Count	Code Breakdown
				-questioning cost benefit of experience (1)
Theme3: Expressed Differences as Follower	Represents participant thoughts on the differences experienced in the follower role interacting with their leaders.	9	28	-having to adapt to leader (12) -dimming light (6) -feeling invisible, overlooked, or dismissed (2) - situational in approach (2) -more opportunity to learn (2) - being accepted until dissenting (1) -deferring more as follower (1) -experiencing more difficulty in follower role (1) -having more patience (1)

Theme 1: Expressed Similarities

The participants in the study articulated that several elements of their follower experiences closely paralleled those of their leader experiences, as illustrated through the theme "Expressed Similarities as a Leader." These experiences included the management of intersectional considerations and encounters, the continuous need to prove themselves, and the imperative to remain strategic and situationally aware. The following narratives reflect some of the evidence that supports the findings identified through dominant codes.

A dominant code was the intersectional experiences in both the leader and follower roles that the participants described they had to navigate. Participant 2 described herself as being a strong Black woman and struggling with people who could not handle her display of strength. She shared:

> So, I think, the same thing that happens to you as a leader also happens to you as a follower being in the skin that we're in … The ones that I struggled with were people who could not handle my being strong. Right. And so, part of some of these stereotypes play out.

Participant 7 reflected on similarities between leadership and followership roles, particularly emphasizing the idea of preconceived notions. She elaborated on the thought that people tend to form initial judgments about others until they can observe them in action and reassess their perceptions. She stated:

> I think everybody, no matter who walks into the room is going to have some type of preconceived connotation of who that person is. I think where it really comes down to is once you start speaking, and once you start actually leading, where people see you for the person that you really are.

Participant 9 also expressed her perception of variance in the accepted qualities and behaviors of others compared to her experience of being accepted or received. She was concerned with overcoming stereotypes in encounters. She articulated:

> I just don't know if I feel I have the freedom of my peers who are in a different race ... they speak directly, they have their cultural standard of how they are and that's just accepted … I feel like a lot of times, I'm trying to

> undo stereotypes. I'm trying to dispel stereotypes. I don't know if other cultures are worried about that. I'm dispelling the stereotypes of being a Black female in the work environment.

Participant 3 expressed the parallel experience of having to demonstrate competence both as a leader and follower continuously. She noted, "Well, I think as a leader and follower the similarities are you're constantly having to prove, reprove, reprove, and over prove yourself, your ability." Participant 5 believed she had to level the playing field by demonstrating competence in both roles. She remarked, "And so, my focus is more on getting the work done, showing the outcome, you know, demonstrating outcomes and not being the one that is not meeting expectations because I feel that is how I level the playing field."

Taking a strategic and situational approach in both roles emerged as a salient subtheme with participants expressing their actions, asking questions in both roles, filtering approaches of others, and being situational for adjustments. Participant 7 shared:

> I don't mind asking questions because I have to be informed at the end of the day. I know somebody's going to ask me … And I think that's a big role that I have put myself in when I have to be in the follower role is that I'm still able to ask the questions, so that I fully understand because at the end of the day, there's going to be somebody following me that I'm gonna have to get their input and feedback from and I have to be able to make sure I fully can share with them why we're doing what we're doing.

In describing the leadership and followership experience, Participant 8 articulated:

> So, I think it's just two sides of a coin. I think it's like an ebb and flow. And kind of moving throughout the space of leading and following with your team and being situational in your approach to it and just very emotionally aware of what people's skill sets are, how they respond, and what makes them tick and then also your own triggers.

The narratives within this theme emphasized the perceived similarities in experience within both leader and follower roles. The participants indicated that

both roles required ongoing justification of their capabilities and expertise. Navigating their intersecting identities required strategic vigilance, prompting a continuous cycle of situational analysis for self-management.

Theme 2: Expressed Differences as Leader

The theme "Expressed Differences as Leader" reflects the perceived distinctions in the unique experiences of Black/African American female healthcare leaders in this study in their leader role contrasted with their roles as followers within the broader context of intersectionality. Eight participants contributed to this theme with 31 references. A dominant code that emerged under this theme was the increased sense of control and agency these women experienced while functioning as leaders with their subordinates. Additional key differences in their leadership roles included the utilization of strategic communication tactics, the necessity to project confidence and competence, and the navigation of heightened visibility.

Feeling more in control in the leader role was referenced by five of the nine participants and their perceptions of having more ability to influence, empower, and set culture in the environment with their subordinates. For example, Participant 1, a COO in the 35–44 age group, indicated:

> For me, the biggest difference is control over my career, and being able to make decisions … and having control over my life, and how I do things, is very empowering. And it's very freeing, and it makes me enjoy work so much more.

Participant 2, a CEO in the 55+ age group articulated:

> I think that as a leader, I am sensitive to the way I was treated as a follower. And I hope that I am not doing what was done to me to other people. I'm probably more sensitive to a number of things. I'm sensitive to the way that I respond to the people at the table. I want to hear everybody's voice. I'm sensitive to that person who says I want the next promotion … I also seek out diversity candidates and watch how they're being treated and responded to by others, so I can provide spaces for them to have success, not disproportionately to others, but equal to others.

Participant 5, a healthcare organization President in the 55+ age group, indicated, "When I lead people, then I have the opportunity to set the tone and to set the culture, and to engage them as individuals and develop the relationships." In the leader role, Participant 5 indicated using questioning as a tactic to confirm understanding or to assess subordinate grasp of the direction shared. She expressed the following:

> I ask a lot of clarifying and sometimes the questions I ask, I already know the answers to, of course, but I need them to articulate the answers in front of me so that we're clear on what's the answer, or so that I can hear or understand how they're thinking about where we're going, so then I can correct them on the spot. And so that's the way I kind of show up in the space that demonstrates that I'm quote, unquote, in charge.

For the women, being in charge extended beyond simply occupying the role. They articulated the additional measures and the mindset they took to ensure they presented themselves as the person in charge, so they can be received in that light. Many of the participants conveyed the necessity of looking the part and exuding both confidence and competence. For example, Participant 4 indicated:

> I think when people see me, they know I'm about the business. Because for one, I dress the part, which means I look the part, for two I talk and sound the part, meaning that I don't open my mouth if I don't know.

Participant 5 shared:

> I have had my colleague tell me that when I'm in the role, people know I'm in charge. But I don't know what it is. I don't know how to describe it. Um, but I think, you have to be competent in yourself and you have to exude that confidence and don't shrink because of what you think others are thinking in the room. And I think sometimes we shrink because we are projecting what we believe other people are thinking and sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't, so just don't worry about it.

Even while maintaining a mindset of not being concerned with others' opinion of them, several participants acknowledged their awareness of being under closer observation in a leadership role, whether as figures people look up to or

subjects of scrutiny. Participants 6 elaborated, "I believe what I'm recommending is being double checked. I believe when I speak it must add value."

Participant 6, a Chief Nurse, referenced some challenges she faces with subordinates due to intersectionality, such as when she first assumes a leadership role and the stress it causes her. She expressed the following:

> Quite frankly, a lot of questioning and a lot of curiosity. Let me see what she really knows, if she knows, a lot of challenging my authority. And to be frank, and invariably, always a subsection of my followers, trying to figure out how to take me out. And so, plotting starts, the gossiping starts. And so, I literally then have to try to work with my leader to kind of let that play out and not get caught up in it, because eventually, it will go away. But again, it comes at a personal sacrifice, so it is just extremely stressful. And then you're like, okay, I don't want to start a new job because it's Déjà vu, it's Groundhog Day. It's gonna start all over again.

Participant 6 also articulated her consciousness of being a visible figure who people watch in words and action. She shared:

> People aren't just going to take the words that come from your mouth. People watch it. They watch how you interact with other people. They watch how you make your decisions. They watch how you interact with the people that follow you.

