

The Evolving Development of Minority Partners at Big Law Firms: A Critical Incident Study

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This case study explores African American attorneys' accounts about critical incidents that influenced their decisions to leave or stay at Big Law Firms (BLF) in Central Florida thus resulting in an underrepresentation of the group in partnership positions. A purposive sample of 10 African American attorneys was used to collect over twenty incidents. The participants' insight encompassed demographics and responses to interview questions. The findings developed from analyzing responses to semi-structured open-ended interview questions, examining records, and reviewing the literature. The collected data were coded and matched with responses to interview questions as well as the research questions. Manual analysis was performed on the data which revealed important emergent themes relating to: (a) mentoring, (b) diversity, and (c) leadership development. Applying the findings from the study might be valuable to leaders from BLF in developing policies to overcome employment obstacles that hinder advancement of African American attorneys to partnership levels.

Keywords: diversity, mentorship, leadership opportunity, leadership theory, critical incident, big law firms

INTRODUCTION

This case study identified and classified *critical* incidents that African American attorneys attributed to their decisions to leave BLF. These incidents were perceived as potential causes for the resulting phenomenon, to wit, the underrepresentation of this specific minority group at the partnership level in big law firms. In 2014, the National Association of Law Placement (NALP) acknowledged the low representation of minorities in leadership roles, which equates to partnership positions, at these prestigious law firms: As a result, the NALP, in conjunction with other organizations, ventured to identify ways to address the problem (Byrd & Scott, 2014). Subsequently, corporate leaders joined by implementing diversity programs to equalize competitive advantages in the business community and issued directives for overall improvements geared towards increasing the number of African Americans at BLFs (Rhode & Ricca, 2014).

Nevertheless, the legal community, continued to trail behind other institutions in advancing diversity in today's progressively multicultural society (Rhode, 2014). Leaders in legal organizations expressed concerns about the lack of diversity in a profession with a primary duty of advancing justice. Many organizations, including the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), the Diversity Research Institute (DRI), Law School Admissions Council (LSAC), the American Bar Association (ABA), the National Bar Association (NBA), Minority Bar Association (MBA), and the Florida Bar Association (FBA) published congruent reports on the problem.

Evolving changes in the local and national business world caused significant transformation in the legal workplace. The rationale was that diversity afforded minorities opportunities, but at the same time, hindered African American lawyers from attaining leadership positions within elite legal areas (Jayatilake, 2012). Artificial barriers, whether intentional or inadvertent, highlighted bias that denied competent individuals from achieving their full potential of partnership (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Leaders in the legal community faced challenges to advance diversity that would increase the presence of African Americans in the top positions (Jayatilake, 2012). Despite the sustained increase of African Americans graduating law school and joining the legal profession as well as government's best endeavors to embrace and promote cultural diversity, Caucasians continued to monopolize the top leadership positions (Jayatilake, 2012). According to Cook and Glass (2014), having a diverse workplace is significant for two reasons: First, organizations benefit from having more African Americans in leadership positions to serve an increasingly diverse population. Second, having a significant African American presence strengthens the influence that legal organizations can have in advancing ethnic and cultural diversity. Leaders that appreciate labor-force realities and transform to more diverse workforces become more competitive and successful in the international business world (Cook & Glass, 2014).

The Problem

This study is rooted in the theory that African American attorneys are underrepresented at partnership levels in BLF. Furthermore, there is a glaring disparity between the number of minorities graduating law school and how many eventually achieve top positions at BLF. Over a ten-year period, the graduation percentages of African Americans at law schools increased, resulting in more African Americans entering the legal field (Woodson, 2014): However, during that time span, African Americans only accounted for 13% of associates in large firms and a mere 3% or less at partner levels (Rhode & Ricca, 2014). Inequality persists in the legal profession despite the growing population of knowledgeable and highly qualified professionals (Tomlinson, Muzio, Sommerlad, Webley, & Duff, 2013). The number of African Americans lawyers in leadership roles at many legal organizations was lower than in other disciplines; moreover, the problem was also present in BLF firms; thus, substantiating the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) report that leaders in the legal profession were failing as standard-bearers for promoting diversity (Pearce, Wald, & Ballakrishnen, 2015). Statistics indicated that racial discrimination and other forms of inequality persisted in the workforce when considering individuals for employment or promotion to leadership roles (Birch, 2013).

