



SPECIAL RESEARCH FORUM: NEW WAYS OF SEEING

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY ON THE CAREER EXPERIENCES OF EXECUTIVE BLACK WOMEN

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The unique and complex experiences of and challenges for Black women, which are tied to their intersecting marginalized identities, have largely been overlooked in management research. Although Black women are physically visible in that they are different from most of their colleagues, intersectional invisibility research suggests that they can be simultaneously invisible—easily overlooked or disregarded—because they are non-prototypical members of their gender and racial identity groups. To shed new light on the role that intersectional invisibility plays in Black women’s perceptions and experiences, we conducted two waves of in-depth interviews across seven years with 59 Black women who occupy senior-level positions in organizations. We develop a theoretical model to explain the paradoxical effects of executive Black women’s “outsider within” status in which they simultaneously experience opportunities and constraints associated with two forms of intersectional invisibility: benign and hostile. To manage both forms of intersectional invisibility, executive Black Women adopt a number of critical strategies to gain credible visibility needed to ascend in their careers.

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The second and third authors contributed equally.

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I was black, they were white ... I was female, they were all male ... There was nothing that was an obvious similarity between us. I think I spent my early years trying to mask how different I really was ... I would have spent the next 15 years trying to hide from them how different I was, but, when you do that, you miss where there are similarities and the ability to build a real relationship. I decided I'm going to have to take the risk here because nobody can accept and like me if they don't know me.

—Mabel (Former Senior Vice President, Pharmaceuticals)

Outsiders can be viewed as both a threat and a curiosity. Others may disregard or doubt them because they are strangers while at the same time scrutinize their unfamiliar nature. As reflected in the above quotation, this complicated experience of being an outsider within another's world resembles the unique situation of one of the most underrepresented groups in executive and senior leadership roles in organizations: Black women. As strangers in the predominantly male- and White-dominated upper echelons of organizations, on the one hand, they may be ignored, devalued, and misinterpreted (Bell, 1990), while, on the other hand, they may be seen as an intriguing anomaly with "bonus standing" (Nkomo & Cox, 1989). Although such insights can be gleaned from prior research, we know surprisingly little about how successful Black women contend with the benefits and costs of being Black *and* a woman as they navigate their careers at upper echelons of organizations (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

Black women's representation in the highest levels of the professional arena is persistently grim. Despite accounting for roughly 7% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), Black women represent only 1.3% of senior management and executive roles in S&P 500 firms, 2.2% of Fortune 500 boards of directors, and there is not a single Black female chief executive officer (CEO) in the S&P 500 (Catalyst, 2017; Deloitte, 2018; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). White women, despite being underrepresented themselves, far surpass Black women in terms of corporate representation. Comparatively, while being roughly 38% of the U.S. population, White women hold 29% of senior management and executive roles, 15.7% of Fortune 500 boards of directors, and 4.4% of S&P 500 CEO roles (Catalyst, 2019a, 2019b; Deloitte, 2018; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). Moreover, the gender pay gap is wider for Black women, who earn just 67.7% of White men's average salary, compared to White women who earn 81.9% (Hegewisch, Phil, & Williams-Baro, 2017). These bleak figures suggest that the convergence of race and gender may result more in a double burden than a double advantage for Black women (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Nkomo & Cox, 1989).

The scarcity of Black women extends beyond organizations, and is reflected in a dearth of organizational research on Black women's workplace experiences as well. Extant organizational research on women's leadership tends to be drawn overwhelmingly from White women, with conclusions applied to all women (Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston, 2016). Yet, the experience of Black women is likely to differ from that of White women due to the low status of both their gender and their race. Seminal work by Bell and Nkomo (1999, 2001; see also Bell, 1990) set the stage for subsequent work on Black women professionals and their experiences at work (see, e.g., Collins, 2000; see also Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2018). Yet, surprisingly little research has extended or built on this groundbreaking work on Black women professionals, despite evidence of their strong desire to ascend the corporate ladder and become influential leaders (Travis, Thorpe-Moscon, & McCluney, 2016).

While management literature has historically been limited in scope as it relates to Black women in the workplace, the intersectionality framework emerged in other literatures (e.g., law, social psychology, sociology) as a vehicle with which to examine Black women along with other groups at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (Grzanka, 2018). In this paper, we explore new pathways to understanding and managing intersectionality by examining the lived experiences of executive Black women (hereafter, "EBW"). We bound our examination to EBW specifically for three important reasons. First, as Black women, EBW reside at the intersection of two historically marginalized categories in the workplace. EBW must contend with living in two pervasive hierarchical societal structures: one gender-based hierarchy,

where they are subordinate to men, and another race-based hierarchy, where they are subordinate to Whites (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Second, Black women are not merely Black or women, they are Black women, which is a unique status from either of their individual identity groups and opens them up to different experiences, both negative and positive (Crenshaw, 1989; Rosette et al., 2016). As expressed by one EBW, “It’s a three-edged sword ... you’ve got to jump over all three of those hurdles before you’re really heard. Yes, I’m a minority, but you’re female ... but you’re a minority female” (Victoria, Retail Executive). This sentiment and previous research suggests that, as intersectional minorities, EBW contend with a unique set of experiences as compared to Black men and White women. Thus, we depart from previous literature by avoiding the trend of subsuming a variety of racial and gender groups under one common umbrella of “minority” or “women,” and thereby create the space for deeper understandings of intersectionality.

Third, as executives, EBW exist in an elite world ordinarily closed to most others. Many Black women come from communities and families that are not well represented among their high-status professional peers. One of Bell and Nkomo’s (2001) primary insights was that gender, race, and class conflict and combine as Black women experience their professional lives. That is, the executive (i.e., class) component of their identities, along with their educational and occupational achievements, may put EBW in a unique position relative to Black women in other walks of life. Having surpassed the levels of educational, income, and occupational status commonly experienced by the vast majority of Black women in America, they defy stereotypical race- and gender-based expectations. Yet, they are simultaneously relative strangers among their largely White and male counterparts at work. Thus, EBW may experience “outsider within” status, whereby they are living in two worlds but never really at home in either (Bell & Nkomo, 1999; Collins, 1986, 1999, 2000).

In line with other scholars, we suggest that their “outsider within” status at work plays a significant role in shaping EBW’s workplace experiences and career trajectories (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Settles et al., 2018). Specifically, the complexities of being a Black woman are exaggerated in professional settings due to “intersectional invisibility,” meaning that their intersecting marginalized identities render them both invisible and hypervisible (McCluney & Rabelo, 2018). That is, EBW’s accomplishments and potential may be easily overlooked by (or even invisible to) dominant group members (e.g., White men) working around them. Yet, at the same time, their token demographic status may make them hypervisible such that they (and their contributions) are scrutinized more than others around them (Kanter, 1977; McCluney & Rabelo, 2018; Settles et al., 2018). What is unclear from this burgeoning literature is how EBW contend with these seemingly contradictory experiences of invisibility and hypervisibility, as well as whether intersectional invisibility is a detriment, an advantage, or both.

Our research examines the dynamic nature of intersectional invisibility by drawing from the career narratives of 59 EBW interviewed at two points in time. Our analysis sheds light on the paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility for Black women at the highest organizational levels, and how they gain credible visibility needed to ascend in their careers. Taken together, our study offers a new way of seeing career progression through an intersectional lens in which EBW and others with multiple marginalized identities are aiming to make their invisibility visible so that they can ascend in their organizations.

THEORY INFORMING OUR STUDY

Our research begins with literature on managing multiple marginalized identities and dual stigma, as well as intersectionality and intersectional invisibility. Bridging multiple disciplines of research, Table 1 provides a list of definitions of core constructs that were developed in or are central to our study.

TABLE 1
Definitions of Intersectional Invisibility Constructs (Table view)

Construct	Definition
Intersectionality	The intertwined and multiplicative effects of multiple identity groups
Intersecting Disadvantage	The additive or interactive effects of multiple subordinate group memberships creating combined inequities and disparities
Intersectional Cancelling Effects	The neutralizing effects of one subordinate identity group on another subordinate identity group
Outsider Within	The condition of being outsiders when working in predominantly high-status (e.g., White- and male-dominated) spaces
(In)Visibility	<p>“Visibility” refers to the extent to which an individual is fully regarded and recognized by the dominant group</p> <p>“Invisibility” refers to the experience of marginalized group members whom are overlooked or dismissed by the dominant group in terms of professional authority, potential, and recognition</p>
Hypervisibility	Occurs when members of multiple subordinate groups experience that they (and their contributions) are scrutinized more than others around them by the dominant group
Intersectional Invisibility	Occurs when members of multiple subordinate groups (e.g., Black women) are not prototypical of their respective identity groups, which renders them difficult to categorize and easy to overlook
Benign Intersectional Invisibility	Refers to the positive interactive effects of belonging to multiple subordinate identity groups such that they are perceived as unfamiliar by the dominant group, and, thus, unbound by stereotypes tightly associated with their multiple subordinate identity groups
Hostile Intersectional Invisibility	Describes the negative interactive effects of belonging to multiple subordinate identity groups such that the dominant group perceives them as the combination of stereotypes, and, thus, are subject to compounded negative stigmas
Agentic Visibility Tactics	Strategies to gain visibility as credible leaders

Multiple Subordinate Identities and Dual Stigma

The management literature has examined how individuals manage multiple marginalized (i.e., subordinated) identities at work (Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Ladge, 2017). This literature generally focuses on dual stigma experienced in the workplace by those who hold low-status or marginalized identities, such as women managing pregnancy and motherhood (Ladge et al., 2012; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015), lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents (Sawyer et al., 2017), and minority women from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). Among this literature, several theoretical perspectives have been advanced to explore the varied ways in which multiple subordinate identities are experienced, some of which are generalizable to anyone with more than one subordinate identity (Ramarajan, 2014) and some of which are unique to the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Generalizable aspects include the experience of compounded stereotypes stemming from simultaneously belonging to multiple subordinate identity groups, while different intersectional groups (e.g., Black women vs. Asian women) experience unique effects of multiple subordinate group membership resulting from the specific stereotype content (e.g., warmth vs. competence) associated with each of their identity groups. Below, we review literature examining the unique experiences of working Black women.

Scholars have put forth a number of theoretical perspectives to address the unique experiences of Black women in the working world. Among these perspectives is “double jeopardy,” which proclaims a “double whammy” or additive effect of being Black and a woman (Berdahl & Moore, 2006), leading to Black women’s increased experiences of sexual and racial discrimination. According to this perspective, Black women are in a precarious position because they have to contend with racism based on their race and sexism based on their gender (Beale, 1979). Importantly, the double jeopardy perspective indicates that Black

women face greater disadvantage than White women or Black men because they struggle with two sets of discrete disadvantages: one racial and the other gendered.

The double jeopardy explanation has been criticized for simplifying the experiences of Black women by simply adding the consequences of their multiple identities, thereby discounting unique experiences that may not result from a simple combination of oppressions (King, 1988; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). As a response to this shortcoming, scholars advanced the intersectionality perspective to capture the intricacies of holding multiple social identities (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989). The current manuscript rests upon an intersectionality framework, which we explore in depth next.