The narratives shared emphasized the perceived difference and nuanced dynamics the participants experienced in their leader role compared to the follower role. These leaders valued the profound sense of control and autonomy afforded by their leadership positions, which enhanced their ability to influence positive conditions for their direct reports. However, their accounts also underscored the unique challenges posed by race and gender for a leader. These challenges required them to adopt certain mindsets and behaviors, such as strategic communication strategies, carefully considering the implications of their visibility, adjusting how they show up professionally, and continuously working to ensure they projected confidence and competence, irrespective of external perceptions or challenges of their role or authority.

Theme 3: Expressed Differences as Follower

The theme "Expressed Differences as a Follower" captured the distinction made in the unique experiences of the Black/African American female healthcare leaders navigating as followers under their leaders. The codes that formed this theme were derived from the voices of all nine participants captured through 27 references. The dominant code under this theme was beliefs about having to personally connect and adapt to the leader. The participants recounted the need to "dim their light" to avoid overshadowing their superiors or causing discomfort. The narratives also highlighted the careful navigation of situational dynamics and tailoring interaction with leaders. In the following section, this theme is examined through participant narratives to provide a deeper understanding and support for the subthemes highlighted.

In their capacity as followers of their leaders, the participants emphasized the need to understand the intricacies of their leaders' personalities and expectations to effectively connect and align with them, ultimately supporting the leaders to humanize them and lead them more effectively. Participant 2 shared the following:

> So as a follower, and I think as a Black/African American woman, you have to do this, we have to be more in tune to understanding who our leader is and who they're not, so we can help them lead us … I need to learn how you tick so that I can help you navigate working with me, particularly if you don't have a lot of cultural competence … And so, we have to help our leaders become comfortable leading us. And so, the way that I do that is helping them to realize that we probably have a lot of similarities. We're not as different as they think that we are, but we are different. And so, if we happen to have jazz music in common, I'm going to talk about the jazz concert, because now all of sudden, oh, you listen to jazz so who's your favorite artist. I become more personable, I become more healing for you. And now you're like, okay, so let me put down this initial thought that I had of they fit in this particular box. And I helped them see that I might be outside of the box that they originally had envisioned I was in.

Participant 4 provided similar sentiments when she articulated the following:

> I always say I'm the best assistant to whoever because I always find out what's their direction, you know, what's their philosophy because I want to please them. I want to ensure that what I'm doing is to the best of my abilities and to their highest expectations.

The participants articulated a strong desire to meet the leaders' expectations, recognizing that such efforts ultimately contribute to their success in the follower role, regardless of implicit follower beliefs and intersectional challenges. However, they expressed feeling the need to "dim my light" to do so. For instance, Participant 1 shared:

> So oftentimes, for me, being a follower, I wasn't good at being a follower. Not that I wasn't good, let me retract that. It wasn't that I wasn't good, but I felt I had to dim my light as a follower, and couldn't be my full self, because, 48 Laws of Power, you can't outshine the master … because as the masters, most of them don't like it, and they can't handle it.

Participant 3 expressed:

> As a follower, the leader's expectation is essentially, as long as you're doing what I asked you to … oftentimes I feel like I'm fine as long as I'm producing, but I have to keep in check whether or not my thoughts are independent, or whether or not I have to minimize myself so that my leader doesn't feel threatened.

Participant 4 articulated, "I'm learning to kind of sit back and not always be the answer person because sometimes people think when you're always the one with the answers that maybe you're the showoff." The consideration of how their behaviors would be perceived forced the participants to be strategic and situational in their approach to the follower role. Participant 3 expressed:

> I think the expectation is that I should basically align, accept the leadership and be okay with it. And so, I'm a naturally curious person. So even sometimes in using, you know, Appreciative Inquiry, I get labeled challenging … Questions are good, questions are never bad. It's a good thing, but I always seem to feel that it's never okay. I should literally just sit

> there and be quiet and not say anything, which is a double edge sword because I've actually tried that. And when you're quiet, several White male leaders I've had when I took the quiet route confronted me about being disengaged. Oh, so you're disengaged because you're quiet, you're not speaking up. But then, I speak up, then it's why are you challenging? And so, it's like, could you please just tell me how you want me to show up today?

Several participants indicated they try to strategically manage their follower trajectory from the outset by carefully considering who they work for from the beginning. For example, Participant 1 remarked:

> So just because a position avails itself and I'm eligible and I can apply and I could get it, doesn't mean that I want to work for the person who is leading that role. And so now, I'm spending more time researching the leaders who I'd be willing to work for and who I can trust with my career and who will create psychological safety.

Similarly, Participant 6 indicated, "I don't look for jobs for a certain pay or a certain title, actually, I look for a boss."

Participant narratives supporting the theme "Expressed Differences as a Follower" captured the Black/African American female healthcare leaders' nuanced considerations and challenges when functioning as followers of their leaders. The dominant code was followers feeling the need to adapt to their leaders. The participants articulated feeling compelled to "dim their light" in certain instances to avoid overshadowing or making their leaders uncomfortable. These narratives also highlighted the specific mindset and calculated strategies the participants employed to effectively navigate situational dynamics as followers.

Summary

Descriptive and thematic analyses were used to explore the data from semi-structured interviews to garner insights into the experiences of followership and dissent of Black/African American female healthcare leaders, considering the intersectionality of race and gender. Chapter 4 included the themes associated with

each research question as uncovered from the coding. Content was grouped and coded by research question. The codes under each research were then grouped into themes. The analysis generated 13 themes.

RQ1 was, "How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?" For themes emerged for RQ1:

1. Cultivating Trust Through Relationship Building and Role Modeling
2. Navigating Identity and Cultural Dynamics
3. Proving Professional Legitimacy and Competence
4. Strategic Engagement

RQ2 was, "How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role?" Three themes emerged for RQ2:

1. Feeling Misinterpreted
2. Respect and Ethical Followership
3. Strategic Communication

RQ3 was, "In what way does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?" The following three themes emerged for RQ3:

1. Navigating Intersectional Identity
2. Perceived Intersectional Challenges in Behavior Acceptance
3. Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-Management, and Response

RQ4 was, "What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?" Three themes emerged for RQ4:

1. Expressed Similarities
2. Expressed Differences as a Leader
3. Expressed Differences as a Follower

Each theme was subsequently examined in a narrative format, incorporating the participants' own words to provide further evidence and support. To facilitate easier navigation of the findings, each thematic section began with a table following the introductory paragraph. This table contained a summary of the

themes, including its meaning and the codes associations that formed clusters to develop the themes.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among Black/African American female healthcare leaders, considering intersectionality. Because followership is emerging as an independent area of study, exploring it from different contexts is critical to contribute to its development in theory and practice. Thus, this study provided insights into the followership experience of Black/African American female leaders in the healthcare sector based on an identified literature gap in their experiences from a followership perspective. The experiences of these women were explored using semi-structured interview questions based on the following research questions:

- RQ_1: How do African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?
- RQ2: How do African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role?
- RQ3: In what way does intersectionality manifest itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?
- RQ4: What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?

This chapter contains a summary of the findings and interpretation, connection to existing literature, implications, limitations, and future research and practice recommendations.

Interpretation of Research Findings

To interpret meaning, the researcher performed three rounds of coding: descriptive, process, and open coding. This coding process resulted in 140 codes and 523 references of codes for four research questions that were then clustered based on similarity to dominant codes and patterns to form 13 themes from the nine participant transcripts. Under RQ1, four themes emerged as follows: Cultivating Trust Through Relationship Building and Role Modeling; Navigating Identity and

Cultural Dynamics; Proving Professional Legitimacy and Competence; and Strategic Engagement. Three themes emerged under RQ2: Feeling Misinterpreted; Respect and Ethical Followership; and Strategic Communication. Similarly, three themes emerged under RQ3: Navigating Intersectional Identity; Perceived Intersectional Challenges in Behavior Acceptance; and Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-Management, and Response. Lastly, three themes were identified under RQ4: Expressed Similarities; Expressed Differences as a Leader; and Expressed Differences as a Follower.