Diversity has been crucial in an organization's effectiveness (Brown, 2015). Scholars theorized that the lack of diversity created distrust among business leaders and private individuals desiring to do business with organizations that mirror the images of their community (Woodson, 2014). The underrepresentation of African Americans leaders at some of the nation's elite law firms implied that legal organizations could be missing growth opportunities with a large segment of the business population (Woodson, 2014). The problem also suggested that African Americans are offered fewer opportunities because of adversarial attitudes and policies created by the majority (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004). Although African Americans have gained access to leadership positions within the past decades, they remained underrepresented at top-tiered law firms in comparison to other groups (Rhode & Ricca, 2014).

Discrimination counts as one reason for the disproportionate number of African American attorneys in leadership positions at BLF (Wax, 2011). Donovan (2015) postulated that the underrepresentation issue was still pervasive in the legal profession evidencing that diversity measures were unsuccessful, despite support from the government and law schools to implement valuable programs (Johnson, 2017). Given that the minority population is expected to account for over 70% of America's workforce by 2016 (Feagin, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014), it behooves organizations including BLFs to expand their diversity platforms (Festekjian, Tram, Murray, Sy, & Huynh, 2014).

Gap in the Literature

Past studies documented trends that the low representation and sluggish growth of minority lawyers at elite law firms were indicative of the invisibility of Black attorneys at the top ranks (Ashong-Lamptey,

2015; Donovan, 2015; Henderson, 2014; Pearce, Wald, & Ballakrishnen, 2015; Rhode, 2014; Rhode & Ricca, 2014; Woodson, 2014). Past literature pertained to traditional minority groups, such as, women, Asians, and Hispanics. Those earlier studies also centered on absolute subjectivity as to how the number of African American attorneys collectively reported on a phenomenon and collected data based on the worldviews of a group (Flynn, Cavanagh, & Bilimoria, 2015). However, there was no systematic time-bound or outcome-based studies on specific incidents. Furthermore, the prior studies did not address what critical incidents influenced the decisions of African American lawyers to leave Big Laws thereby leaving a gap in the literature. Identifying and categorizing critical incidents could explain the declining representation of African American attorneys in leadership positions; thereby, assisting leaders to promote diversity in legal-business environments. In turn, leaders would develop necessary policies and programs to sustain African American lawyers all the way through partnership.

Literature Review

Review of the literature spanned periods before and after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s which was a momentous time span for African American attorneys. Implementation of the Cravath system (a concept that shaped human resources practices at BLF for decades) was also given careful attention. The literature review encompassed delving into existing relevant theories contained in primary scholarly articles and journals (Kay & Adjei, 2013; Root, 2013). Additional studies centered on absolute subjectivity as to how the number of African American attorneys collectively reported on a phenomenon and collected data based on the worldviews of a group (Flynn, Cavanagh, & Bilimoria, 2015; Jonsen, Maznevski, & Schneider, 2011).

Historically, the government initiatives derived from the Civil Right Acts of 1964, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and Affirmative Action programs, jointly and severally held corporations accountable for ensuring equal access to employment for citizens from diverse cultural backgrounds (Choi, 2011). The manuscript is grounded in the premise that discriminatory practices caused organizational leaders to overlook African Americans intentionally or accidentally for promotions and limited access to mentorship that affords social connections and professional guidance (Worsley & Stone, 2011).

Many senior level supervisors of minority ancestry frequently confronted discrimination, even though they had the knowledge, experience, and education that are vital for progressing through the promotional levels in the organization (Worsley & Stone, 2011). Hornsey and Hogg (2002) suggested that minority employees must work harder than their Caucasian counterparts at earning respect and acceptance in most industries. In the legal profession, minorities faced various barriers in pursuit of leadership roles (Wilkins & Gulati, 1998), as such, examining the cause for discrimination was relevant to this study.