Intersectionality

The intersectionality perspective posits that the effects of race and gender are not independent of one another but instead are intertwined and multiplicative (Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988). In other words, a Black woman would be expected to have worse—and *different*—challenges than White women and Black men, not because she is Black and a woman but because she is a Black woman. Those holding multiple subordinate identities (e.g., Black women) have intersecting identities that create interactive inequities and disparities (Crenshaw, 1989). Indeed, “the disadvantages of race and sex compound or multiply each other, making the detrimental effect of both belonging to an ethnic minority and being a woman greater than the additive hypothesis would suggest” (Berdahl & Moore, 2006: 428).

Further, those holding one or more subordinated group memberships are also subject to intersecting societal systems of oppression that reinforce such group-based hierarchies (i.e., institutionalized racism and sexism; Collins, 2000). Thus, when scholars examine doubly stigmatized individuals (e.g., Black women), they should take into account the simultaneous effects of residing at the crossroads of multiple systems of oppression. Supportive of this logic is research suggesting that the intersection of race and gender produce qualitatively unique experiences of oppression such as racialized sexism where the experience of sexism depends on a woman’s race (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) or sexualized racism where the experience of racism differs depending on the target’s gender (Collins, von Unger, & Armbrister, 2008). For example, some research indicates that Black women are assumed to be promiscuous single mothers, and consequently they experience more sexual harassment, racialized sexual harassment, and racial discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Buchanan, 2005; Collins, 2000; Mansfield, Koch, Henderson, Vicary, Cohn, & Young, 1991) than do women of other races.

A number of organizational studies have illustrated the interactive effects of race and gender on outcomes such as pay (Greenman & Xie, 2008), incivility (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013), perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012), perceptions of unfair treatment (Collins, Dumas, & Moyer, 2017), and work–family experiences (Frevert, Culbertson, & Huffman, 2015; Williams, Berdahl, & Vandello, 2016). Despite their theoretical differences, both the additive (double jeopardy) and the multiplicative (intersectionality) hypotheses predict that Black women experience more negative outcomes than do their White female and Black male counterparts because of their race and gender. Thus, existing literature largely suggests that dual subordinate minority identities means that EBW must contend with intersecting disadvantages of belonging to multiple subordinate identity groups.

However, we join a small group of scholars (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Rosette et al., 2016) who go beyond a “score-keeping approach” that asks which subordinate group is more oppressed, and instead focus on the intersectionality framework’s potential to shed light on unique experiences of those holding multiple subordinate group memberships, such as Black women. At its core, an intersectional framework conceptualizes individuals as inhabiting a unique position on intersecting dimensions of social identity. That is, all individuals are intersectional group members since every person is a member of multiple social identity groups and these different intersectional positions may lead to significantly different

experiences whereby intersectional groups may simultaneously be advantaged and disadvantaged. In the present study, we build on this literature to gain a deeper understanding of the unique position of EBW and assert that intersecting subordinate identities may actually produce paradoxical experiences for Black women in the workplace.

Intersectional Invisibility

“Visibility” has been defined as “the degree to which an individual is fully regarded and recognized by others” (Settles et al., 2018: 2). Settles and colleagues (2018) observed that marginalized group members, as outsiders, are frequently invisible in terms of being recognized as legitimate authority figures and credible leaders, and thus seek to gain visibility as professionals. While (in)visibility may be a pervasive issue affecting low-status or marginalized minorities broadly (e.g., numerous studies examine the marginalization of White women), an intersectional lens adds a layer of complexity to the experience of (in)visibility (Settles et al., 2018). “Intersectional invisibility” refers to the notion that “possessing multiple subordinate-group identities can render people ‘invisible’ relative to those with a single [subordinate]-group identity because the former are perceived as non-prototypical members of their respective identity groups” (Rosette et al., 2016: 6). That is, Black women experience intersectional invisibility because dominant cultural ideologies of “androcentrism” (wherein men tend to be the hegemonic normative standard) and “ethnocentrism” (according to which Whites tend to be the hegemonic normative standard) in the United States render Black women non-representative of either of their respective identity groups (Black *men* represent the prototypical standard of Blacks and *White* women represent the prototypical standard of women; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). As such, Black women contend with intersectional invisibility such that they are not readily categorized into their respective identity groups and easily overlooked. Importantly, this sort of invisibility may result in both disadvantages as well as advantages at work. However, previous literature presents positive and negative consequences of intersectional invisibility as largely contradictory, with one camp of research focused on detrimental career outcomes and the other focused on beneficial impacts.

The detriment argument suggests that being representative of neither Blacks nor women means that Black women are neither readily categorized nor remembered, and, thus, are easily overlooked, disregarded, and rendered invisible (Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach, & Dittmann, 2012; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). For example, experimental research in which White participants were shown photographs of White and Black male and female faces demonstrated that it was more difficult for participants to recall the Black female faces compared to the other faces (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2012). In another experimental study, participants classified White women’s and Black men’s faces quicker than they did Black women’s faces (Thomas, Dovidio, & West, 2014). These studies highlight the idea that people have a difficult time seeing and remembering Black women. In a workplace context, this could lead observers to overlook Black women’s leadership potential or misattribute Black women’s contributions to others (Rosette et al., 2016) despite their highly visible token status (Kanter, 1977). Recent theoretical research has also synthesized how invisibility complicates inclusion for Black woman in a variety of professional settings (McCluney & Rabelo, 2018).

The alternative viewpoint is that intersectional invisibility (i.e., being atypical in terms of both gender and race) might actually benefit Black women (Biernat & Sesko, 2013; Epstein, 1973; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). In her qualitative study of Black women professionals, Epstein (1973) reported three patterns suggestive of a cancelling effect that explains why some Black women professionals have been able to achieve success in the workplace. First, Black women were subject to less negative stereotyping than prototypical members of their respective identity groups. Because they are not White (as in the case of the prototypical woman), the stigmas commonly associated with women (e.g., being passive and incompetent) were reduced for Black women. Similarly, since the prototypical Black person is a Black man, being a woman distanced Black women from the negative stereotypes commonly associated with Blacks (e.g., aggressive and threatening). Second, gender and race combine to construct a new and different status, the

value of which has not yet been established and could be up for negotiation. This unique status may provide opportunities for Black female professionals to deviate from larger societal race- and gender-based stereotypes, and, instead, craft credible professional images at work. In other words, because they are atypical and unfamiliar to those evaluating them, Black professional women have a degree of agency in setting the value of their status at work. Third, having experienced a degree of freedom from stereotypical strictures applied to White women and Black men, Black women are freer to pursue personally fulfilling choices such as a meaningful profession. In other words, Epstein's perspective is that Black women in professional and managerial roles have a singular opportunity to create their own career journeys.

Although this perspective has been criticized by others (e.g., Sanchez-Hucles, 1997), there is some empirical evidence that Black women might gain some opportunities based on their atypicality (e.g., Roberts, Mayo, Ely, & Thomas, 2018). For example, women leaders are often penalized for exerting masculine behaviors such as assertiveness, aggression, or self-promotion (see Heilman, 2012) while Black women leaders are not (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016). These results suggest that Black women may have a greater degree of latitude to exert dominance and authority than their White female counterparts (Rosette et al., 2016). Also supportive of this intersectional invisibility benefit, a study employing an experimental design found that Black women working in teams were buffered from stereotypes of incompetence while White women were negatively evaluated (Biernat & Sesko, 2013). The study highlighted a potential benefit of intersectional invisibility in that "it offered the advantage of protection from typical patterns of bias" (Biernat & Sesko, 2013: 475). We believe that these patterns might explain why Black women working in senior White- and male-dominated positions have been able to find success.

In sum, the literatures on intersectionality and intersectional invisibility have largely taken an either-or approach by focusing on either the positive or the negative consequences of intersectionality rather than their co-occurrence. We believe, however, that it seems likely that intersectional invisibility manifests itself in multifaceted ways such that Black women at senior levels have varied experiences reflecting both intersectional disadvantages and opportunities. Further, the limited empirical work tends to focus on how others see (or do not see) Black women (e.g., by examining whether or not others can recall having seen Black women's faces), rather than how Black women themselves experience intersectional invisibility. Given the progress that some Black women have made in attaining leadership positions at the very top of organizations, we focus on Black women's subjective lived experiences in executive roles. Below, we discuss our study in which we draw from the intersectional invisibility framework to analyze the narratives of Black women working at the highest levels of their fields.

METHODS

We employed a grounded theory approach to examine how high-achieving EBW experience and manage the effects of intersectional invisibility. Qualitative theory-building studies are well suited to examine rare, understudied contexts such as EBW (Charmaz, 2014; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Neal, Hammer, & Morgan, 2006), in respect of which only a handful of scholars have focused their attention (e.g., Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Epstein, 1973; Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Access and Sample

All participants comprising our final sample were interviewed at two points in time (approximately, 2007 and 2014; Time 1 and Time 2, respectively). To be included in the study, participants at Time 1 had to meet at least one of the following criteria for inclusion: (1) senior-level Black manager or executive, as defined by being located within three levels of the enterprise-wide CEO of a Fortune 1000 or Global 500 corporation or equivalent with annual revenues of at least \$1.2 billion; (2) Black executive serving on the board of directors

of a Fortune 1000 or Global 500 corporation or equivalent; (3) senior-level Black manager or executive at a professional services firm or equivalent; (4) Black thought leader or senior-level academic leader (e.g., university president or dean). Participants were drawn primarily from an affinity-based professional organization for Black executives and the remaining participants were identified via the interviewers' professional and social networks. We also sought to make the interview pool diverse with respect to industry, with the most commonly represented industries being financial services, consumer products, and health care or pharmaceuticals. The executives in our sample held various titles, including CEO, chief marketing officer (CMO), president, senior vice president (SVP), and vice president (VP). All of the women in our study were college educated and lived across various regions of the United States. Our sampling approach was purposeful, allowing us to reduce some of the potential variation (Patton, 1990) so that we could examine a distinct experience.

The first wave of interviews was conducted in 2007 by two of the authors in partnership with an executive leadership development organization. The initial goal of the study was to examine the facilitators and impediments for EBW in reaching and succeeding in the C-suite. During the second wave of interviews, the women discussed their overall career histories, specific experiences from the first wave of interviews, and any new career or job changes and events. During the study period, most of the sample encountered a variety of job changes: 32% had stepped up through advancement or promotion, 31% had remained stable in their original roles or made lateral career moves within or between organizations, 25% had reinvented themselves (in other corporate roles, philanthropic or nonprofit organizations, or entrepreneurial ventures), 5% had stepped down (i.e., been demoted, had responsibilities reduced, or went to a smaller organization with fewer responsibilities), and 7% had fully or semi-retired. Table 2 delineates our decision rules for classifying each participant's direction of job change, and Table 3 displays each participants' demographic information and job changes across the two interview points.