RQ_1 Themes

Cultivating Trust Through Relationship Building

The Black/African American leaders in this study needed to be seen as trustworthy in followership. They emphasized forming connections upwards with their leaders and downwards with their subordinates. They perceived that this aspect of their experience was necessary to help them dismantle preconceived notions and facilitate acceptance. In these relationships, they highly valued mutual respect and communication, which allowed them to establish their presence by being professional, open, approachable, and transparent to avoid miscommunication or misinterpretation.

Role modeling was also significant to the Black/African American women, both in the capacity of serving as mentors and setting an example as a figure to make the path easier for those coming behind them. They also modeled desired behavior to their leaders to demonstrate how they wished to be treated in followership relationships. The participants expressed a better experience in followership where positive connections were made and a negative experience where there was no connection, or a poor display of mutual respect occurred.

Cultivating trust as an African American is particularly salient due to the historical prejudice, bias, and stereotypes this group faces, stemming from the legacy of slavery (Carton & Rosette, 2012; P. S. Parker, 2002). These findings highlighted the importance these women placed on connecting with leaders and followers in an attempt to create positive relational interactions to counteract

stereotypes and negative assumptions made about them. The theme is connected to the relationality component of the intersectionality lens as followership experience is being considered from the context of race and gender. Relationality within intersectionality advances that social identities interact with surrounding social structures and relationships to form unique experiences (Misra et al., 2021).

Although intersectionality has not been explored explicitly in followership, similar assertions related to building trust and role modeling have been supported in leadership-focused literature, such as in the paper by Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) that focused on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women of color in leadership. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis argued that women of color in leadership often use relational and collaborative leadership styles as a strategic choice in navigating the complexities shaped by their intersecting identities. The findings from the present study in the followership context also highlighted building trust through forming relationships as a salient measure taken in followership, which aligns with the findings in the leadership literature.

Navigating Identity and Cultural Dynamics

Navigating identity and cultural dynamics required the participants to maneuver the complexities of their social identities through various cultural encounters within followership, concerned with their leaders in the role of follower and their subordinates in followership as a leader. This navigation included the effort to avoid stereotypes while adapting to the expectations set within a predominantly White, male-dominated leadership context. Within those dynamics, the participants recognized the significance of their representation and the cultural strengths and influences that informed their authenticity. They tried to balance remaining true to their authentic selves and making others feel comfortable with them. These women had to overcome cultural disconnect during encounters with others, which encompassed being perceived as less capable or knowledgeable and facing microaggressions or overly negative comments by subordinates, all while trying to lead and follow effectively within the followership context.

The findings from this perspective on followership are consistent with existing leadership literature, highlighting the unique challenges Black women face

in professional settings. The challenges involve the requirements for these women to balance multiple identities and navigate systemic biases in ways that are not typically experienced by their White counterparts. This balancing act is essential for maintaining authenticity and professional effectiveness within the mainstream organizational culture. Previous studies by Dickens et al. (2019), P. S. Parker and Ogilvie (1996), C. M. Sims and Carter (2019), and Sue et al. (2007) similarly captured the additional layers of complexity and resilience required for Black women to thrive in leadership roles. These studies underscore the intersectional challenges stemming from both racial and gender biases, which manifest in various forms, such as stereotyping, microaggressions, and cultural disconnects. Although the studies were not designed explicitly within the context of followership theory, the findings from the present study align with some of the experiences encountered.

Proving Professional Legitimacy and Competency

The participants in this study experienced pressures to prove their capabilities and competence, not only to their leaders in the follower role but also to their subordinates, particularly when their authority or knowledge was challenged. To maintain professional legitimacy, the women adopted several strategic behaviors. Most participants provided an example of "managing up" in the follower role, where they proactively communicated and shared information with leaders to increase their visibility and demonstrate their capability. These Black/African American women also embraced a positive mindset, which involved self-belief and conviction in their deserved seat at the table, irrespective of others' perceptions or doubt of their abilities, with a focus on meeting expectations. To maintain professional legitimacy and safeguard themselves, the participants heavily relied on ethical and rule-based followership, considering their identity, the double standards, and challenges they faced. This finding is consistent with existing literature on leadership, particularly the assertion by A. N. Smith et al. (2019) that Black women are frequently harshly judged or disregarded in professional environments due to their lack of prototypical in-group membership within certain professional spaces. This marginalization can stem from deeply entrenched

stereotypes and biases that question their legitimacy and competence due to their intersectional identities (Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Misra et al.'s (2021) intersectionality framework supports this theme through the tenet of visibility and recognition, which emphasizes that individuals from marginalized groups often encounter challenges that limit their visibility and recognition of their competence and professional contributions. This under-recognition highlights the relational dynamic where Black women must prove their professional legitimacy and competency within these spaces, reflecting the broader dimensions of social inequality and power imbalances discussed in the intersectionality theory (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality research makes the invisible visible by acknowledging the multiple layers of oppression marginalized individuals face, amplifying their experiences, often obscured within the dominant collective narrative. In the instance of Black women, their stories are hidden within the experiences of Black men from the race perspective and within the experiences of White women from the gender perspective, reinforcing the invisibility of their experiences and voices.

Strategic Engagement

The study's Black/African American female healthcare leaders were conscious of adeptly navigating sociocultural interactions and workplace relational intricacies considering their identity. Their approach involved taking intentional and calculated actions to ensure they aligned closely with their leader's direction and expectations and to ensure no ambiguity regarding their performance expectations. They were very mindful of how they engaged with others, carefully considering both the people and the context of interactions to avoid misinterpretation and to set the standard in interactions appropriately. In their capacity as leaders interacting with their subordinates, the participants felt more in control operating as the leader in the followership process because this role allowed them to set the standard for followership conditions and create psychologically safe environments, reflecting the treatment they valued as followers while maintaining clear expectations of their subordinates. Their strategic engagement extended beyond direct interactions. The participants leveraged their spirituality as an

emotional and psychological resource to navigate challenging interactions. Having personal and professional support networks gave them the resilience and support needed to persevere through adversities. Their strategic engagement also included self-development and maintaining support of their networks, enabling resilience through various challenges.

The followership literature on how African American females navigate followership, considering intersectionality, has been relatively limited because followership is still developing. However, several studies in other sectors have addressed Black women's adversities in leadership (Chance, 2022; Key et al., 2012; Lanier et al., 2022). Dickens et al. (2019) discussed Black women employing strategies to manage hypervisibility. They identified selective engagement as a theme where Black women may choose to selectively engage in certain conversations or activities to protect themselves and avoid scrutiny or reinforcement of stereotypes.

Chance (2022) examined how Black women in higher education leadership navigated cultural adversity shaped by intersectionality, stereotype threat, and tokenism. The study revealed that these women employed strategies to overcome challenges, including strategic visibility, asserting authority while remaining approachable, and forming support systems and networks. Although Chance's research did not specifically address the experience within the context of followership, the shared experience of finding ways to navigate strategically aligns with the current study's finding that the participants made various adjustments to navigate within followership. Although the strategies employed in leadership and followership may differ in some respects, there are notable similarities that suggest Black women use calculated approaches in both contexts as defense mechanisms to protect themselves and exert as much control over their environments as possible, which involves them engaging in both active and proactive behaviors in followership.