Today, organizations have moved toward a more multicultural business model prompting leaders to incorporate minorities into their workforce. Leaders are more aware of the positive role diversity plays in a company's competitive edge. Being disregarded for promotions and having limited mentorship opportunities were two barriers confronting African Americans in their pursuit for leadership status in the Big Laws (Worsley & Stone, 2011). On the other hand, diversity caused discourse or conflict within an organization, such as, segregation, assimilation, marginalization, and integration, with underlying reactions to change focused on apathy, resistance, pessimism, and failed promises. The outcome of the debates is either shown as destructive silence or positive voice. Proponents of diversity faced backlash when attempting to advance diversity in the workforce. Another viewpoint is that diversity perpetuated inequities between gender and race rather than enhanced minority presence (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000).

The theoretical framework for this research study was grounded in multiple theories, emerging from leadership, professional development, and discrimination. The examination focused on six specific discrimination theories relevant to the advancement and development of African American attorneys: (1) Social Identity Theory, (2) Kanter's Tokenism Theory, (3) Institutional Racism Theory, (4) Conventional Discrimination Theory, (5) Critical Race Theory, and (6) Job Satisfaction Theory. Social identity theory (SIT) established some coherence to the law firms' identity and offered productive applications to behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). One feature of SIT was that individuals usually self-classify into categories

befitting their typical group characteristics. For instance, people tend to group themselves and others into social categories, such as, gender, race, or age units, organizational associations, and religious affiliations. Hamilton (2015) commented that social identification created a perception of isolation or feelings of oneness within an organization or some human collective group on stereotypes.

Kanter's Tokenism Theory (KTT)

Under KTT employees are separated into two groups: A token group which represented less than 15 percent of the total workforce and was distinguishable from the rest of the employees (Dalkiliç & Yilmaz, 2019). The remaining workers, called “dominants,” were the greater portion or at least 85 percent of the workers (Kanter, 1977). Tokenism was highly visible in the legal profession as evidenced by the overwhelming presence of Caucasian male at every level (Helen, 2015). The theory suggested that if Black attorneys were recruited to join a firm as partners, the reason was oftentimes to fill token positions with additional diversity-related responsibilities (Wallace & Kay, 2012).

Institutional Racism Theory (IRT)

IRT was yet another explanation for the mass exodus of Black attorneys from large law firms contributing to the underrepresentation of the ethnic class. Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, postulated the concept of institutional racism in 1967. Hamilton and Ture (2011) argued that it was easy to detect individual racism because of the overt qualities; however, institutional racism was less observable because of its subtle aspects. Institutional racism emanated in the everyday operation of established and respected societal forces, and therefore receives less public denunciation than racism perpetuated against individual. IRT was shown in the recruitment and training practices of large corporate firms. Institutionalized racism practices discouraged African American lawyers from investing in proficiencies that could help them succeed within the elite corporate firms and eliminated all but a few African American candidates from being hired or succeeding in the firm environment (Sommerlad & Ashley, 2015).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Developed by Derrick Bell in the 1980s, this theory continues to be the most common philosophy on discrimination. CRT is based on the premise that racism was an accepted norm in American culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The theory challenged liberal policies and highlighted that Caucasians had been the primary recipients of civil rights legislation intended for disenfranchised groups.

Job Satisfaction Theory (JST)

The theory, which is commonly referred to as Locke's Range of Affect theory, described employees' emotional reaction and attitudes towards their jobs and is intermingled with an individual's needs from his employment. Ikonne and Onuoha (2015) examined influences on job satisfaction of librarians in Southern Nigeria. The findings revealed that a fulfilling work relationship, job security, and customer contact were influencing factors of satisfaction. Whereas employee earnings, benefits, and work conditions ranked among the lowest influencing aspects (Emmanuel & Hassan, 2015).

Leadership

Analyzing leadership stereotypes showed that attributes exhibited by Caucasian males were often sought after for leadership positions (Carton & Rosette, 2011). Chin (2010) posited that enhancing the skills, knowledge, abilities, and theories on leadership could be the basis from which to examine data and help researchers gain better awareness about leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2010). For example, Wang and Huang (2009) expressed that transformational leadership played a significant role in the success of any organization and was practical for individuals or group performances. The early theory of transformational leadership was developed mostly from descriptive research about political leaders.

Transformational leadership is both a micro-level influence process between individuals and a macro-level process of mobilizing power to change social systems and reform institutions. Transformational

leadership can be exhibited by anyone in an organization, in any type of position and could involve individuals influencing peers, superiors, or subordinates. Transformational leaders sought to raise the consciousness of followers by appealing to higher morals and values, such as, liberty, justice, equality, peace, and humanitarianism, rather than; emotions, fear, greed, jealousy, or hatred (Burns, 1978). For this study, Burns' theory was used as the impetus to provide an elaborate understanding of the pathways to leadership at Big Law firms.