TABLE 2
Job Pattern from Time 1 to Time 2 (Table view)

EBW Job Pattern (2007–2014)	Direction of Job Change	No. of Participants
Same company, higher title and responsibilities (move within P&L or move within staff)	<i>Step up</i>	19
Different company, same title and responsibilities at a company that is 200 places or better on F500		
Different company, same title and responsibilities at a company that is F500 from a company that was not F500		
Same company and same title	<i>Stable</i>	18
Same company, different title and responsibilities, move from P&L position to staff position in order to position for larger P&L role		
Same company, different title and responsibilities, move from P&L to staff position	<i>Step down</i>	10
Different company, same title and responsibilities at a company that is 200 places or worse on F500		
Different company, same title and responsibilities at a company that is not F500 from a company that was F500		
Different company, same title and responsibilities at a small or mid cap company (> \$10 billion market cap)		
Generally, going from a P&L position to staff position		
Going from for-profit company to a not-for-profit company		
Starting a for-profit new venture	<i>Stepped out (entrepreneur)</i>	2
Career reinvention into nonprofit role after retirement	<i>Retired and Reinvented</i>	6

EBW Job Pattern (2007–2014)	Direction of Job Change	No. of Participants
Semi- or fully moved into retirement	<i>Retirement</i>	4

TABLE 3
Participant Demographics, Job Changes, and Career Trajectories (Table view)

Moniker	T1Job^a	T1Industry	T1Company Type	T2Job^a	T2Industry	T2Company Type	Direct Job Change	T1 to T2
Abigail	Owner and Managing Principal	IT Consulting	Other for-profit	CEO	IT Consulting	Other for-profit		Stable
Antoinette	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 50	Global Head	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Step up
Ashley	SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 1000	National Head	Financial Services	Fortune 1000		Step up
Barbara	Regional VP	Financial Services	Fortune 100	Training Associate	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Step do
Beatrice	Divisional President	Consumer products	Fortune 50	EVP	Pharmaceuticals	Fortune 100		Step do
Caitlin	VP	Medical Equipment	Other for-profit	Chief Commercial Officer	Medical Equipment	Other for-profit		Step do
Camara	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 100	Vice Chair, Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Step up
Chloe	VP	Oil & Gas	Fortune 100	Founder Managing Partner and CEO	Oil & Gas	Other for-profit		Step up (Entrepreneurial)
Christine	SVP	Food & Health Services	Fortune 500	Owner	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Retired Reinvested
Ciara	EVP	Retailer	Fortune 500	Retired	n.a.	n.a.		Retired
Dana	VP and CDO	Conglomerate	Fortune 50	Foundation President, CDO	Conglomerate	Fortune 50		Step up
Darlene	Divisional President	Consumer Products	Fortune 50	Executive Officer ^b	Consumer Goods	Fortune 100		Step do
Deana	Associate Medical Director	Health Services	Nonprofit	Associate Medical Director	Health Services	Nonprofit		Stable
Dolores	VP and CDO	Financial Services	Government	CDO	Financial Services	Government Entity		Stable
Dominique	President	Insurance	Fortune 500	Managing Director, President	Venture Capital	Other for-profit		Stable
Drue	Partner	Venture Capital	Other for-profit	Managing Partner	Venture Capital	Other for-profit		Stable
Emily	Dean, SVP	Education	University	Vice Dean	Education	University		Step up

Moniker	T1Job^a	T1Industry	T1Company Type		T2Job^a	T2Industry	T2Company Type		Direct Job Change T1 to T2
Grace	SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 100		EVP and General Manager	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Step up
Harriet	VP	Oil & Gas	Fortune 500		VP	Oil & Gas	Fortune 500		Step up
Jamie	Director	IT Services	Fortune 50		VP	IT Services	Fortune 500		Step up
Jane	SVP	Telecom	Fortune 50		CMO	Security & Protection	Fortune 1000		Step do
Jocelyn	SVP	Insurance	Fortune 50		President	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Step do
June	VP	Energy	Fortune 500		Retired	Energy	n.a.		Retired
Karen	VP	Consumer Products	Fortune 50		Senior Advisor	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Step up
Kate	Division President	Consumer Products	Fortune 500		SVP	Health & Nutrition	Fortune 500		Step do
Kit	SVP, Foundation President	Financial Services	Fortune 50		Senior Managing Director	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Step do
Laura	VP, Institutional Business	Financial Services	Fortune 50		CMO	Insurance	Other for-profit		Step up
Lauren	VP	Financial Services	Government Enterprise		VP	Insurance Brokers	Fortune 500		Step do
Layla	CIO	Health & Nutrition	Fortune 50		Owner, Operator, and CEO	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Step up (Entrepreneur)
Lianne	VP	Pharmaceuticals	Fortune 50		VP	Consumer Products	Fortune 500		Step do
Lindsay	SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 500		CDO, SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 1000		Stable
Lola	VP	Consumer products	Other for-profit		Diversity and Inclusion Officer	Consumer Products	Other for-profit		Stable
Mabel	SVP	Pharmaceuticals	Other for-profit		Retired	n.a.	n.a.		Retired
Macy	VP	IT Consulting	Fortune 50		CEO	Professional Services	Nonprofit		Retired Reinvest
Madison	Division Chairman	Telecommunications	Fortune 500		CEO, EVP	Telecom	Fortune 500		Step up
Marla	CFO	Retail	Fortune 1000		EVP and CFO	Retail	Fortune 500		Step up
Maxine	CMO	Consumer Products	Other for-profit		CMO	Retail	Fortune 500		Stable
Melanie	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 50		Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Stable

Moniker	T1Job ^a	T1Industry	T1Company Type		T2Job ^a	T2Industry	T2Company Type		Direct Job Classification
Mindy	VP	Pharmaceutical	Global 500		Managing Director	Financial Services	Global 500		Stable
Mirabel	VP	Health Services	Fortune 500		VP	Health Services	Fortune 500		Stable
Moira	VP	Pharmaceutical	Fortune 100		EVP	Pharmaceutical	Fortune 100		Stable
Nancy	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 50		Managing Director	Financial Services	Other for-profit		Stable
Natalie	VP	Professional Services	Fortune 500		VP	Professional Services	Fortune 500		Step up
Pamela	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 50		Managing Director	Financial Services	Other for-profit		Stable
Pilar	EVP (Retired)	Consumer Products	Fortune 100		CEO	Consulting Firm	Other for-profit		Retired Reinvent
Renee	Executive Officer ^b	Financial Services	Fortune 500		Owner	Health & Fitness	Other for-profit		Retired Reinvent
Rihanna	Divisional President	Retail	Fortune 50		President and CEO	Retail	Other for-profit		Step up
Samantha	SVP, Foundation Chair	Financial Services	Fortune 100		SVP, Foundation Chair	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Stable
Sarah	VP and General Manager	Consumer Products	Fortune 1000		SVP	Health Services	Other for-profit		Step up
Selena	SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 50		SVP	Financial Services	Fortune 100		Step up
Tara	SVP	Consumer Products	Other for-profit		Retired	n.a.	n.a.		Retired
Taylor	SVP, CFO	Consumer Products	Fortune 1000		EVP, CFO	Consumer Products	Fortune 500		Step up
Trina	VP	Energy	Other for-profit		VP	Energy	Other for-profit		Step up
Ulana	Executive Officer ^b	Business Services ^b	Fortune 500		Executive Officer ^b	Business Services ^b	Fortune 500		Stable
Victoria	Assistant Secretary	Retailer	Fortune 100		VP, Assistant Secretary	Retailer	Fortune 100		Stable
Violet	VP	Document Services	Fortune 500		SVP	Document Services	Fortune 500		Step up
Virginia	COO	Manufacturing	Fortune 100		Program Director	Philanthropic Programs	Nonprofit		Retired Reinvent
Vivian	VP	Professional Services	Other for-profit		VP	Financial Services	Fortune 50		Stable
Wanda	Managing Director	Financial Services	Fortune 50		VP, Chief Program Officer	Philanthropic Programs	Nonprofit		Retired Reinvent

^a *T1* = Time 1, *T2* = Time 2; CDO = chief diversity officer, CEO = chief executive officer, CFO = chief financial officer, CIO = chief information officer, CMO = chief marketing officer, COO = chief operational officer, DVP = divisional vice president, EVP = executive vice president, HR = human resources, SVP = senior vice president, VP = vice president.

^b Title or industry withheld to maintain anonymity.

The first wave (*T1*) of interviews included 73 EBW, while the second wave (*T2*) included 59 of the original 73 women. When we examined the 14 women who did not participate in Study 2, we uncovered no meaningful differences in their job changes (i.e., there was a similar degree of variance in their 2014 roles compared to the 59 women who completed the repeat interviews). In this study, we include only the 59 participants who completed both interviews.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or by phone and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Most of these interviews were conducted in person at the office of the interviewee (a few were conducted over the telephone). There were two interviewers present for each interview, with the primary interviewer leading the interview and the secondary interviewer taking detailed notes or operating the audio recorder. In the first wave of interviews, questions were open ended and predominately focused on the interviewees' career progression and personal history, relationships and sponsorship, and perceptions of career opportunities and risks. Specific questions included "Tell me about how you got to this point in your career?" and "What have been some of the significant personal and professional experiences that have shaped your career?" We also asked about the extent to which their race and gender had played a role in influencing different aspects of their careers, which was often followed up with specific examples that provided further context. Since all of the participants were either the only one or one of a few Black women at their level in their organizations, many of them described the ways in which their race and gender had either helped or hindered their career development.

The second wave of interviews (*T2*) were mostly conducted over the phone and focused primarily on interviewees' perceptions of their career trajectories and career changes in the intervening seven years since the first set of interviews. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and it was explained that the goal of the study was to follow up on their initial interview and discuss changes that had occurred in the subsequent seven years. For example, questions included "In 2007, you were [INSERT ROLE], and now you've moved onto [INSERT NEW ROLE]. Catch me up on what's changed for you in the last seven years." Participants once again provided detailed accounts of their career history and any transitions that had occurred, identified significant career challenges and opportunities, and reflected on new skills acquired through these experiences.