RQ2 Themes

Ethical Followership and Respect

In their experience in the dissenting process of followership, the participants in this study placed a high value on mutual respect, both as followers dissenting with their leaders and as leaders whose followers dissented with them. When dissenting with their leaders, they carefully judged when or when not to dissent, considering their social identity and how they might be received. Their general approach in the follower role was to align with the leader, except when the direction taken would be unethical, illegal, or immoral. They discerned whether to dissent publicly or privately, adapting their response accordingly. The participants discovered that public dissent was not always well-received and often communicated their concerns privately. As leaders experiencing dissent, they were open to disagreement and believed it was a necessary element of effective followership. The participants took follower feedback seriously and made efforts to understand the context and origin of the dissent. In the leader role dealing with followers, they responded positively to dissent when it was expressed respectfully. However, in the follower role, when their opinions were not well received, were dismissed, or were met with disrespect, they tended to withdraw and share less or refrain from proactively speaking up unless explicitly prompted.

The participants emphasized the value and importance of following ethically and with mutual respect during dissenting interactions, showing an astute understanding of the power dynamics they faced. Within leadership theory, principles, such as mutual respect and ethical grounding, are pivotal to frameworks, including transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, as they facilitate the development of trusting relationships between leaders and followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977). Tourish (2013) acknowledged that productive dissent was an essential aspect of followership to enhance agency. However, Black professionals face unique challenges in the workplace. Ferguson and Dougherty (2022) examined the paradox experienced by Black professionals, highlighting the myriad of tensions and contradictions inherent in the workplace. Specifically, dissenting, when viewed through an intersectional

lens, has significant implications for marginalized groups. These groups are often subjected to oppressive conditions, assumptions, and double standards that pose substantial barriers to how they engage in the workplace, including dissenting and challenging leaders in followership.

Chaleff's (1995) notion of courageous followership, particularly the courage to challenge authority, predominantly arises from a hegemonic viewpoint in practice. This framework should address the practical nuances and obstacles introduced by intersectionality and power disparities. Full comprehension of the specific tensions and contradictions that arise within the context of courageous dissent is needed, especially when considering intersecting identities that may compound these experiences, forming inequality in reception.

Strategic Communication

In dissenting, the participants emphasized the importance of expressing their viewpoints but did so with strategic and thoughtful communication. Their approach involved specific communication tactics during interactions within the followership process, especially in the follower role. The participants considered multiple factors before speaking up. They were meticulous with their choice of words or tone of voice, attempted to ground their statements with supporting facts or reference documents., and quickly assessed their dissenting voice's potential value to the discussion. The participants also braced themselves for possible consequences from their dissenting voice, often choosing not to "co-sign with silence," especially in matters with ethical or legal implications. Furthermore, they considered their hierarchical position within the organization, the persistent stereotypes and labels associated with Black women, and the intricate workplace political landscape.

The participants' strategic communication approach underscores the complexity and deliberate nature of dissenting, considering their intersectionality of race and gender. Collins (2000) emphasized that African American women often navigate a "matrix of domination" that requires them to develop unique approaches and strategies to cope with and navigate systemic inequalities to counteract the dominant narrative. Additionally, high reliability in healthcare organizations

preoccupied with the risk of failure to promote safe environments depends on employees speaking up to promote a culture of safety (Eriksson, 2018; Henriksen & Dayton, 2006). The literature is unclear on how dissenting by minority groups is experienced similarly or differently in organizations that embrace the high-reliability culture versus those that do not, leaving an opportunity for exploration.

Feeling Misinterpreted

The participants described experiencing a sense of misinterpretation or dismissal when voicing their differing opinions in the context of followership. These feelings commonly led them to adopt self-protective measures, such as modulating their manner of speaking or refraining from contributing unless their ethical values were at stake. The experience of being misinterpreted was often attributed to prevailing stereotypes and the difficulty in being heard as a double minority in followership, especially in male-dominated healthcare leadership environments.

The identification of the theme "being misinterpreted" within the context of followership aligns with common findings in the leadership literature on intersectionality, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by Black women. Research by Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) and Sesko and Biernat (2010) indicated that women of color in leadership often face undervaluation in the workplace due to stereotypes and intersectional invisibility. The intersection of their identities and misalignment with expected prototypical behaviors of Black/African American female leaders result in harsher judgments and greater penalties than their counterparts (Rosette et al., 2016; Salerno et al., 2019). Stereotypes and microaggressions frequently lead to these leaders being perceived as difficult, aggressive, confrontational, or challenging authority (Ford-Turner, 2021; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016; West, 2008). The participants in the followership context of this study described their efforts to carefully manage their demeanor to appear balanced and professional as they attempted to counter preconceptions or assumptions.

RQ3 Themes

Perceived Intersectional Challenges in Behavioral Acceptance

The participants' experiences, as conveyed through coded transcripts, revealed distinct perceived challenges faced by African American female healthcare leaders compared to other racial groups. They highlighted notable disparities in how their behaviors are received and evaluated, contrasted with those of White males and females. They noticed that White males and females are often presumed competent and given the benefit of the doubt, whereas they were scrutinized more intensely. This perception underscores a double standard wherein behaviors deemed acceptable for dominant groups in followership and dissenting can become problematic or lead to adverse consequences when exhibited by Black/African American women.

The intersectional framework is a crucial analytical tool for examining the intricate layers of challenges African American women encounter. Participant narratives highlighted their perception of being subjected to difficulties stemming from the intersection of their racial and gender identities. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as the *double bind* (Ong et al., 2011) or *double jeopardy* (King, 1988), where the simultaneous interaction of being Black and female creates unique and multifaceted experiences of marginalization and discrimination.

There are limited leadership studies on intersectionality from the leadership standpoint. Specific studies on the perceived intersectional challenges are needed within the realm of followership. This study's findings suggest that some distinct challenges in followership may also perpetuate inequities in treatment, underscoring the need for further empirical investigation into this understudied area to create generalizable findings.

Navigating Intersectional Identity

The theme "Navigating Intersectional Identity" revealed that the study's Black/African American female healthcare leaders employed a deliberate approach to navigating followership, heavily influenced by their dual identities. Their approaches were driven by dual motives: fostering a positive perception and ensuring that opportunities were not hindered for minority women coming behind

them. Their experiences often involved being the sole representatives in their roles or positions, contending with stereotypes, and maintaining a heightened awareness of how these stereotypes could impact their workplace interactions and how they are received in followership roles. To be better received in the follower role, they frequently adjusted to make others feel more comfortable with them, including modifying communication styles and approaches, such as using tentative language or engaging in purposeful inquiry in the follower role. The strategies the participants undertook to meet professional demands involved continuously balancing authenticity, conformity, resistance, and adaptation—a complex process strongly influenced by their subordinate identities and the relational and power inequities they faced.

P. S. Parker (2002) contended that African American women senior executives had to continuously negotiate their identities, which stems from the power dynamics inherent in the organizational discourse, which essentially amplify and prioritize the voices and behaviors of the dominant group, particularly White male leaders. P. S. Parker's discussed not only the challenges African American women faced in interactions with their White male colleagues but also perceived challenges in interacting with other African American colleagues and clients in its intra-racial dynamic that brought its own set of identity-based expectations and pressures.

Consistent with P. S. Parker's (2002) leadership-focused study involving African American executives, the findings from this study in the followership context also captured the complex navigation and adjustments participants made in followership. The adjustments the participants took to fit within the conditions of the followership formed by dominant perspectives are also discussed among Black feminist scholars, such as Collins (2000), who argued that African American women often develop unique perspectives and strategies to cope with systemic inequalities within a matrix of domination shaped by power differences. These differences can also manifest as environmental cues that threaten identity (Remedios et al., 2020), ultimately negatively impacting the marginalized group members and the organization.