METHOD

The qualitative research method was used to perform this study without the usual constrictions of fixed categories of analysis found in the quantitative method. Qualitative studies are in-depth examination of an issue by studying the participants in their natural surroundings (Yin, 2015). A qualitative study emphasizes participants' perceptions and understandings where the findings can be presented unaided or combined with quantitative data (Yin, 2017). Selecting the qualitative method over the quantitative or mixed-method approaches was determined because of the information sought in the study.

In this study, the qualitative approach was deemed most suitable because the study focused on the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants, which facilitated human storytelling (Yin, 2017). This study about the underrepresentation of African Americans at elite law firms, concerned human demeanors and happenings in a natural environment, which fell within the purview of the qualitative method as opposed to the artificial backdrop that typified quantitative research. In other words, the formulaic nature of quantitative research did not enable personal interaction or communications and was therefore inadequate to address deep sensitive issues presented in this research. Similarly, because the mixed research method had some quantitative elements, it too was inappropriate for this study. The qualitative method elicited deeper, and more comprehensive answers from participants whilst the quantitative methods required examining an occurrence by application of mathematical formulas and focused on numerical values to analyze collected data and make generalization about a phenomenon or group (Yin, 2017). Marshall and Rossman (2014) posited that it was a fundamental assumption for qualitative researchers to view a phenomenon from the participant's perspective as opposed to the researcher's viewpoint. As such, the qualitative case study method was ideal for answering the research question through ordinary storytelling (Yin, 2017).

Population and Sample

In this study, the researcher settled on a sample size of 10 African American lawyers from which to collect multiple accounts of critical events (minimum of two incidents per participants). The study was limited to a few selected Big Laws firms in Central Florida; as such, the findings could not necessarily show the population of African American attorneys in other law firms. Intrinsically, there was always the potential that the study's construction and results could be compromised (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). A sample of twenty or more critical incidents was adequate for this study. The research problem was translated into specific questions and the data sources were compared through triangulation.

For the initial sample, introductory letters were sent to fifteen African American attorneys. Three attorneys were immediately disqualified based on certain criteria outlined for the study. Of the remaining twelve willing participants, ten of them (6 women and 4 men) were sent Informed Consent Forms via email. The Informed Consent detailed specifics about the study, participation requirements, and their inalienable rights to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Six of the ten participants acquiesced to a face-to-face interview session. The other four participants were interviewed via telephone sans video. The interview format comprised of semi-structured open-ended questions with the interview sessions lasting between 20-30 minutes.

A total of fifteen open-ended interview questions concerning the primary research question were posed to each participant with instructions to formulate responses based on individual experiences, personal views, and perceptions. The questions allowed the participants to express themselves and import meaning in their own words (Green, Elmore, & Camilli, 2012). At the end of the session, participants were given an

opportunity to receive and review a copy of the transcript which they all waived. Analyzing the data encompassed reviewing and documenting the experiences and insights of the ten participating attorneys.

Data Collection, Instrumentation and Data Analysis

Personal interviews aided by a pilot-tested questionnaire guide provided the data. One examiner conducted both face-to-face and telephonic interviews. The interviewer remained mindful that personal characteristic can affect participants' response to the inquiry (Bahrami, Soleimani, Yaghoobzadeh, & Ranjbar (2016). Every effort was made to avoid risk of interjecting bias in the process. Participants were provided comfortable setting, location, and duration, throughout the interviews (Rimando, et al., 2015).

The interview questions were carefully drafted to eliminate anguish or offensive information. Inductive data testing generated patterns, themes, and categories of analysis. Triangulating many sources of data i.e., semi-structured interviews, observations of participants, questionnaires, documents, and review of historical data offered different perspectives on the phenomenon which strengthened the research study. Cross-comparison of the data was incorporated to assure confirmability and reliability. The principal use of the information was to identify strategies for improving minority representation at Big Laws in areas of hiring, training, promotion, and development procedures affecting job performance. Given the small data set within the study, manual data analysis was selected for this study. Manual analysis was preferred because it allowed for content analysis and observation of the developing data.