Data Analysis

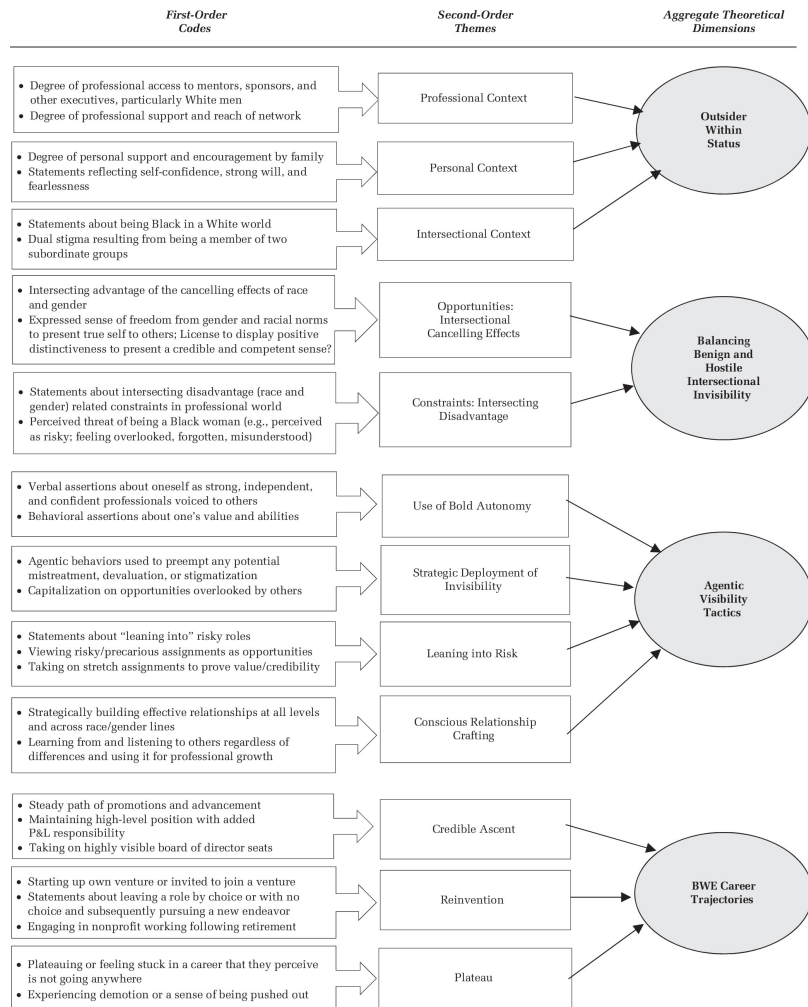
The vast majority (112 of 118) of the interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Each transcription ranged in length from 20 to 40 pages for a total of approximately 3,300 pages of transcribed data. Six interviews were not recorded (at the request of the participant) and the interviewer instead took detailed notes of the interview. We employed a combination of inductive techniques for analyzing large volumes of qualitative data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1981). We read through each transcript, coding for common themes related to how EBW experience and manage intersectional invisibility as they navigate their careers. As we moved through the data, we remained open to adjusting these questions and emergent coding categories based on our own interpretations of the data, our knowledge and understanding of the literature, and the interpretations of respondents. Using an iterative approach of moving back and forth between the coded data and existing theory, we moved from the concrete data toward a conceptual understanding of the data (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). These analytical steps are discussed in more detail below.

We began by conducting first-order coding, wherein three authors coded the transcripts of four participants from *T1* and *T2* (all three authors coded the same eight transcripts). The goal of this initial phase was to independently read a subset of the data to begin developing an initial starting list of codes that emerged from the data. We then met to discuss and compare our individual initial lists of codes and began to consolidate those that were similar. As we began to consolidate and define the meaning of the codes, we revisited the literature to determine which codes were applicable to existing theory and which were unique to our sample and context. After this phase, the entire sample was divided among the three authors, with each author assigned their own set of transcripts (each author coded 38–40 of 112 transcripts). We met weekly to discuss our coding process, identify and clarify emerging themes, and determine if any codes needed to be further refined. We concluded this process when we reached a point in which we felt we had sufficient support for all remaining codes and after fully investigating relationships among them. We then continued to code the remaining set of transcripts. We did not test for inter-rater reliability as the rigor of our coding process likely served to address any potential for bias that might have otherwise resulted from qualitative data analysis (Ladge et al., 2012).

Given that our goal was to understand how the participants' careers had developed over time, each author coded the participants' two interviews (*T1* and *T2*) sequentially before moving onto the next participant. By coding both *T1* and *T2* together, the authors were able to code for transitions in each participant's career path, and also to verify each participant's earlier experiences via their reflections in the later interview. Using cross-case analysis techniques (Eisenhardt, 1989), we compared the objective job changes between the two time periods (see Tables 2 and 3) as well as the overall career trajectories of each of our participants, which are noted in the last column of Table 3. Career trajectories are discussed in a later section.

The results of our coding process are shown in the data structure diagram presented in Figure 1. The figure illustrates how we moved from general statements that reflect common themes in our data (first-order codes) to second-order codes, and, ultimately, to more conceptual categories (aggregate theoretical dimensions). The data structure formed the basis for the conceptual framework, which is presented in the following section.

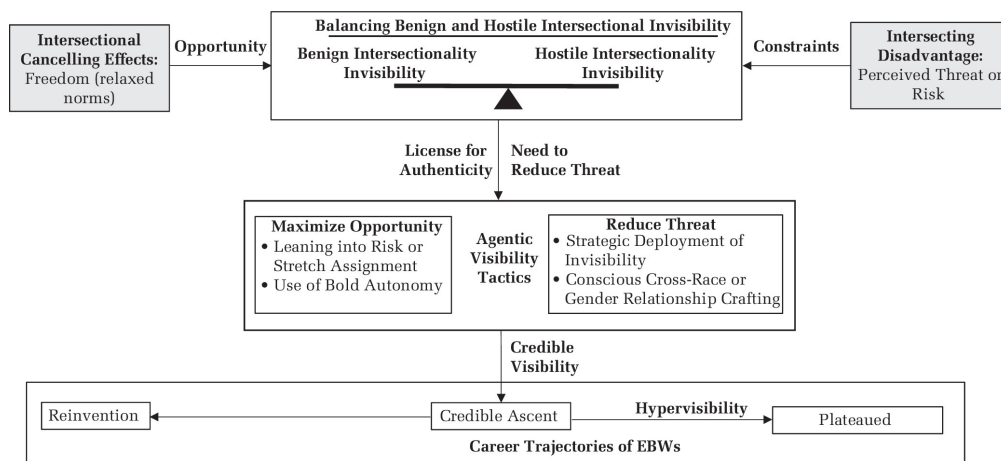
FIGURE 1
Overview of Data Structure



FINDINGS

We explored the dynamic experiences of EBW to shed light on the mechanisms by which their intersectionality affects their career progression. The findings of our study led us to develop a new theory revealing the paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility (see Figure 2). Our findings, along with exemplary quotations from our participants, are presented below.

FIGURE 2
Paradoxical Effects of Intersectional Invisibility on the Career Experiences of EBWS in the Workplace



Outsider Within Status

While the women in our sample varied in terms of experiences, job titles, and industries, they each shared an “outsider within” status, as prior research would suggest (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Collins,

1999). In our sample, EBW had access to professional worlds by virtue of their education and training, but remained outsiders among their predominantly White peers. Mindy (VP, Pharmaceuticals; T1) said, “There’s this insider–outsider dynamic, and, as much as you have this title ... there’s still these informal clubs that exist.” Indeed, most were the only or among only a few Black women in the executive ranks of their organizations. Virginia (Program Director, Nonprofit; T2) said:

It’s always only one or two of us [Black women] at this level anywhere in the country you look. So you’re dealing with people who know each other, grew up with each other, went to school with each other, socialize with each other, party with each other, and we’re never ever one of the total insiders.

Moreover, many EBW were also outsiders within their own Black communities. As highly educated emerging professionals, the EBW in our sample were often different from the majority of others who surrounded them in the largely Black communities of their upbringing. For example, Barbara (Regional VP, Financial Services; T1) described her childhood years as an outsider within her own community as follows:

Male friends in high school who were not boyfriends used to tell me, “No guys are asking you out because they think that your idea of a good time is reading the dictionary on Friday night.”... It’s not the image I was looking to project, but it always has been.

As perpetual outsiders within, they learned to straddle two worlds without fully belonging in either. We assert that this dynamic is the product of their intersectional, professional, and personal contexts, which we describe below.

Intersectional Context

Dual stigma. A common experience among Black women (in many walks of life) is that of being subject to stereotypical ascriptions of multiple subordinate categories. All of the EBW in our sample reported experiencing limiting expectations and barriers to advancement stemming from stereotypical expectations and perceptions of their race and gender. Speaking about her earliest experiences in public accounting, Dominique (President, Financial Services; T1), told us:

I could not go on certain assignments because there were certain clients that did not want Black people in their offices. ... I wouldn’t get assigned to certain things, and didn’t like it, but you sort of accepted the fact that you were blazing new trails and you just had to constantly prove yourself.

Dominique’s experience reflected the exclusion reported by every EBW in our sample in one context or another. The EBW in our sample reported race- and gender-related barriers and expectations that presented problems in their compensation, informal and formal relationships, recognition, international experiences, and promotion and advancement opportunities, as well as in interactions that tended to be important for relationship building and networking.

For example, consistent with research on racialized and gendered biases in feedback giving, Camara (Managing Director, Financial Services; T1) reported that EBW often cannot get critical performance feedback. She said:

We have the stereotype of the angry black woman thing, so they’re more afraid of that than they are of anything else, so, if they think you’re going to challenge them on anything, then they just won’t give you the feedback. So you won’t get it.

Such biased feedback giving was a barrier to critical feedback that slowed career advancement.

In discussing the role of race and gender as a barrier, some EBW described the political and social networks from which they were excluded as outsiders. Beatrice (Divisional President, Consumer Products; T1) said:

I do think that this is a major barrier for me as an African American ... Corporate America is very much like a chessboard and you're going to play the game, and you're going to figure out how to play it well or you're not going to survive on the board.

Many of the EBW in our sample referred to their race and gender as barriers that prevented them from understanding the role of political capital and "gamesmanship."

While the EBW in our sample reported a multitude of ways in which dual stigma stemming from their intersectional backgrounds forced them to be perpetual outsiders in their organizations, they also reported ways that their personal and professional contexts created the opportunity for EBW to gain insider status that many others could not attain. Below, we outline EBW's professional and personal contexts, and how these elements of their background interacted with the dual stigma from their intersectional context.

Professional Context

Professional investment. EBW invested heavily in their professional selves, uniquely positioning themselves to rise to the top. Despite ongoing bias against them, even as young girls, they spent their formative and early career years becoming well prepared to accomplish their professional work. In line with research by Epstein (1973), high-achieving Black women are sheltered by their education and upbringing such that they have the potential to avoid strong, limiting stereotypical expectations (e.g., incompetence) frequently ascribed to Black women. For example, Kit (SVP, Financial Services; T1) said:

Growing up in Chicago, the kids who were smart, you knew who they were. Then you had everybody else. The kids who were sort-of rough always respected me and would protect me ... it gives you a sense of empowerment and a little bit of moxie and a feeling like you could do anything.

Thus, they were able to avoid the normatively low expectations of other Black women, and instead, focus on academic and professional achievement. For example, Dolores (VP & CDO, Financial Services; T1) reflected on her atypical academic path, and noted that:

I was the first in my immediate family to go to college ... my parents were very dedicated to education ... [my sister and I] spent our formative years in private school. It was pretty unheard of in the 60s ... the effects of that have stayed with me throughout my career.

The professional investment extends beyond their educational achievements and toward their desire to build a professional track record of strong performance history. Our data suggest that Black women not only feel pressure to be "twice as good" but also meet that expectation. For example, Grace (SVP, Financial Services; T1) said: "I had to work doubly hard ... this is what I grew up with. I have to work harder than anybody else, like three times as hard or I can't survive." This level of professional investment provided them with greater access to and support from high-level mentors and sponsors, and contributed to a strong self-awareness of their abilities and skills.