Van Laar et al. (2019) asserted that subtle devaluation cues can heighten identity threats, resulting in negative emotional and cognitive impacts, affecting well-being, motivation, turnover rates, and performance. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) found that these cues could lead to a loss of trust or disengagement. Kalokerinos et al. (2014) noted that identity threats could impact career aspirations and confidence. It is not enough to focus on the lived experiences of Black/African American women in leadership roles because leaders rise from the follower pool and navigate between being leaders and followers in different contexts. These findings emphasize the need for organizations to understand the challenges faced by African American women when navigating followership in healthcare leadership. Organizations should strive to create consciously inclusive environments that recognize and appreciate the complexity of multiple identities and the unique perspectives and contributions people with these identities bring to the workplace that can help with better problem-solving and innovation.

Strategic Workplace Navigation, Self-Management, and Response

Cognizant of the challenges arising from the intersections of race and gender in followership, the participants implemented a vigilant and intentional approach to their engagement and navigation within the work environment. By maneuvering their environments strategically and introspectively, they could discern when adjustments in their behaviors were necessary to mitigate the risk of being subjected to stereotypes. Workplace navigation included being mindful of their communication approaches, critically assessing whether negative encounters were identity-based or due to other factors to formulate a balanced response and developing coping strategies. These strategies encompassed leaning on spirituality, focusing on future objectives, and seeking support from sponsors who helped them build credibility and gain opportunities and mentors who could guide them as they navigated challenges. This conscious, deliberate mode of operation underscores the participants' resilience and adaptability in managing racial and gendered systemic biases they encounter in these spaces. Though navigation sometimes led to feelings of stress and frustration, the participants persisted in overcoming them through the strategies they employed.

Similar to the challenges identified in leadership studies on the experiences of Black women necessitating adjustments to navigate the workplace in leadership (Bowers, 2021; Chance, 2022; Eure, 2022), this study revealed that African American women also face significant challenges in followership related to their dual identity, necessitating strategic adjustments to navigate followership. McCluney et al. (2021) and Dickens and Chavez (2018) revealed that Black women navigate their intersectional identities through behavioral and appearance modifications, known as identity management or code-switching. This phenomenon arises from the hypervisibility of Black women and their consequent need to conform to the dominant group's norms and comfort levels, especially in environments where they are often the sole or tokenized individuals (Dickens et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). McCluney et al. further illustrated that Black women experience a dual tension. Although the pursuit of authenticity can enhance their well-being, it also subjects them to increased scrutiny and stereotyping due to their marginalized identities. This study opens additional considerations for the existing literature by revealing that such behavioral adjustments are not only related to navigating leadership roles but are also present in Black women's experiences of followership within organizational contexts.

One might assume that followership, given its lesser position of assumed power, would require fewer strategic efforts from Black women than leadership. However, the dual identity of Black women necessitates an equally proactive stance in followership, making them more visible and susceptible to stereotypes, especially when they demonstrate proactive followership or leadership qualities within their followership roles. Engaging in strategic navigation allows Black women to balance professional expectations and personal authenticity adeptly. This approach forms a nuanced strategy crucial for their survival, coping, and success in predominantly White, male-centric environments, regardless of their follower or leader status. However, the scholarly literature on Black women's experiences in followership is notably limited. This study, therefore, provides a valuable contribution to the literature by paving the way for further investigation into these

complex dynamics within the context of intersectionality, mainly drawing on the works of Crenshaw (1989) and other Black feminist scholars who emphasized the importance of understanding and giving voice to the compounded social identities and their impacts on lived experiences.

RQ4 Themes

Expressed Similarities in Leader and Follower Roles

Although leaders and followers are two distinct roles intended to complement each other to enhance both leadership and followership in the organizational context, the relational component of this process in practice introduces complexity, particularly considering intersectionality and its incongruence with implicit followership beliefs and behaviors within the roles that can lead to disenfranchisement (Goswami et al., 2022; Pogrebna et al., 2024). The participants in this study expressed certain similarities in their experiences as both leader and follower, which were shaped significantly by their identities. They noticed a difference in how they were perceived and received compared to their counterparts. This discrepancy often compelled them to counteract stereotypes in both leader and follower contexts actively. The participants also indicated a perceived necessity to adapt situationally in each role while consistently feeling pressured to prove their competence and value.

Agho (2009) investigated senior executives' perceptions of effective followership and leadership characteristics and identified overlapping skills and attributes for both roles, such as demonstrating knowledge and competence, strong communication abilities, role commitment, and positive attitudes. These characteristics underscore a relational aspect within the roles, which can profoundly be influenced by beliefs, stereotypes, and biases (Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Theoretically, followership is posited to be a significant source of social influence, where leaders and followers mutually impact each other (Oc & Bashur, 2013). However, according to Yukl and Van Fleet (1992), in practice, being able to mutually influence hinges on accepting the influence of the respective roles.

Although Agho's (2009) study alluded to similarities in expectations of the two roles, it did not address social identity or specific experiences, which are crucial to understanding how followership is impacted by intersectionality within the dominant narrative that has inadvertently silenced these experiences. The current study considered race and gender identities among Black/African American female healthcare leaders' experiences of followership and follower dissent, where participants expressed similar challenges in followership as they have in leadership.

Because the present study focused on exploring followership among leaders at high levels in healthcare who may introduce or exude leadership in followership, investigating how these findings may overlap or differ among informal leaders at various hierarchical levels and across diverse clinical and nonclinical roles within healthcare could yield significant insights. Therefore, continued exploration of the similarities between the experiences of leaders and followers, with a particular focus on intersectionality, is crucial for providing diverse perspectives that can enhance the alignment of findings and the development of frameworks that can help explain followership and intersectionality. Furthermore, integrating an analysis of social identity into the discourse on followership practice and theory across different contexts is essential for developing a deeper understanding that can contribute to inclusive organizational cultures that recognize the value active and proactive followership by all groups add to the workplace.

Expressed Differences as a Leader

The participants in this study articulated several distinct perceived differences when experiencing followership in their roles as leaders with their subordinates, compared to when they were followers experiencing followership under their leaders. In their capacity as leaders, the women reported feeling a greater sense of control, considering intersectionality. They expressed a feeling of autonomy in being able to set the tone, expectations, and culture with their direct reports. As leaders, they emphasized the need to project presence, confidence, and competence, recognizing that they were often subject to scrutiny, hypervisibility, and heightened evaluation of their decisions, actions, and contributions in the leader role.

These findings align with K. M. Thomas' (2019) study that focused on the unique challenges and experiences Black/African American women face in leadership positions, confirming the double consciousness of being in the role. *Double consciousness* is a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois that describes Black/African American women as being acutely aware of how they are perceived at their intersection of race and gender. As a result, they have to continuously navigate and adjust based on their identity in professional spaces (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015).

Expressed Differences as a Follower

The participants in this study reported several critical distinctions in their intersectionality experiences when occupying the follower role compared to the leader role. They emphasized their need to diligently understand and align with their leader's style, preferences, and dislikes. This alignment often involved a proactive effort to manage upwards, fostering trust with the leader, building their credibility, and showing their competence. The women perceived building trust as helpful in making followership easier and more comfortable and navigating any intersectionality challenges that attacked their credibility. The experiences in followership were perceived as more challenging in encounters when no relationship or trust was built.

The participants reported that, as followers, they frequently felt obligated to "dim their light" or defer to the leader when in their presence. This behavior was adopted to avoid appearing overly domineering or outshining the leader, particularly in situations involving cultural disconnects, or when they sensed that their leaders felt threatened by the follower's assertiveness, confidence, or knowledge. On the other hand, the interviewees also highlighted that the follower role provided them with greater opportunities for learning and development. Being in this position afforded them better initial receptivity, fostering growth through observation and interaction, as long as they maintained alignment with their leader and refrained from excessive dissent or significant differences of opinion from the leader. Thus, though similarly complex to leadership, the follower role was seen as

a crucial space for contributing actively or proactively in a balanced way that required strategic and situational navigation to avoid pitfalls.

Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) explored the barriers Black women in applied behavior analysis faced when pursuing and attaining positions of leadership and found that the women faced experiences of being *the only*, combatting stereotypes, implicit bias, and microaggression, having to prove their competence, and made to feel invalidated, which caused them to question or reevaluate their role and career direction. Although the study was very limited, did not follow traditional qualitative research design, and focused on anecdotal experiences of Black women in a different sector, the intersectional experiences reflected in the few voices of the women interviewed were consistent with the findings of the intersectional experience of the women healthcare leaders in this study that led them to feel invalidated in followership or perceive that they needed to tame their personality or authenticity to make people feel comfortable with them. These experiences, if not addressed, have considerations for perpetuating underrepresentation and turnover of Black women in leadership (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Implications

For decades, leadership has been the predominant focus within the leadership process, which has led to a pronounced emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of leaders. This leader-centric approach has resulted in a significant gap in understanding followership from the followers' critical perspectives. As a result, the complexity and dynamics of the follower experience, particularly among marginalized groups, have often been overlooked. The findings from this study highlight the nuanced experiences that Black/African American female healthcare leaders encounter within the context of followership and follower dissent. These experiences exhibit similarities and differences compared to their leadership experiences, reflecting the unique challenges these Black women face in followership.

These complexities can negatively impact their workplace followership experiences and exacerbate the stress of navigating their environments.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing a more inclusive framework that recognizes the valuable contributions of followers in the leadership process. By incorporating followers' perspectives, particularly those from underrepresented groups, organizations can cultivate more equitable and supportive work environments that enhance the overall effectiveness of both leaders and followers. This study has several implications for enriching the broader discourse on followership in theory and practical application.

Implications for Practice

Similar to the findings in the leadership literature, the Black women in this study also experienced negative encounters in the followership context based on their dual race and gender identities. The negative interactions with either their leader or followers in the followership context added a level of workplace pressure, forcing them to self-regulate, manage responses, and adjust to coexist without compromising their authenticity, which added an element of stress. The participants experienced bias, microaggressions, and feelings of invalidation, requiring them to strategically maneuver through challenges, avoid stereotypes, and prove their value. These experiences can harm workplace inclusion efforts and morale, which have implications for followers and organizations (Bergh & Hoobler, 2023; M. A. Brown, 2019; Macintosh et al., 2022).

To foster trusting and psychologically safe environments in which employees feel connected and respected in followership, organizations must cultivate inclusive environments that promote awareness of inclusive behaviors and actions at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Cultivating inclusive work environments means actively working to understand their experiences, dismantling stereotypes, biases, and intentionally recognizing and valuing all voices, contributions, and perspectives. Organizations should prioritize education on bias and its effects on workplace inclusivity while creating opportunities to engage Black women in discussions about their experiences at both the team and organizational levels. This engagement is crucial for raising awareness, validating experiences, and identifying actionable strategies to enhance support for Black women in their followership roles.

One specific area that posed a problem in the expressed followership experiences of the participants in this study was dissenting, speaking up, or offering a difference of opinion. Many complex considerations went into dissenting from the race and gender context. Although challenging leaders through courageous followership is often regarded as ideal proactive follower behavior within the leadership process (Chaleff, 1995), most of the participants expressed that, in practice, their dissent was frequently met with resistance or a lack of support, particularly when viewed through the lens of intersectionality. Dissenting required participants to adopt a more balanced and strategic approach. They often perceived this process as emotionally and cognitively exhausting, as they invested considerable effort and energy into dissenting to escape stereotypes and misunderstanding while striving to be received more constructively. When initial attempts to dissent with leaders proved challenging, the participants had to decide whether it was worth the effort. They often chose to adjust by holding back their thoughts when they perceived their views were not valued, acknowledged, or considered, and they sometimes adjusted to asking questions rather than directly expressing their dissenting viewpoints. Understanding such dynamics deeper has significant implications for informing the development of training and organizational practice.

April and Syed (2013) highlighted that fostering inclusion within organizations is crucial to ensuring that all voices, particularly those from marginalized groups, are heard and integrated into decision-making processes. In embracing follower dissent, building an inclusive climate involves transcending identity group bias and demonstrating openness and respect toward diverse opinions and viewpoints. It requires acknowledging and integrating varied perspectives to enhance problem-solving and decision-making processes (Nishii, 2012). An inclusive culture should be purposeful in championing diverse perspectives to mitigate the risk of unintentionally silencing or disengaging certain groups within the workplace.

Developing leadership and followership skills will be critical in setting clear standards and expectations for effective followership and follower dissent. Uhl-

Bien et al. (2014) noted that followership behaviors are essential to leadership behaviors. However, many organizations do not train employees for followership development, although leadership development exists. Organizations should equip employees and leaders with the necessary tools to grow and develop in followership and effectively engage in and manage constructive dissent, leading to better problem-solving, decision-making, organizational outcomes, and less work conflict.

For Black women, the balancing act of navigating their followership experience that entails microaggressions and stereotypes, as well as inequities in treatment and perception driven by power imbalances in the pecking order of identity, can undermine their careers and well-being (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Thus, finding ways to connect with other women for a safe space and outlet to validate experiences and opportunities for sponsorship and mentoring will be necessary for support networks in followership development, not just leadership development.

Implications for Theory

The results of this study revealed an important insight, highlighting that an element of strategic navigation that African American women leaders use in leadership roles (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019; Dickens & Chavez, 2018) are also needed in followership. Although certain aspects of strategic navigation and engagement may manifest themselves differently when operationalized as a leader versus a follower, based on participant experiences in this study, the core reflexive (self-awareness and self-regulation) and adaptive strategies (flexibility and situational awareness) to navigate visibility, invisibility, stereotypes and power imbalance remained significant to the context of followership that influenced the strategies they employed to engage in followership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Chance, 2022; D. R. Davis & Maldonado, 2017; Sales et al., 2020). To further clarify the distinctions and overlaps in strategic workplace navigation beliefs, attitudes, and actions of African American women in follower roles, additional comparative studies will be necessary to understand how strategic workplace navigation is manifested within the intersectionality perspective among various

marginalized groups, within different organizational layers, and different sectors. This level of exploration will capture the comprehensive considerations in followership strategic navigation, contributing to a better understanding of followership theory within intersectionality.

Demonstrating competence and professional legitimacy was equally significant in the women's followership experiences. African American women in this study faced a dual challenge: they had to prove their competency both upwardly to their leaders and downwardly to their subordinates. They were not presumed competent at the outset in either context. Proving and justifying competence has been a prevalent theme in leadership studies on African American women's lived experiences (D. R. Davis & Maldonado, 2017; Kelly, 2023; Overstreet-Wilson, 2020), and was also a significant aspect of the participant followership experience in the present study. However, more explorations of the dominant theme, proving competency in followership, is needed. This study was not designed to explore the multifaceted ways in which followers experienced having to justify their competence bidirectionally—with superiors and subordinates—and laterally with colleagues. This gap highlights the need for future researchers focusing on intersectionality in followership to delve deeper into this specific experience of Black/African American female leaders proving themselves and their professional legitimacy as followers and leaders within followership.

Finally, dissenting has implications for work engagement and turnover and is associated with complex factors related to the person, relationships, and various organizational factors (Kassing et al., 2012). Although this study considered follower dissent within followership and included a few interview questions, the complexity and breadth of dissent within followership, especially in intersectionality, warrant a dedicated study to capture a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and considerations. Such a focused study could focus on the experiences of marginalized groups with intersecting identities and include an exploration of the implications of historical and systemic power imbalances. Future researchers should examine these nuances specifically among Black/African American women, as well as comparatively with other minoritized

and dominant groups, to explore similarities and differences in experiences. Additionally, because this study focused on followership among individuals already in leadership positions, future researchers should explore the perspectives of nonsupervisory first- and mid-level followers, both within and outside their hierarchies.