RESULTS

This study examined the problem of the low representation of African Americans at partnership levels in Florida's big law firms. The goal was to classify critical incidents that African American lawyers gave as their reasons for leaving these firms. The perceptions obtained from ten African American attorneys, along with reports generated by the NALP, demographical records produced by the Florida Bar Association, and other literature pertaining to African American leadership roles, were all analyzed to comprehend the phenomenon. Analyzing discrimination theories, transformational leadership, and their implications among the races equally contributed to the results.

Responses to Interview Questions

Questions 1 through 4 established demographics about the participants including their qualifications and experiences at big law firms. Interview Question 1: How long have you been an attorney? Interview Question 2: Have you been employed in a law firm with 50-100 attorneys? Interview Question 3: How long did you work at that present firm? and Interview Question 4: What is your status in the legal arena? the questions all combined to allow the participants to elaborate on their years of experience at Big Laws and current employment status. The participants' responses are listed below:

Participant 1 (NP1). I have been an attorney for over 20 years. During my years of practice, I worked my way up to senior associate with my last firm. Although I did not see it as an issue with advancing in the legal field, it took several years to reach senior level. I left before receiving an offer for partnership. Participant 2 (NP2). I have worked in large law firms since graduating law school some 20 years ago. I held senior positions over the years in two different firms but neither position led to partnership. Participant 3 (NP3). I spent 22 years in the legal field, and it has been difficult advancing through the ranks at Big Law. It is an arduous path to partnership especially for minorities. I was stuck in the senior associate role for many years and thought I should have been promoted to at least junior partner many times but unfortunately that never happened. I think mentoring or guidance from the top was to blame. Participant 4 (NP4). I have been in the industry for over 20 years. Like most attorneys, I started my career as an associate and later advanced to a leadership role as lead trial attorney. I chose to leave the big firm environment for a myriad of reasons; however, continue to practice law. I am currently employed as a solo practitioner. Participant 5 (NP5). I worked for over 20 years in the legal arena. I was a prosecutor for several years before joining a large law firm. I was the only African American in the 100-lawyer firm for many years and felt isolated. I left after not being promoted to a partnership level despite demanding work.

Participant 7 (NP7). I have been a lawyer for 15 years in total, all of which has been as a junior associate at several Big Law organizations. I changed law firms frequently before finally starting my own firm. I saw many problems with progression in the Big Law organizations. Participant 8 (P1). I have been an attorney for over 25 years. I started at a small firm and transferred to the current Big Law as a lateral hire (already a partner). In a brief time, I progressed to junior partner. My current role is equity partner. I think some luck and being in the right place when the opportunity presented itself was the reason for making it this far. I had a great mentor and instant connection with right people who championed my cause. Personally, I believe being a single male helped. Participant 9 (P2). This is my 23rd year in the legal field. My current position is that of an equity partner. The opportunities for minority males are exceedingly rare in general. "I personally believe that other minority group do not encounter the same problems as Black men. It is easier for Hispanics and Asians to advance over the African Americans for whatever reason." Participant 10 (P3). I have worked in the legal industry since 1993. I began in the public sector. After five years, I was eventually promoted to a lead attorney. I stayed at the firm for several years but left one year after attaining partnership in pursuit of a less stressful career.

Question 5. How do you perceive advancement opportunities at your firm? The question sought to determine how each participant saw their progression as pertained to their career paths. NP1 responded "I have been employed in the law for several years and find to be rewarding for the most part". Nevertheless, many changes are needed to the current system. I am comfortable with my achievements and still enjoy what I do. NP2 said "I perceive my advancement as disappointing." My progression has been slow. I am not comfortable with my achievement and where I am in my career. NP3 said I am happy with my accomplishments, but I was hoping to have advanced further in my profession, for example being in a leadership role like junior partner. I am still hopeful to get to the top because I do have the knowledge and experience. P1 said I perceive my advancement as right on point, I am right where I want to be career education wise. I also see my progression in the law firm as a great accomplishment for a black woman. I would admit that getting this far in the private sector was due to being given the opportunity and support, proving that I could do the job, and some luck as well. NP4 said I see my achievements as a great accomplishment even without the partnership title. NP5 said I perceive my advancement as unsatisfactory. Although I quickly went up the hierarchy, I do not think the environment is supportive or permits more room for growth to partnership. NP6-I honestly do not feel my knowledge and experience are equal to my advancement. I also view my achievement as stagnant in the big law firms. NP7 expressed my advancement in the big law firm environment was gradual, but I never made it to partner. However, I am content with my present status in the legal workforce. P2 said I am extremely satisfied with where I am in my legal career. While, I have progressed to the top of my profession, it is difficult for minorities to advance in this field.