Professional support. We also found support for the notion that EBW gained some insider status by developing professional support. We define "professional support" as the degree to which EBW received guidance, role-modeling, developmental advice, and instrumental career advocacy from mentors and sponsors. This kind of support was critical for providing "air cover" or protection for this vulnerable group of high achievers, and was described by 78% of the women. Dominique (Managing Director & President, Financial Services; T2) said:

You can't survive or excel without it ... You have to enlist and grow sponsors. Some of it can happen naturally and then some of it organically, but then sometimes you have to, with intent, develop sponsors.

Examples of support included statements about having senior-level individuals looking after them, taking a risk on them, or supporting their growth and development. The extent to which mentors and sponsors supported them varied, but many interviewees described advocacy and opportunities for networking. For example, Darlene (Divisional President, Consumer Products; T1) described her sponsor as follows:

I had one person in my career who basically pulled me by the scruff of my neck and said, “I think you’re good. I’m going to help introduce you to people. I’m going to tell you, you have to network. And, when you don’t live up to my expectation, I will also tell you that.”

Although professional support came from many sources, White men were viewed as the most effective and obliging. Karen (VP, Consumer Products; T1) explained, “I had a lot of White males in my career, and still have a lot of White males in my career, who have been instrumental in taking a risk on me and supporting my growth.” Some EBW intentionally sought out White male sponsors. As Kit (SVP, Financial Services; T1) explained:

I’m looking at my sponsors, I am looking for men, and White men. They have got to be White men! They better be White men. Forget that trying to “come together” and “build some sisterhood across gender.” That is dead.

Given that White men hold the vast majority of positions of influence and power in organizations (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016), it should not be terribly surprising that EBW identified this group as important for sponsorship support.

EBW who had achieved high levels of elite education and fostered developmental and instrumental relationships with those in their corporate worlds were able to pave an inroad to insider status that undermined their stigmatized outsider status. Below, we discuss the fortifying role EBW’s personal backgrounds played in helping them manage outsider within status in White corporate worlds.

Personal Context

Family support. The EBW also received personal support from family and other personal relationships. Many of the EBW in our sample (39%) referred to the importance of family (parental or spousal) support that prepared them for their eventual professional lives. For example, Barbara (Regional VP, Financial Services; T1) said:

As far as my parents [are concerned], I think the greatest gift they gave me was no limits. Neither of my parents graduated high school. They grew up in [the South] and migrated to [the North] in the 50s, as did so many other people. But they always told us, “You can be anything you want to be.” And I believed it.

Self-assurance. Having invested in their academic and professional pursuits, EBW were able to develop a great deal of self-assurance. We define “self-assurance” as the degree to which one has a sense of confidence in one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities. For example, Laura (VP, Financial Services; T1) said: “I saw my own ability to be a senior executive and a greater vision for myself ... I was just as capable, if not more so, than the people who surrounded me.” Self-assurance was strongly represented in our sample (97%). Sarah (SVP, Health Services; T2) explained it from her perspective as follows:

I’m just a strong personality. I’ve never been fearful or intimidated in any situation. I hold my own in any group. I guess, it’s just been second nature to me. I’ve always been the only one.

The degree of confidence expressed by the women in our sample may not be all that surprising, given that research has found that Black women have higher self-esteem than women from other racial and ethnic minority groups, despite residing in a cultural context with a rich history of bias and discrimination (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Yet, many of our participants expressed that being “the only one” or “one of a few”

reinforced their sense of confidence as it signifies their personal ability to overcome challenges and drives their desire to succeed when others may expect them to fail.

The EBW reported that their personal contexts fortified them for the work it takes to manage their outsider within status in their workplaces. They drew confidence and resilience from their family support and developed a deep well of confidence in their personal countenance. The fact that the vast majority either named their own confidence or expressed it in the stories they shared with such consistency was remarkable. As outsider within executives, the EBW relied on their personal contexts to draw on the fortitude for striving in predominantly White institutions and industries.

Importantly, rather than being unrelated experiences, we posit that the EBW intersectional professional and personal contexts were mutually reinforcing and interacted to produce their outsider within status at work. Next, we provide evidence for two contradictory and interrelated dimensions of intersectional invisibility that give rise to several tactics EBW deploy to gain credible visibility needed to ascend in their careers.

Benign and Hostile Intersectional Invisibility

Our analysis suggests that central to EBW unique outsider within status is being subject to both benign and hostile intersectional invisibility. “Benign intersectional invisibility” represents the cancelling hypothesis (Epstein, 1973) whereby gender and race weaken each other’s impact, while “hostile intersectional invisibility” represents the double disadvantage hypothesis (Beale, 1979; Crenshaw, 1989) whereby the gender and race strengthen each other’s impact. Thus, on the one hand, EBW’s invisibility is benign such that they have more freedom to deviate from stereotypes applied to other Black women. On the other hand, invisibility is hostile such that EBW are constrained to a host of negative stereotypes that hamper their ability to present credible images of their professionalism.

Benign intersectional invisibility and the license for authenticity. The majority of our participants (80%) identified opportunities that had emerged for them as a result of their intersectional invisibility as Black women. Specifically, benign intersectional invisibility gave EBW the freedom to be authentic. “Authenticity” for EBW refers to the ability to feel as though they are able to bring their true selves to work. As Karen (VP, Consumer Products; T1) explained:

I lead with that authenticity. I’m really clear and comfortable with who I am and the choices I make. ... Authenticity is back to who I am, how I live in this world, what matters to me, the alignment of my values, and my behavior to my word so that, again, this is all about credibility, this is about how I show up.

Authenticity was most often discussed in relationship with interviewees’ intersectionality, as the above quotation illustrates. Authenticity is a positive experience that involves being allowed to show all aspects of oneself when one chooses to do so (Roberts, 2005). Being authentic is important because, in this context, it means that one is representing one’s community of people. When our participants felt they could draw from their authentic selves, they reported feeling freed from the stereotypical behaviors often ascribed to their race and gender. For example, Pilar (EVP, Consumer Products; T1) described having taken a risk to take on a role in her company that would allow her to draw from her cultural competence around marketing specifically to minority and female clientele:

This was the first job where I could bring my whole self to it ... being able to have a very specific conversation about opportunities in a minority community or opportunities with women-owned firms ... Maybe there’s an advantage to being a Black woman. Maybe there are unique things that I can do and some unique things that we can offer out to our clients quite honestly because I happen to be a Black woman.

Our analysis suggests that benign intersectional invisibility frees EBW to present their authentic selves at work. At her T2 interview, Pilar had recognized the strengths of her own authenticity, as she reports:

I was never going to be a White male. One of the key reasons why I was going to be able to add value is because I brought in a different perspective. I brought in some other relationships. I brought in something that other people didn't have.

Authenticity was an unsolicited recurring theme that was mentioned by the majority of the sample (75% of participants in either *T1* or *T2*), likely due to its particular value for members of multiple marginalized groups. Moreover, it appears that benign intersectional invisibility gave EBW the ability to craft professional images that felt genuine and might ultimately help them to fit in with others. For example, Rihanna (President & CEO, Retail; *T2*) said:

I allow people to get to know me. It was many years ago where I just made the decision that I was just going to bring my whole self to work ... Once I started practicing that, it just felt better ... because it's just damn who I am.

While many of our participants described authenticity as centrally important to navigating their careers, not all of the women expressed a willingness or ability to bring their authentic selves to work. Additionally, as Rihanna explained, it may take time or the right workplace environment to feel comfortable expressing one's true self. Unwillingness or inability to be authentic seemed to be derived from experiences of hostile intersectional invisibility, which we found in most cases to be experienced simultaneously along with benign intersectional invisibility.

Hostile intersectional invisibility and the need to reduce threat. Hostile intersectional invisibility constrained EBW to the dual stigmas associated with them as Black women. EBW felt both hypervisible as Black women who were conspicuously out of place in their workplace, and also invisible because they were unrecognized or doubted as professional colleagues. Many described the lengths to which they go in order to suppress their stigmatized identities and blend in. For example, Mabel (SVP, Pharmaceuticals; *T1*) said:

I'd memorize [sports] scores every Sunday night in case I found myself having to talk to somebody about something I didn't care nothing about. ... You are so busy focusing on masking the place where there is no parallel or no similarities.

Hostile intersectional invisibility is a constraint because EBW are seen more for their membership in stigmatized groups (e.g., Blacks and women) than as competent professionals. Ironically, hostile intersectional invisibility has the disadvantage of making EBW *hypervisible* as deviants from the archetypal White, male leader (Settles et al., 2018). EBW found they constantly needed to reduce others' perceived threats by combatting the stereotypes associated with their dual negative identity. Several women described contending with hostile intersectional invisibility as "not giving anyone reasons to sort of say you're not doing this or you're not doing that" (Camara, Managing Director, Financial Services; *T1*) or "you have to find a way to eliminate the question marks in people's minds ... because of stereotypes" (Grace, SVP, Financial Services; *T1*).

The need for EBW to reduce others' perceptions of threat stems from hostile intersectional invisibility where negative stereotypes about Black women (e.g., aggressive, dominant, incompetent) drive others' responses to and evaluations of them. For example, Layla (CIO, Consumer Products; *T1*) described her experiences of dealing with others' stereotype-driven threats:

I had the chief diversity officer tell me that was my fault. That they didn't trust me ... they didn't feel as comfortable ... He said, "You're just not vulnerable enough." I said, "I am not vulnerable?" and he said, "No. You just sit in the room, you are confident ... You just don't seem like you're in need."

In another example, Taylor (SVP & CFO, Consumer Products; *T1*) said:

Earlier in my career, I got [feedback that I was] too aggressive and I got it repeatedly ... I said to my boss, "What do you mean?" [He said,] "Well, you're so smart and you're so forthright in your opinions that they feel intimidated by you." ... I said to him, "If I were a White male, would you have the same comment?"

In fact, 75% of participants described constraints they had faced throughout their careers, attributing the barriers predominately to their intersectionality as Black women and differentiating their experiences from White men, White women, and Black men. The irony of hostile intersectional invisibility is that, while EBW are more *visible* as members of stigmatized social identity groups, their identities as leaders, their accomplishments and potential become more *invisible* to those in the dominant group. Most of the EBW had been managing pervasive negative stereotypes and the corresponding invisibility during their adult lives and had grown "accustomed" to it, as described by Kit (SVP, Financial Services T1):

The invisibility that we experience, that our voice is not being heard ... I just think that, usually we are so accustomed to the feedback being negative ... We are expecting it not to be good, we are expecting people not to know us and understand us ... but, even as we move up and we contribute and we have a reputation, still when we are talked about in aggregate, we are still invisible.

Navigating the paradox of benign and hostile intersectional invisibility. Importantly, benign and hostile intersectional invisibility are not alternative realities faced by different groups of EBW. Rather, the women in our sample refer to simultaneous experiences of both benign and hostile forms of intersectional invisibility. Such interrelated but contradictory experiences are aptly described as paradoxical. The EBW in our sample reported that achieving sustainable success required responses that embraced both opposing experiences simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Darlene (Divisional President, Consumer Products; T1) said:

So when you see it as not the burden but a benefit, what kinds of things do you focus on where your race and gender are really actually supporting you? When you're saying it's not just a neutral, of course not a negative, but it's a positive thing. It frees me from conformity. It frees me from expectations.