Study Limitations

The study had several limitations. First, as a qualitative phenomenological study, the sample size was intentionally small to allow the researcher to explore and capture rich information from a targeted group of healthcare leaders. Consequently, the findings are not generalizable to the larger population, as L. Leung (2015) noted. Second, the scope of the study was limited to African American female executives or senior leaders in healthcare, and purposive snowball sampling was used. This nonrandomized sampling approach, in which participants self-select to participate, may have introduced sample bias, as O. C. Robinson (2014) explained.

Third, the researcher accessed participants affiliated with the American College of Healthcare Executives or the National Association of Health Services Executives. As a result, the study may have missed capturing the experiences of specific groups not affiliated with those organizations and may not reflect all experiences, further creating sample bias (C. Parker et al., 2019). Furthermore, all study participants had at least a Master's degree, with five of the nine participants having a doctoral or equivalent degree. This high educational background may have influenced the participants' understanding of concepts, affecting their responses and examples. Moreover, the study focused on followership among African American females who had achieved leadership positions in healthcare. Therefore, it did not capture the experiences of frontline followers, which could introduce different dynamics. Lastly, the researcher is an African American female executive working in healthcare leadership, so researcher bias had to be accounted for to ensure the accurate representation of findings and interpretation (see Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Recommendations

This study has provided significant insights into the experiences of the African American female healthcare leaders interviewed. The participants' narratives revealed the complexity at the intersection of their race and gender that these professionals must navigate, which has critical implications for followership theory and practice, as discussed in the literature review and implication sections. Considering intersectionality and followership, the study offers targeted recommendations for organizational practice and further research. The aim of these recommendations is to advance followership in the workplace and the academic literature, which can help explain followership and foster conditions where followers and leaders can thrive within followership processes.

Practice

First, the researcher recommends that organizations foster inclusive environments through focused inclusion policies and practices that create environments where employees feel psychologically safe to contribute and have opportunities for involvement and engagement in building strategies around perceived challenges (Shore et al., 2018). Inclusion can be achieved through initiatives that promote dialogue and raise awareness (Pless & Maak, 2004). Mor Barak et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of developing a climate of inclusion within organizations and demonstrated that such environments resulted in positive organizational outcomes.

Second, unconscious bias, discrimination, and stereotypes threaten workplace inclusion. To address these issues, organizations should implement programs that address unconscious bias. These programs should not only involve training, but they should also foster a discussion on how organizational culture and commitment align with and support inclusion goals (Onyeador et al., 2021). Both leaders and followers must understand the threats to inclusivity from both perspectives to create equitable workplaces where people feel valued and connected.

Third, to create an inclusive organizational culture, the role of dissent from the followership perspective must be considered, mainly when intersectionality

introduces notable challenges. According to April and Syed (2013), fostering inclusion within organizations is crucial to ensure that all voices, particularly those from marginalized groups, are heard and integrated. Such an inclusive culture mitigates the risk of unintentionally silencing or disengaging certain groups in the workplace. Fourth, developing leadership and followership skills is essential for setting clear standards for effective dissent. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) emphasized that followership behaviors are critical to leadership behaviors; equipping leaders with the necessary tools to facilitate and manage dissent encourages a more dynamic and adaptive leadership style. Therefore, is the researcher recommends that workplace followership training includes educating followers on how to express dissent constructively and training leaders on how to facilitate, welcome, and embrace dissent. This approach can lead to more meaningful and positive individual and organizational outcomes, such as employee job satisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2011) and better organizational decision-making and problem-solving (Garner, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2009)

In addition to fostering inclusive environments, organizations should address the often-overlooked concept of followership. Despite a prevalent focus on leadership development, the understanding of followership is limited and the opportunities for it in training and development are minimal. Therefore, the second recommendation underscores organizations' need to cultivate a positive followership culture and implement followership development training. Read (2021) asserted that educating leaders about followership enhances their understanding of followers' significant impact on achieving organizational goals, enabling followers to make meaningful contributions. Organizations should strive to influence their culture by training followers on effective followership practices and educating leaders to facilitate and embrace these behaviors. This approach promotes an organizational culture where leaders and followers actively demonstrate and embrace courageous and proactive followership behavior, thus contributing to a more inclusive environment that is also responsive to the needs of marginalized groups.

The final recommendation highlights the strategic importance of mentors and sponsors in the context of followership. Although mentors and sponsors have been extensively discussed in leadership literature, particularly for aiding African American women in navigating career challenges (Helms et al., 2016), their role in followership still needs to be explored. This oversight stems from the assumption that followership is an inherent skill requiring no structured development or mentoring.

Adopting a novel approach, organizations should create opportunities for employees to connect with mentors and sponsors from a followership coaching perspective. Investing in followership development is crucial, especially in understanding that there are typically more followers than leaders at any given time and that the talent pool of leaders often emerges from the pool of effective followers. Furthermore, not all followers aspire to formal leadership roles; some excel in supportive positions that significantly contribute to overall leadership effectiveness.

By leveraging the experiences of mentors and sponsors, individuals can deepen their understanding of followership, gain insights into organizational dynamics from a follower's viewpoint, and access supportive networks to address unique challenges. This comprehensive approach will enhance leadership and followership development, fostering a more inclusive and effective organizational culture.

Future Research

The aim of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the experiences of followership and follower dissent among African American female healthcare leaders. Although the findings provide valuable insights, the scope of this study was limited, and its conclusions are not generalizable due to the methodology and sample size constraints. Future researchers should employ methodologies that enhance generalizability, such as larger sample sizes and mixed-methods designs incorporating quantitative measures.

A similar imperative exists in followership research as the emphasis in leadership studies advocating for broader research on how intersecting identities

shape leadership dynamics (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). The intersections of identity influence leadership practices and significantly shape experiences in followership. This qualitative study focused on healthcare executives, underscoring the need to expand followership research within an intersectional framework. Exploring diverse sectors and contrasting experiences between clinical and nonclinical staff in followership roles, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, can deepen the understanding of followership from diverse perspectives and advance theoretical development within the intersectionality context.

Future researchers should also delve deeper into perceived imbalances faced by marginalized groups, particularly in proving professional legitimacy and competence within followership roles. Though this study addressed followership hierarchies from the viewpoint of Black/African American female healthcare leaders, future investigations should adopt a multi-dimensional approach, incorporating top-down, bottom-up, and lateral perspectives of followership, taking intersectionality into account. This comprehensive approach will shed light on the behaviors, attitudes, and responses encountered across different structural contexts and identities, including race, gender, and age. Additionally, further explorations should encompass followers' experiences in the same and mixed dyads and nonsupervisory and entry-level roles to identify similarities and differences in followership contexts. The investigation will provide a more nuanced understanding of followership dynamics within diverse organizational settings.

Finally, regarding dissent, although this study included specific questions addressing follower dissent considering intersectionality, the complexity and breadth of this topic necessitate dedicated research within the field of followership. The study of dissenting in followership from the intersectionality lens is significant given the nuanced challenges minoritized groups face due to historical and systemic power disparities. Chaleff's (1995) framework of courageous followership encourages courageous followers who challenge leaders, which may have different implications for marginalized groups such as Black/African American women. Future researchers should investigate the principles of courageous followership through an intersectional lens to uncover deeper nuances. Examining how these

principles manifest across diverse identities and contexts is essential, particularly in understanding how marginalized individuals navigate dissent, the considerations they face, the challenges they may encounter, and the responses to their behaviors in various dyadic and organizational settings. Such exploration will enhance the awareness and understanding of courageous followership dynamics within intersectionality for informed strategies to create more inclusive and equitable organizational cultures.