Interview Question 6. What was your understanding of the partnership progression at the big law organization? The participants provided multiple different answers to this interview question. Most of the responses were brief with terse sentences or phrase. Notwithstanding the variations, the most significant theme as deduced from NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP6 comments was that most of the big law firms still operate under the "up and out" system which they considered to be outdated and disadvantageous to minorities. Another significant theme was revealed in the answers given by (P1, P2, and P3) which was that challenging work and personal sacrifices were key to advancement in this environment. The answers given by (P1, P2, and P3) produced a third emergent theme which was based on firms' targeting specific attorneys to become partners, while devaluing and overlooking other attorneys.

Questions 7 and 8. Did you experience any challenges with advancing to partnership? What, if any incident resulted in you not advancing at the firm? The response to question 7 was a resounding yes from every participant, even those who reached equity partner levels. The third prevalent theme as cited by responses (P1, P2, and P3) was that certain factors associated with discrimination and diversity (expressed by: NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, and NP7) and mentorship (reiterated by: NP1, NP2, NP6, NP7, P1, P2, and P3) hindered opportunities for progression. The participants believed these obstacles were either intentionally or inadvertently ignored by the leaders at the firms. With regards to question 8, about incidents relating to

attaining partnership roles in their respective firm, the most noteworthy emergent themes involved isolation resulting from race, lineage, or other connections.

Questions 10 and 11. What are your views on qualified African Americans not attaining partnership at big law firms? and What type of mentorship programs were available to assist employees to advance in the organization? Please explain. Participants offered varied views about failing to reach partnership level at big law firms. The most prevalent themes included: (a) disinterest, (stated by: NP1, NP2, NP4, NP5, P1, and NP6), (b) racial bias (mentioned by: NP1, NP2, NP3, and P1), (c) white-male dominance (declared by: NP2, NP3, NP4), (d) cultural diversity (mentioned by: NP3 and NP5). With regards to mentorship, the dominant theme that emerged from responses to question 11 was that: (a) the firms do a poor job pairing partners with associates (said NP1, NP2, and NP5). Interview Question 12. What are your views about your law firm's diversity policies and practices? This question produced mixed answers from the participants. NP1, NP2, and NP4 voiced that diversity was non-existent at their firm. NP5 said "most of these firms usually have only one token black person." Two noteworthy themes emerged from the question: One addressed diversity as recalled by (P1, P2, NP1, NP2, and NP4) and the other theme was the failure to implement appropriate policies as mentioned by (P3, NP5, and NP6).

Question 13. What type of mentorship programs were available to assist employees to advance in the organization? Please explain. Although many of the associate lawyers responded that they were paired with a senior attorney (NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP5, and NP6), those same individuals could not describe a definitive mentorship policy. Interview Question 14. What do you perceive are some of the barriers to attaining partnership? This question was intended to classify possible outside factors that the participants believed were disadvantageous to their success. Again, the prime reason gleaned from the responses of (NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP5, and NP6) were poor mentorship, unhappiness with assignments, and the old boy system. One attorney stated that "there was a lot of politics when it comes to getting plum cases and since these cases determined advancement in the firm, there was no way of getting up the ladder." Interview Question 15. What, if any specific, event influenced your decision to stay or leave Big Law?" This question was significant to the core of issue in this study which was identifying incidents that were critical to African American attorney's decision to stay or leave Big Law. The question elicited several emergent themes:

The responses ran the gamut of critical incident. Some participants named lack of mentoring, (NP1, NP3, NP4, NP5, NP6). The main problem was that these law firms did not have formal mentoring programs that paired partners with associates throughout employment. Realistic growth opportunity was another reason as stated by other participants (NP3, NP4, NP5, and NP6). The perception was that it was that attorneys were not given the choice assignments to demonstrate the talent that would allow them to advance. By far, the most cited reason that came out of the responses as stated by (NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP5, NP6 and NP7) who felt they were simply overlooked and not being offered or presented with the leadership partnership opportunity. They commented that firms did not seriously develop young talents. Analyzing the data began by examining and reviewing transcripts of each participant's interview. At first, finding themes in the raw data proved to be an onerous task, but the information became more manageable once transcribed into Microsoft Word (Word) format. For this research study, using standard Word program as well as color-coded notes simplified the analysis process.

RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

The single research question was "What incidents were perceived as critical to African American attorneys' decisions to stay or leave Big Law prior to reaching the upper echelon of the profession resulting in their underrepresentation in leadership roles?" The study was framed within a theoretical context about leadership development centered around the advancement of African American attorneys attaining partnership positions. This research revealed three emergent themes: (a) Diversity, (b) Mentorship, and (c) Leadership opportunity. The objective of the study was accomplished through analysis of the collected data which was attained from interviewing 10 African American senior attorneys from elite law firms. A comparison of the emergent data in the current study matched discussions in the literature review. The developed themes emphasized the insights, views, and recollection of stories from 10 African American

attorneys. The patterns of emerging keywords and themes that came from participants' answers to the interview questions aided in responding to the core research question.

Theme 1: Diversity.

A close examination of transcripts and themes revealed that diversity is trending in today's global workforce. For this thematic category, study participants offered substantive information about diversity development in elite law firms that was supported in the literature. Participants expressed that developing diversity policies and programs would benefit the organization. As law firm leaders recognize the value of cultural diversity that employees place on work environment and being productive, leaders should understand that diversity was not an isolated incident in a worker's life but a continuation of their individuality. Engaging workers meant that firm leaders should focus on cultural dynamics within the firm and be attentive to attorneys' personal lives. The results correlated with the reviewed literature's pronouncement that examining diversity was vital to partnership development in elite law firms. Group exchanges tend to facilitate workers' engagement based on distinct lifestyle requirements. For instance, P1, P2, NP1, NP2, and NP4 spoke about offering a cultural environment that considered the attorneys ethnicity and race. These attorneys shared the general perception that diversity was good policy but was non-existent at their firm. One specific account came from a non-partner who said,

I remember one question at my initial interview as if it were yesterday. The hiring partner asked me if I was a Gator or a Nole, an apparent reference to determine loyalty to the University of Florida or Florida State University. Everyone in the firm had gone to one of those Universities. Ironically, I was hired for having no allegiance to any Florida schools and was the first ever Black female lawyer at that firm. Thus, aligning with tokenism or part of an initiative to change the culture. I was never offered partnership and didn't think it was coming (NP1).

Other examples came from many of the participants who collectively voiced feelings of oneness and solitude at the big firms. They felt isolated in the sea of Caucasian lawyers. NP4 said, "I went into this profession fully aware that I had to work harder than my white colleagues. I probably would still be there if I were more social, but I wasn't going to sell my soul" (NP4). Lack of commonality among peers was cited by one attorney, who stated, "I had nothing in common with the white-male dominated staff."

The head-in-the-sand approach is not an efficient strategy for managing cultural differences in an office setting. Instead, studies that recognize and accept differences along with associated challenges, go a long way toward nurturing employment relationships. According to Moses (2010), organizations should accept having diverse patrons and employ diverse personnel to navigate the global marketplace to reach customers from all social backgrounds. The establishment and implementation of diversity policies emerged as a thematic category. Many of the ten participants, expressed that there was value in developing such policies and programs. These participants also stressed that law firms should collaborate with African American associate attorneys to create effective diversity policies. Recent research studies have shown that promoting diversity is crucial for organizational growth (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016).

Theme 2: Mentorship

This theme concerned the participants' views about the mentoring programs for up-and-coming associate attorneys in the law firm. The shared opinions among the participants revealed that having a definitive mentoring program in the law firm would advance attorneys' professional and personal growth. Many participants criticized their law firms for not having formal mentoring programs to develop associate into partners. One attorney expressed disappointment with the poor attempts at mentoring. She expressed that "if the firm had an identifiable mentoring program it would protect and advance dynamics that are unique to Black attorneys. There was no single individual I felt had my back." (NP4). A non-partner (NP5) expressed that "most of the time, partners don't support African-American associates when issues arise with a client. My firm did a poor job of pairing partners with associates." *Mentoring programs improve the*

professional development of the mentor, protégé, and the organizations. The data disclosed agreement between participants that having definitive mentoring program would advance professional and personal growth. In addition, this theme highlighted that the lack of mentorship program harms African Americans and other employees in pursuit of achieving leadership roles.