Here, Darlene described the way she discerned when her actions needed to be focused on taking advantage of the positive (i.e., benign) aspects of her experience despite the negative (i.e., hostile) aspects. Indeed, EBW's responses to both dimensions of intersectional invisibility and their consequent opportunities (the license to be authentic) and constraints (the need to reduce threat) was commonly discussed as an intentional attempt to navigate simultaneously both benign and hostile intersectional invisibility. As explained by Nancy (Managing Director, Financial Services; T2):

The environment can penalize you if you are too authentic depending on what your authenticity is bringing ... There are specific people at [XXX] with whom I could be 100% authentic, with no fears. And, even if I went too far, they'll say, "You know, you went a little too far with that one," or "Don't say that."

Nancy described her decision to display authenticity as a choice, her preferred choice, but that it was balanced with efforts to manage others' threat perceptions.

As many of the women worked hard to navigate both dimensions of intersectional invisibility, some framed this as an ability to be "multifaceted" (Camara, Managing Director, Financial Services; T1). Importantly, the experiences of benign and hostile intersectional invisibility coexist simultaneously, but the women in our sample learned over time how to manage their behavior to exert some control over the effects of the two competing forms of intersectional invisibility. In some cases, they chose to focus on being authentic, while in other cases, they focused on reducing threat. Next, we explore the tactics EBW used to do so.

Agentic Visibility Tactics

Our analysis suggests that EBW employ a range of agentic tactics to navigate benign and hostile intersectional invisibility and gain credible visibility. “Credible visibility” is defined as the perception of being seen by others as a *credible* leader. Initially, race and gender were foregrounded in others’ perceptions of EBW as leaders. By developing relationships and strategically using invisibility when necessary, EBW defused the intersecting stigmas of their race and gender. Simultaneously, by boldly leaning into high-visibility risky assignments, EBW crafted a reputation for excellence that defied others’ low expectations. Speaking about how she developed credible visibility, Karen (VP, Consumer Products; T1) attributed her excellent “record of performance” for her success, and said:

[It’s] not because [the CEO] thinks I’m good, it’s because I’ve done things in the organization that people know, not because I brag about it, but that’s how I lead in the organization. So we don’t get into questions about whether or not [I’m] competent.

Karen’s perspective suggests, importantly, that EBW do not simply emulate the majority around them when they become visible. Rather, they work hard to be seen as credible *in spite of* their difference.

Our analysis revealed the agentic visibility tactics that were most commonly deployed by EBW across the spans of their careers that either allowed them to take advantage of the opportunities of benign intersectional invisibility or to overcome the constraints of hostile intersectional invisibility. We first highlight two opportunity-maximizing strategies—leaning into risk and use of bold autonomy—and two constraint-reducing strategies—strategic deployment of invisibility and conscious relationship crafting. Of note is that none of these tactics were mutually exclusive; rather, EBW described using either one, some, or all of these tactics at different moments or times during various stages of their careers.

Leaning into risk. The first strategy EBW employ is what we refer to as “leaning into risk,” which was used by 83% of our participants. EBW, who felt confident in their skills but frequently overlooked as potential leaders, seemed eager to flock toward opportunities to be seen as credible and valuable assets to their organizations. These risky assignments may also provide some visibility to those who have historically been invisible. Mindy (Managing Director, Financial Services; T2) said:

We are an interesting breed. I just revel in the thought I can make it ... if I do it right and if I have the right support and resources, then I could really make a significant impact in an organization, so I lean into those opportunities when they’re presented to me.

Indeed, these assignments prevent EBW from getting bored and allow them to demonstrate breakout performance. Some women did their research before accepting risky jobs and acknowledged the professional upside but also the potential costs if they were not successful. As Grace (SVP, Financial Services; T1) explained it:

I couldn’t understand why nobody wanted this job, and, when I really dug in, I understood why, but, by then, I was ok with that. To me, this was a way to really get grounded in the business. To get a little bit of visibility. But I’m also smart enough to know that visibility can be bad if you screw up a job.

Many of the EBW in our sample reported that these roles were particularly important for Black women. For example, Samantha (SVP, Financial Services; T1) said, “If you’re going to go anywhere in corporate America, particularly in an industry that has so few people of color, you’re going to have to do things to distinguish yourself.” Additionally, some women view risky assignments as their ticket to better roles or high-profile assignments. As reported by Rihanna (Divisional President, Retail; T1):

The one thing that I’ve learned they do to women and to people of color is that they either give you the tough assignments or the assignments that no one else wants to do. ... But, every time I was given a tough business, I was able to turn it around and make something out of it. So, eventually I began to get the better assignments and the better businesses because of the success rate I was having on the business.

However, Camara (Managing Director, Financial Services; T1) noted that, for these assignments to turn into credible visibility as high-potential leaders, EBW must promote their successes:

You have got to talk about the fact that it was the impossible. You have to talk about the fact that nobody had done that before. You have to talk about the value that was created around it.

Use of bold autonomy. A second agentic visibility tactic EBW employ is the use of bold autonomy, which was used by 68% of participants. We define “bold autonomy” as unabashed expressions about their convictions, making bold statements and standing up for what they feel is right, and using autonomy to craft their careers and execute their plans. Bold autonomy was a tactic used by EBW in our study to gain respect and recognition in their organizations, and a derivative of their license for authenticity gained through benign intersectional invisibility. Camara (Managing Director, Financial Services; T1) said, “I defined myself as being worthy ... I said, ‘Look, you need to understand that it has to be this year for me because I’m ready ... I’ve proven that I can do it.’” Such assertions of worth were relatively commonplace among our sample. Rihanna (President & CEO, Retail; T2) described an experience in which she was offered the “number two” position in a firm. In her words, she explained:

They called me and I said “No,” and they called me back again and I said, “Hell, no!” It was interesting because they called me just after [XX] had been named, and he said he’s looking for a great number two. I was like, “I’m nobody’s ‘great number 2.’ No, I’m not doing it. ... I’m a CEO. Why would I come working for you as your ‘great number 2’?”

Further, those EBW who engaged in bold autonomy saw the fruits of their labor pay off. For example, Virginia (COO, Manufacturing; T1) secured a mentoring relationship by leaning into her bold autonomy:

We got to talking and I said, “You know, I think I’d like to follow up with you, I like the things you’re saying. Do you have any mentees?” [He said], “Oh no, I don’t have time to mentor.” I said, “I think you have time to mentor me.” ... I gave him my card, and I said, “Call me when you’re ready to mentor me.” ... He got back to California and he called me, and he said, “Okay, no one has ever done that to me, so, okay, I’m ready.”

Strategic deployment of invisibility. The third agentic visibility tactic employed was strategic deployment of invisibility, which was used by 52% of our participants. “Strategic deployment of invisibility” includes agentic behaviors used to preempt any potential mistreatment, devaluation, or stigmatization (Settles et al., 2018). Sometimes, strategically deploying invisibility meant avoiding fully authentic displays. Such strategies were particularly important when EBW perceived that stigmas associated with their race and gender posed too large a threat to overcome by displaying authenticity. In other words, depending on the situation, they would decide when it was appropriate to be invisible. Christine (SVP, Food & Health Services; T1) explained:

It really is that positive invisibility and knowing when you want to be visible, because, when I need to stand up, oh make no mistake, you don’t cross me ... So it is about making sure that you stand for something, but, when you can be invisible on an issue and you don’t need to be visible in that way, you can be comfortable with that.

Christine used her invisibility strategically as an asset to deploy at her will when the situation called for her to withhold her genuine or authentic responses. Several women described themselves as selective about whether or not to “show up” or be authentic at work. Grace (SVP, Financial Services; T1) said of managing authenticity at work:

Find a way to succeed in the organization being you. Doesn’t mean that you don’t modify your behavior because Lord knows we all have to do that ... It’s modifying the behavior so that I know how you like the truth and serving it that way.

However, being selective about when and how to be authentic was not a way to escape for the EBW. Rather, our analysis suggests that hostile intersectional invisibility creates a context in which authenticity is not licensed and EBW needed instead to focus on reducing threat. Jane (SVP, Telecommunications; T1) described the need to reduce others' threat about looking different like this:

I wake up and see that brown face every morning in the mirror ... and that connotes a page one that's probably not true. So, if I can demystify that and help others see through that fog and not let that hold them back, I think that's important.

Whereas some scholars have suggested invisibility is strategically used to go off the radar screen when individuals disengage from aspects of work or from people at work who may be most threatened by them (Lollar, 2015; Settles et al., 2018), we found that EBW did not disappear but instead went "under the radar screen" (Violet, VP, Business Services; T1). That is, given that EBW in our research were often disregarded because of hostile intersectional invisibility, some used their existing invisibility to capitalize on opportunities that others had overlooked.

The EBW in our sample referred to invisibility as a choice and many used it to mine opportunities that others had disregarded as worthless or risky. Some said that their intersectionality as Black women was an asset in that it allowed them to see value where others had missed it. One EBW, Kit (Senior Managing Director, Financial Services; T2), said:

I think this was where we will begin to see the intersection of being a woman of color and seizing opportunities where there might not appear to be one. The foundation was so unaligned with the company and the business and nobody cared about it that I really think it was like, "Sure, give her that. If it doesn't work out, so what? It hasn't been working anyway. If it doesn't work out, it'll just be additive." Expectations were low ... For the first couple of years, no one really cared. Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, this big foundation appeared. It had this incredible value proposition around creating vibrant communities.

Kit took the opportunity that others had overlooked as she developed a minority community-centered business model and turned it into a \$20 million business. Kit's story is not unique, as many EBW turned what may have been seemingly invisible work into something valuable and visible.

Conscious relationship crafting. The last agentic visibility tactic EBW engage in is "conscious relationship crafting" across different racial groups and genders. All 59 participants used this strategy. We found that EBW became adept at building relationships at all levels and instrumentally used those relationships for career development and professional advancement. This was particularly important where hostile intersectional invisibility was more pronounced. By creating critical one-on-one relationships, EBW could undermine negative stigmas associated with them and build individual bridges with those who might otherwise find them threatening. For example, Selena (SVP, Financial Services; T2) recounted the difficulty of overcoming stereotypes and breaking down relational barriers as a daily part of her job:

[White colleagues] will tell you that [Black women] are angry all the time ... I'm an African American female and they don't know any African American females except for me ... If I don't work at creating that bridge, it's not going to happen.

In the same vein, Deana (Associate Medical Director, Health Services; T1) echoed that it is the responsibility of EBW themselves to craft these relationships. She said:

What I learned was that, if you don't take advantage of those opportunities to get to know people, and I mean it starts with things like going to the company picnic, making sure your family gets to the company picnic, making sure people meet your children ... Over time, I really began to appreciate the importance of really connecting when the opportunities arose outside of the workplace.

Regarding the downstream effects of EBW's conscious relationship-crafting efforts, Ciara (EVP (retired), Retail; T2) described the impact of relationships on fostering credible visibility:

It is our responsibility as Black women to develop that relationship in a way that is comfortable on both sides ... that feeling that, if I'm going to be stuck on a ship in the middle of nowhere, you're the one I want to be there with me because I can rely on you both intellectually as well as emotionally. You can't get to know that about a person unless you spend time with them and unless you reveal something of who you are.