Summary

Followers have traditionally been studied primarily in relation to their roles within leadership. However, a burgeoning interest in followership as an independent study area presents numerous opportunities to explore it from diverse contexts and perspectives to advance theoretical development, including further exploration through intersectionality and diversity lens. Despite some exploration of intersectionality among Black/African American female leaders within leadership, a significant gap remains in understanding the conditions of oppression or advantage within followership for traditionally marginalized groups. Thus, this phenomenological study encompassed an exploration of the lived experiences of followership and follower dissent among African American female healthcare leaders, considering the intersection of race and gender. The research focused on four primary questions:

1. How do African American healthcare leaders experience followership in both leader and follower roles?
2. How do African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in both leader and follower roles?
3. In what ways does intersectionality manifest in their experiences of followership and dissent?
4. What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?

Several crucial themes emerged in this study that elucidate the complex dynamics of intersectionality within followership. The themes highlighted the participants' strategies for navigating challenges, such as cultivating trust through relationships, negotiating identity and cultural dynamics, and establishing professional legitimacy and competence. Moreover, the strategic engagement, ethical followership, and effective communication required in these roles were underscored. The participants also articulated perceived intersectional challenges, the strategic maneuvering required to combat the complexities, such as feeling misunderstood, and the perceived difference in behavioral acceptance and scrutiny compared to counterparts.

This study contributes to followership theory by providing a voice to a group that has been historically silenced through the perspectives of the dominant group. The study highlights that the social identities of race and gender among African American women can influence oppression and inequality within the followership context. By specifically focusing on African American female healthcare leaders, the research expands the current understanding within the context of healthcare leadership, where intersectional challenges often contribute to disparities in leadership representation. Similar themes have been identified in leadership studies using an intersectional lens, suggesting commonalities and unique aspects within leadership and followership contexts. This initial investigation paves the way for future researchers to explore followership in various organizational settings, contexts, and among different groups to deepen the understanding of followership theory and its implications for theory and practice and followership development advances in theory and practice.

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Appendix A

Followership Study Participant Pre-Screening Form

Participant Screening Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in the qualitative study on Black/African American Female Healthcare Leader Experience with Followership and Follower Dissent. The study will use one on one interviews with participants for the purpose of understanding how they experience followership and follower dissent. Participants must meet certain criteria to be invited to participate in the study. Please complete the pre-screening form by answering the questions below.

The definition of followership being used defines it as "a relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives (Crossman & Crossman, 2011).

Follower dissent is defined as lower-status individuals in the top-down hierarchy voicing divergent ideas or thoughts from their leader (Urbach et al., 2021).

1. Email:_____

2. Do you identify as Black or Black/African American for your Race/Ethnicity?
    - Yes
    - No

3. Do you hold a formal healthcare senior leader role in your organization?

4. What type of executive role do you hold?
    - Executive Director/CEO
    - Chief Operating Officer/COO
    - Associate or Assistant Director
    - Chief Medical Officer
    - Chief Nurse
    - Chief Financial Officer
    - Other _____

5. What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male
    - Other_____
6. Do you have direct reports?
    - Yes
    - No
7. Do you have someone or a board you report to?
    - Yes
    - No
8. What is your age?
    - 18-24
    - 25-34
    - 35-44
    - 45-54
    - 55+
9. In brief sentence or two share what you are responsible for in your role as a healthcare leader.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____
10. Are you willing to participate in a one-on-one interview that will take no more than 1hour of your time to discuss your personal lived experiences with followership and follower dissent?
    - Yes
    - No

Appendix B

Followership Study Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research interview on _____.
You were chosen for the interview because you identified Black/African American Female Healthcare Leader that has experienced followership and follower dissent and can provide insight into your experiences. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to take part in the interview.
This interview is being conducted by a researcher named Shella Miller, who is a doctoral candidate at Southeastern University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this interview is to collect information for a study on Black/African American Female Leaders and their experience with followership and follower dissent as part of a dissertation for Southeastern University.

Procedures:
If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview, lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Interview:
Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether you want to be in the interview. No one at Southeastern University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the interview. If you decide to join the interview now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Interview:
There is the minimal risk of psychological stress during this interview. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. There are no benefits to you from participating in this interview. The interviewer will benefit by practicing interviewing skills.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for participating in this interview.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this interview project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the interview.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher's name is Shella Miller. The researcher's course instructor is LDRS 723 Qualitative Research Methods. You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at smmillerl@seu.edu or the Dissertation Chair, Dr. Jennifer Carter jlcarter@seu.edu. If you want to communicate privately about your rights as a participant, you can contact Dr. Joshua Henson, PhD/DSL Program Director, at jdhenson@seu.edu. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

☐ I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have currently. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the interview.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Participant's Written Signature _____

Researcher's Written Signature _____

Appendix C

Followership Interview Protocol

Introductions:

My name is Shella Miller, and I am a doctoral candidate at Southeastern University pursuing a Ph.D. in organizational leadership. I want to thank you for the time today to participate in this qualitative study be exploring followership from the Black/African American Female Healthcare Leader context.

Purpose: This interview is designed to collect qualitative data for a dissertation on the topic of followership. The interview is an attempt to learn about your experience with followership and follower dissent in the healthcare context as a Black/African American Leader. I know your time is valuable so thank you again for taking time to share your experience and insights. I want to learn and capture as much as I can from you in this short time.

Interview Details: I will serve as a moderator and the interview should last no more than 60 min**.** The interview will be recorded for the purpose of capturing responses for later qualitative analysis in identifying themes. Your interview responses will remain anonymous and will be kept confidential. If you have any questions before or after the interview, you can feel free to reach out to me, Shella Miller at smmiller1@seu.edu.

Consent Form: Prior to today's session, you were provided with a pre-screening google form and consent form for participating in this interview. Thank you for sending those materials back to me. Do you have any questions about the consent before we begin?

Interview Questions:(Questions are open ended, and researcher will use prompting statements, such as "Tell me more", "Can you expand on that", "Could

you explain that", "Can you give me an example to draw out additional detail to answers)

	Type of Question	**Question**
1	Opening	Tell me about yourself and your background in healthcare.
2	Introductory	When you think about the term follower and followership, what comes to mind? What are your thoughts about followership in healthcare?
3	Transition	As a leader in your organization share your idea of effective and ineffective followership.
RQ1: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience followership in the leader role and follower role?		
4	Key	a. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience with people you have led. b. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience with the people who are leading you?
RQ2: How do Black/African American healthcare leaders experience dissent in the leader role and follower role? Follower dissent is defined lower-status individuals in the top-down hierarchy voicing divergent ideas or thoughts from their leader (Urbach et al., 2021).		
5	Key	a. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience when there is a difference of thought or difference of opinion with the people you lead. b. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience when there is a difference of thought or difference of opinion with your leader.

RQ3: In what way does intersectionality manifests itself in their experiences of followership and dissent?		
6	Key	a. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience compared to others of a difference race or gender in terms of leading others? b. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you describe your experience compared to others of a difference race or gender in terms of being led?
RQ4: What are the expressed similarities and differences in the way Black/African American leaders experience followership from the leader role and the follower role?		
7	Key	a. Considering your race and gender as a Black/African American woman, can you compare the similarities and differences of your experiences as both leader and follower? i. Probing Question: If they prototype of a leader is White male, how are you perceived as a leader who is a Black/African American female? ii. Probing Question: If the prototype of a follower is not a White male, how are you perceived as a follower who is a Black/African American female? b. Bonus Question: Of these three types of followers, which one resonates with you the most as a follower: Passive, Active, Proactive? Can you explain why this type of follower resonates with you the most?
8	Ending	