Theme 3: Leadership Opportunity

The participants' viewpoints confirmed that qualified African American attorneys were not given priority in case assignments. The literature disclosed preconceived stereotypes that minorities must constantly prove their worth and credibility. These stereotypes emanated from social theories relating to race, gender, and ethnicity which caused African American attorneys to become unsure and insecure about their future resulting in premature exodus from the firms. Positive views came from three partners in the study. P2 voiced that despite his accomplishments he was denied quality assignments that would help prove his worth. "The best cases were given to *white boys*. I had to scratch and scrape for billable hours which is how they measure you." Another partner level attorney (P1) opined, "I strongly believe that you must have an advocate, for me it was someone I knew from law school. If he wasn't there I probably would have left or not been offered partnership."

In 2014, The Georgia Society of CPA recommended that organizations identify and invest in the next generation of leaders to ensure continued growth and advancement within their company. *Leaders* can no longer ignore the fact that workforce demographics is evolving at a rapid pace. The paradigm shift means that leaders should focus on individuals, conduct, and behaviors, with the aim of refining the skills of minority leaders. Senior managers must think more strategically in allowing followers to achieve planned goals. It is incumbent on law firm leaders to demand more cultural integration into their work environment in general and specifically into leadership roles to maintain a competitive edge.

CONCLUSION

The three themes extrapolated from the ten participants' responses produced a total of 133 extreme activities (35 positive and 98 negative). There was a wide range of style within the responses. For instance, some of the participants gave terse answers to questions about leadership opportunities, while others elected to expand on their opinions. Every participant opined that they possessed the necessary characteristics at the time to satisfy partnership criteria for the firm. NP1, NP3, NP5, P2 and P3 all commented that senior partners could be more effective in assisting African Americans to advance in the big law firm environment. Majority of the participants were frustrated about the lack of diversity training programs at their firms. Only one participant (P2) credited his firm for acknowledging any form of diversity. Participants NP2, NP3, P2, and P3 stressed that African Americans must play integral roles in developing diversity within the firms. Questions about the perceptions and experiences of the participants relative to attaining partnership revealed one prominent theme, which was couched in the glass ceiling concept. Several of participants implied that African Americans were only allowed to advance to a certain level within the firm. This view was shared by participants NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, and NP7. Five of the ten participants (NP1, NP2, NP3, NP4, NP5) perceived that gaining partnership depended on case assignments. Participants NP2, NP3, and NP4 believe they did not receive choice case assignments to demonstrate stellar performance. To quote one attorney, "it felt like we were being setup to fail." Overall, most attorneys felt that the few partnership opportunities were taken up by Caucasians and that African Americans were slow to advance in those positions.

The research question generated mixed responses from the participants with some attributing the problem to the "old boy network." For instance, participants NP3 and NP5 believe that the homogenous culture and exclusivity of the "old boys' network" does not encourage them to excel in the firm. Others were in denial and disbelief that the issue existed. According to NP2, "I did not know that African Americans were underrepresented and thought everyone was treated like me regardless of color." The most critical incidents were subcategorized into eight key areas based on the prominent themes.

This case study used semi structured interview questions to examine the single research question: What incidents were perceived as critical to African American attorneys' decisions to leave Big Law Firms prior

to reaching partnership level thereby resulting in the low representation of African American attorneys in leadership roles? The research question reflected the necessity to identify and explore what factors impeded attorneys from advancing to leadership or partnership positions. A corollary goal of the study was to examine and describe how African Americans perceived achieving partnership in Central Florida Big Laws.

Data was collected via face-to-face and telephonic interviews of 10 African American participants. Manual analysis of the data uncovered three emergent themes: (1) lack of diversity, (2) no leadership developmental opportunities, and (3) no meaningful mentoring. The goal of the study is to encourage leaders of Big Law Firms to seek and develop effective measures to support successful growth of African American attorneys to become leaders/partners at these law firms.

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