Importantly, they built critical relationships at all levels within their work context. That is, they spent time developing relationships with those above them who could be sponsors but also with those in lateral and subordinate positions wherein they sought and received bidirectional mentoring. As Wanda (VP, Philanthropy; T2) retold a lesson from her father that she used throughout her career:

You need to collect I-Know-Yous. You need to know people. You need to get to know people and know them not because you want something from them. Creating that kind of Rolodex and those external relationships propelled my career within [XXX] and it's been extremely helpful for me here at [XXX].

Some of these relationships come from unlikely sources, as Maxine (CMO, Retail; T2) described:

I think people tend to gravitate toward those most like themselves, and that's the easy thing to do ... The best mentors I've had have been the people who have been least like me, because that's where you get the great learning ... [The formal mentoring program] gave me this guy who was lovely, but he was probably 12 years my senior and White ... He was the most helpful guy because [it was about] "How do I get into the heads of those other White men that are sitting around the table?"

Importantly, the balance of benign and hostile intersectional invisibility drove which agentic visibility tactics EBW needed to use. On the one hand, when the balance of dual intersectional invisibility weighed heavier toward the benign, EBW had the opportunity to express bold autonomy and lean into risky assignments as a way to foster credible intersectional visibility. On the other hand, when they needed to reduce stigmas posed by hostile intersectional invisibility, they tended to employ strategic invisibility and consciously crafted critical relationships. Overall, these four tactics were both survival strategies for these EBW, and also, instrumental tools for gaining credible visibility.

Career Trajectories

Each EBW in our sample was selected because she had already achieved very high levels of visibility and professional success. However, having achieved or approached the pinnacle, many of the EBW's career trajectories took some very different turns. The paradox of intersectional invisibility and the pursuit of credible visibility continued to play a role in how EBW experienced their working lives. Our analysis suggests that EBW experience a few distinct patterns of career mobility in and out of corporate America even after gaining credible visibility. We explore these patterns next.

Credible ascent. Not surprisingly, given the criteria for our study inclusion, most of the EBW (70%) stayed on an upward trajectory over the course of their careers until retirement. Specifically, 63% remained in the upper echelons of their organizations as senior-level executives and 7% had gone into full or semi-retirement by the time of their T2 interview. Those who had remained in corporate at the time of their second interview had either advanced to or continued to occupy the top positions in their organization or line of business. Of those who had retired, all continued to remain active on the boards of nonprofit organizations that were personally meaningful to them (e.g., alma maters).

However, not all of the EBW stayed in an upward trajectory. Some faltered or faced career roadblocks in their journey up the corporate ladder and several deliberately reinvented themselves within corporate realms and beyond. Based on our analysis of their reflections on their choices, circumstances, and rationales

thereof, we explore the experiences of the remaining 30% of women in our sample who either hit a career plateau or reinvented themselves.

Career plateau. A total of 5% of our sample could be described as having hit a career plateau. In the context of our study, EBW hit a “plateau” when their careers took a downward turn such that they were demoted, passed over for promotions, or pushed out of their organizations. Of these women, two faced a particularly toxic wall of “hypervisibility,” which we define as having one’s accomplishments, deficits, and contributions scrutinized. Specifically, hypervisibility becomes problematic when EBW or their professional contributions are perceived by others as threatening. Hypervisibility seemed to occur especially when EBW had gained external notoriety. Jocelyn (President, Consulting; *T2*) noted the phenomenon when she reflected on her experience before being forced out of her organization:

I think you can have too much exposure, and I think I’ve seen examples of a number of high-profile [EBW] who’ve been splashed over all the magazines, and in every magazine they are top this and top that. Ultimately, it doesn’t bode well in their companies. I think I was a victim of some of that because ultimately ... as soon as my mentor was out of the picture, I felt like the people who had been suppressing their voices, they all came out of the woodwork. They all came for me ... I knew it was at that point I recognized the signs. It was time for me to look. It was time for me to leave.

Jocelyn was passed over for a promotion that she felt she had earned, and she believed the snub was because her work had caught the attention of media external to the organization. While gaining a positive external reputation is commonly considered a benefit to the organization’s own external reputation, the EBW in our sample told a different story. Their stories suggested that building an external personal brand can actually breed the type of hypervisibility that incites jealousy and hostility from internal audiences. As such, hypervisibility associated with their growing external reputations had actually become a liability. In a similar situation, after she had gained external attention for having turned a dormant unit into a profitable business for her company, Kit (Senior Managing Director, Consulting; *T2*) reflected on when her visibility had become toxic hypervisibility:

That was the beginning of the end ... when the position was seen to have become a very powerful position and that there were significant allies both internally and externally, then the politics began ... a real defining moment was when I was recognized in [National Magazine] as one of the most creative people in the country ... I had a feeling that I was getting too much exposure and that people didn’t like it.

Shortly thereafter, Kit was passed over for promotion and instead offered a role that she deemed beneath her. She said, “When you want to put a person of color out to pasture, you make them vice chair.” She summarily declined the role and took a position in a much smaller company.

However, one particular interviewee, Barbara (former Regional VP turned Training Associate, Financial Services; *T2*), hit a plateau not because of hypervisibility, but rather because of her failure to manage the effects of intersectional invisibility. Our analysis suggests that Barbara had not been mindful of—and, at times, even discounted—the effects of intersectional invisibility. She expressed in the first interview that she had not felt that race and gender were an issue, despite what others (including her family members) had told her. Ignoring her own intersectional invisibility seemed to have prevented her from seizing important opportunities to leverage her unique position and to engage in strategies to overcome any bias she may have experienced. In her *T2* interview, she had taken a significant step down in her career, and, as she reflected on her disappointment with aspects of her career, she seemed to realize that she had not done much to gain credible visibility.

Each of the plateaued EBW reacted to hitting a wall in their *T1* organizations by finding employment in new organizations by *T2*. We distinguish plateaued women from the next category, the “reinventors,” who proactively sought opportunities to achieve greater fulfillment in new roles or organizations.

Reinvention. Twenty-five percent of our sample reinvented themselves in or outside of their organizations. Specifically, we define an EBW as having “reinvented” when she (a) left her role or organization to seek greater alignment between her personal values, skills, or work environment (7 EBW), or (b) left her organization to pursue an entrepreneurial venture (2 EBW), or (c) retired from a corporate role and repurposed her skills into work in nonprofit or philanthropic organizations (6 EBW). Among the first category of seven reinventors, EBW left their positions or their organizations because they recognized that they were out of alignment with the core values of their organizations. Rather than labor in a context in which they felt misaligned, these alignment-seeking EBW sought to change their roles and gain greater fit with their personal values and professional goals. After finding success in her company, Darlene (Divisional President, Consumer Products; *T1*) indicated that she decided to leave her company after eight years because she was becoming more distant from her organization’s increasingly toxic environment, as she noted that she “struggled with aligning myself with the leadership.”

Similarly, Jane (SVP, Telecommunications; *T1*), noted the importance of organizational fit in deciding where she wanted to work: “The steps that I made were around making sure that I was in an organization where it was the right cultural fit. I didn’t want to be a square peg in a round hole.” Although these reinventors might have taken roles with lesser responsibilities, they did so eagerly and intentionally to maximize their personal and professional satisfaction. Other women made career changes to have new experiences and adventures. Beatrice (EVP, Pharmaceuticals; *T2*) noted that her desire to pursue a position at a new smaller company:

It was this fabulous opportunity for me to become, once again, a part of an executive committee that was responsible for leading the company and providing overall direction and guidance for the company during a very challenging time in the company’s history ... I joined [Company] with that in mind and it just proved to be fabulous.

Among the reinventors, two had left corporate America in order to pursue entrepreneurial projects. These entrepreneurs are not to be confused with several EBW who reported having engaged in brief periods of private consulting or coaching as a means of keeping their skills current while unemployed from their corporate lines of work. Contrary to these short-term consultants and coaches, Chloe (former VP, Energy; *T1*) and Layla (former CIO, Consumer Products; *T1*) recognized that their time in corporate America had reached a pinnacle and that they could leave to pursue other passions. For example, Chloe, who had founded a venture capital firm (*T2*), elected to leave when her CEO announced his retirement. She said:

The person who was tapped to succeed him was brought in to break up the company. I didn’t see a future for me there ... we negotiated a deal. I basically said, “I understand how the game is played. You want your senior team around you. I think I’d like to do some other things. Let’s make a deal.” She was open to that. More importantly, she gave me the time and the space to really think about what I wanted to do ... I had saved a fair amount of money, so I knew I was okay.

The third category of reinventors did so after retirement. Of the six women in this category, each had fully retired from corporate roles after successful tenures and took time off to consider their “second act.” For example, Pilar (former EVP, Consumer Products; *T2*) said:

It was a perfect time for me to leave. I had been retirement eligible for a while ... I happily left ... I had enough money to retire comfortably, and I had other things that I was more interested in doing. I made a commitment to myself that I wanted to have more significance in the next 10 to 15 years of my life than I had had in the last 30.

After a brief period of searching, Pilar repurposed her corporate skills into helping nonprofit ventures streamline their businesses. Similarly, Renee (former Executive Officer, Financial Services; *T2*) said:

The time was right, the math was right and so I retired ... I have a passion for seeing senior women, particularly African American women, get healthy and stay healthy. When my mother passed, she was morbidly obese, hypertension, diabetes, she had it all ... and was in a wheelchair the last five years of her life because of her morbid obesity. I thought to myself, "I'm not going out like this, and, if I can help some other sisters not go out like this, that's what I am going to do."

Pilar and Renee are examples of how EBW repurposed their vast skillsets after retirement and reinvented themselves in their second acts of life.

DISCUSSION

Our study takes a deep dive into what living as an outsider within entails at senior levels, what it is like to experience the competing and interrelated forces of intersectional invisibility in EBW's lives, and the role of agency in making the invisible visible. Based on the reported collective experiences of our participants and the extant literatures reviewed, we built a theory explaining the paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility on the career experiences. Below, we explicate our new theory and then highlight the theoretical contributions of our study.

A Theory of the Paradoxical Effects of Intersectional Invisibility

We devised a theoretical model (Figure 2) that demonstrates how EBW, operating from an intersectional outsider within status, simultaneously experience both opportunities and constraints associated with intersectional invisibility. Their outsider within status is derived from the interactions among three intersecting contexts in which they are simultaneously embedded: intersectional (characterized by dual stigmas ascribed to their race and gender), professional (characterized by heavy investments in their education and access to professional support), and personal (characterized by support from family and strong feelings of self-assurance). We contend that outsider within status both prepares them for and drives their dynamic experience of intersectional invisibility.

Further, our analysis suggests that intersectional invisibility is composed of two opposing and interrelated dimensions that we classify as benign and hostile. Benign intersectional invisibility is the positive result of intersectional subordinate identities (i.e., gender and race) such that the subordinate identities interact to cancel or diminish the negative effects of one another. Hostile intersectional invisibility is the negative result of intersectional subordinate identities such that the subordinate identities interact to compound the negative effects of one another. Rather than suggesting that intersectional invisibility is either benign or hostile depending on some individual or contextual difference, we assert instead that it is a paradoxical experience of both positive and negative experiences. Specifically, our findings reveal that intersectionality operates such that those who hold multiple subordinate group memberships experience both benign and hostile forms of invisibility that are constantly at play when embedded in high-status environments (e.g., White-male dominated professional spaces). This paradox occurs because the subordinate categories of race and gender interact to weaken as well as strengthen each other's impact. Our findings indicate that, because they reside at the intersection of two subordinate identities, EBW at once avoid being pigeonholed into stereotypes about Blacks or women, and, at the same time, risk being hypervisible as outsiders because of their subordinate identities. Individuals are able to achieve sustainable success when they meet such paradoxes with responses that embrace both the positive and the negative (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011)

EBW contend with both forms of intersectional invisibility simultaneously and seek to maximize the benefits of benign intersectionality while mitigating the constraints of hostile intersectional invisibility. Benign intersectional invisibility gives EBW more license to be authentic in their visibility-enhancing tactics; hostile intersectional invisibility requires EBW to focus on the tactics that help them to reduce

threat. To seize these opportunities associated with benign intersectional invisibility and offset the constraints associated with hostile intersectional invisibility, EBW employ several agentic tactics to transform intersectional invisibility into credible visibility needed to progress in their careers.

Theoretical Contributions and Avenues for Future Research

We make two primary contributions to the literature on intersectionality. First, we advance the concept of paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility. Existing research tends to highlight the negative challenges that Black women face (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989), while some scholars have suggested that the intersection of race and gender might create an auspicious space in which Black women are released from the negative associations of subordinate race and gender group members (Epstein, 1973; Rosette et al., 2016). We build on the framework of intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) to synthesize prior evidence that has heretofore been framed as contradictory, and instead apply a paradoxical perspective, which reveals that intersectionally invisible groups experience invisibility in both positive and negative ways.

We offer a theoretical explanation for how being Black and being a woman might “cancel” each other such that Black women are perceived as different from Blacks and women (Biernat & Sesko, 2013; Sesko & Biernat, 2010), and thus experience opportunities to be individuated from their stigmatized identity groups (Epstein, 1973; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016). At the same time, however, we also show that EBW are not entirely freed from group membership and that the same intersecting subordinate identities compound to amplify unique stigmas associated with being Black women (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). In so doing, we advance a new way of seeing intersectional invisibility, wherein intersectionality is experienced as both negative and positive simultaneously.

This new way of seeing intersectionality can serve as a starting point for scholars to explore each dimension of intersectional invisibility (benign and hostile) further and determine how they might differentially impact one’s performance at work and career progression. Although we focus on Black women in our study, future research should consider others (e.g., Asian men) who wrestle with dual stigma while striving for or occupying highly visible executive-level roles. Further, our analysis focused on executives, but other intersecting identities such as class, education, and professional position are likely to also affect the balance between benign and hostile forms of intersectional invisibility (McCluney & Rabelo, 2018).

Second, our theory contributes to the social identity management literature by providing a new framework through which to understand the choices that individuals who experience intersectional invisibility have regarding how they present themselves at work. Token minorities often face pressure to assimilate to the dominant environment (Kanter, 1977), and, as a result, are infrequently able to be their full authentic selves at work (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Settles et al., 2018). However, stigmatized identity group members have better well-being and commitment to their professions when they engage in “positive distinctiveness,” which refers to social identity-based impression management intended to claim one’s stigmatized identity and reduce devaluation thereof (Ladge & Little, 2019; Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008). This prior research seems to suggest that minority workers must choose between assimilating to achieve belonging or positive distinctiveness to maintain authenticity.

In our analysis of EBW, intersectional invisibility presented both opportunities (the neutralizing effect of being a Black woman) and constraints (the compounded stigmas of being both Black and a woman). While contradictory, these experiences existed and were navigated simultaneously by our respondents. We assert that intersectionally invisible group members do not choose whether to assimilate or use positive distinctiveness, but rather they must do the seemingly impossible work of simultaneously fitting in and standing out. Our findings suggest that EBW constantly balance needs to reduce negative stereotypes with opportunities to show their authentic selves. Roberts and Blake-Beard (2014: 22) referred to this balancing act as “tempered visibility,” described as “knowing when to stand out and when to slip under the radar.” We

contribute to this relatively underexplored concept of tempered visibility by advancing four tactics that EBW use in an effort to gain credible visibility and career success: bold autonomy, strategically deploying their invisibility, leaning into risk, and conscious relationship crafting. These agentic visibility tactics extend prior research that explores how individuals with multiple, stigmatized identities manage (in)visibility in the workplace (Clair et al., 2005; Ladge et al., 2012; McCluney & Rabelo, 2018; Ramarajan, 2014; Roberts, 2005; Settles et al., 2018). While these tactics do not eliminate the paradox of intersectional invisibility, they give individuals a means by which to strategically navigate the opportunities and constraints. Future research should further investigate how these strategies specifically make the invisible visible by undermining hostile intersectional invisibility and employing opportunities to become credibly visible in the workplace.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

We believe a significant strength of our work is that we utilized a qualitative approach to understand the lived experiences of Black women executives who have largely been excluded from current literature. Not only is our sample nearly triple the size of existing qualitative studies that focus exclusively on Black women's careers in professional settings, it was conducted over two points in time. The two interviews together provided rich descriptions of EBW's varied and extensive career experiences, which strengthened the depth of our analysis. This also enabled us to provide new insights into the role of intersectional invisibility in understanding the careers of EBW. Despite the strength of our data and analysis, however, we acknowledge there are several limitations to our work, which we address below.

First, given that our focus was solely on senior-level EBW, the generalizability of our results is a notable concern. Given that these women were operating at the highest levels of their organizations, they were highly successful and their stories were largely positive. This was intentional, as we were interested in learning how Black women executives overcame barriers and succeeded in the workplace. However, our focus on EBW might limit the generalizability of our findings, in that intersectional invisibility might manifest differently for Black women working at lower organizational levels, as well as for others with multiple identities. While the qualitative experience of hostile and benign intersectional invisibility may differ across target groups, we expect that the emergence of these two forms of invisibility will generalize across intersectional minority groups. Further, variance in other intersectional groups' experience of intersectional invisibility will likely also affect the types of agentic visibility strategies they may access. For example, Latinas who are taught to stay in their place and avoid aggressive and assertive behavior (Rodriguez, 2008) may avoid strategies like bold autonomy or develop additional strategies that address their unique needs.

Second, while we suggest that intersectional invisibility was a concern of the participants in our sample, we acknowledge that not all Black women will experience the effects of holding multiple subordinate identities equally. For example, research on biracial identities explores the various ways in which individuals cope with multiple identities and suggests that some individuals may singularly focus on one identity over another, embrace both, alternate between the two, or transcend both identities (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). We are also aware that Black women have other identities that could have influenced their perceptions and experiences. For example, sexual orientation or being a mother could have also played a significant role in their experiences with intersectional invisibility.

Third, there are limitations related to our data set and analyses. Although interviews allowed us to capture richer data, a limitation of our data analysis is due to retrospective accounts of our participants' experiences. We acknowledge our analysis may suffer from bias or inaccuracies due to retrospective sensemaking. However, a portion of the second wave of interviews was dedicated to revisiting some of the experiences that were brought up in the first wave of interviews, and the women were consistent in their recollections. It should also be noted that, because we were interested in the viewpoints of the women

themselves, we opted for self-reported data. Thus, we cannot determine with certainty how the women are actually perceived by others (e.g., as threatening) or their actual levels of career success (e.g., whether a particular job change was actually positive) beyond their own perspectives. Further, we only collected data at two points in time, which may not fully reflect career transition points or capture in real time instances of intersectional invisibility.

Finally, definitive conclusions about career outcomes cannot be made. Given that our sample self-reported their use of the agentic visibility tactics and their subsequent career outcomes, it is impossible to ascertain the impact of the tactics on career trajectories. Further, some tactics and the frequency with which they are used might have a greater effect on Black women's career outcomes than other tactics. We did, however, provide two methods of assessing EBW's career outcomes. Direction of job change was based on objective changes in their title, position, and organization, while career trajectory was an assessment of their downward, stable, upward, or other career paths, which accounted for both position changes and the participants' own reflections on these changes. Future research should query the relationships between agentic visibility tactics discussed here and career outcomes in empirical work that can test our findings. Nonetheless, it is our intent that this work sparks future work on intersectionality, and we encourage more longitudinal work on the experiences and outcomes associated with intersectional invisibility.

Practical Implications

Our findings offer novel practical insights into how the intersection of race and gender influences EBW's experiences with intersectional invisibility. First, our work offers important practical insights that are unique to EBW. A recent McKinsey report noted that, "when companies take a one-size-fits-all approach to advancing women, women of color end up underserved and left behind" (McKinsey & Company, 2017: 1). Indeed, most practical advice about women advancing in organizations is mostly based on the experiences of White women. For example, countless books and articles have been written about the importance of self-confidence (e.g., Kay & Shipman, 2014), leaning in (Sandberg, 2013), and learning to play hardball (Frankel, 2014; Heim, Hughes, & Golant, 2015). Yet, in our study, we find that these approaches may not apply to Black women executives who appear to already exude high levels of confidence, lean into risk, and use bold autonomy to gain visibility. What seems to be most applicable to Black women is being cognizant of their career runways, or the longer amount of time for them to take off in their careers. Shorter runways may reduce the amount of time Black women have to gain visibility through the agentic tactics that we uncovered. Several women commented on their long tenures in their organizations as assets that allowed them to build a strong track record, take risks, and build relationships. Yet other women commented on their long tenures in roles compared to White male colleagues. The length of their runways should determine the alacrity with which Black women use agentic visibility tactics. Black women who do not intentionally and strategically reduce their invisibility might have trouble taking off and may find their careers stalling and plateauing.

Second, it is difficult for Black women to grow their careers alone and they need commitment and support from their organizations for their advancement. Thus, sponsors and mentors should be attuned to the particular position in which Black women find themselves due to their intersecting identities. We found that successful Black women executives intentionally sought out inter-race and inter-gender relationships with those who could be instrumental in their career development. Developmental relationships that acknowledge and explicitly address the unique challenges of women and racial minorities are critical and guidance often should be tailored to that particular person. Our findings indicate that important sponsors—who "protect, prepare and push" women (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010: 4)—are critical facilitators of EBW success.

CONCLUSION

We examined the lived experiences of Black women executives who have largely been excluded from management literature. Qualitative data enabled us to gather a rich description and in-depth information about senior-level Black women's experiences with intersectional invisibility. Our findings highlight the notion that Black women executives operate as both intriguing and also threatening outsiders within their organizations, which leads to competing pressures of intersectional invisibility that they must balance. Although Black women have to deal with negative race- and gender-based stereotypes, they may also find permission to be authentic by circumventing these stereotypes. Our findings challenge prior notions of intersectional invisibility as being wholly negative or positive, and instead offer insight on the paradoxical effects therein. We identify a number of agentic visibility tactics that Black women use to be seen as credible leaders, and shed light on Black women in senior-level positions.

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