

teractionism framework [28].

Mueller's [26] third tool involved recent history, indicating memory and experience as critical aspects of people's interpretive frameworks. History required a theory that gave meaning and structure; therefore, what people learned from history was considered interpretive and diverse [21]. A view of learning and interpretation through the passage of time affected what people remembered, expected and believed. The more an individual invested in retained old memories that contained mistakes; the more the person placed value on the repeated error. A decision to repeat past mistakes influenced the person in the future. Thus, the person's goal, beliefs, institutions, recent history, and incentives determined the way each interacted with the other and the world [26], [29].

Lincoln and Lynham [27] listed 13 criteria that should be present for application of an interpretive perspective theory; three criteria were key to this study. First, the selected theory must contain an explanation and deeper understanding of the phenomenon [23]. Full descriptions would provide understanding and insights, structure, and consistent support for the problem in the study [27]. Second, shedding light on social life concerning the phenomenon could result in finding new ways to envision meaningful changes for old situations [30]. Third, theory must provide a good conceptual understanding of what direction to move to next.

1.3 The Literature

Volunteerism. The steady rise in both public and academic interest in representatives of voluntary organizations are remarked on the benefits such association yielded [31]. Scholars had taken a steady interest in the explanation of ethnic advocacy organizations [10]. Ethnic groups as social groups sharing common ancestry bounded through culture, language, and phenotype [32]. Involvement of individuals in a voluntary association increased political participation and promoted social cohesion [31]. The growth of ethnic and minority immigration had a direct effect on local communities, the workforce, and the people who operated businesses [33], [34]. Resulting from the effects of the high growth impacted communities, some business owners engaged in transactions with other companies, customers, and different ethnic groups. agreed that with increased growth, changes to the current business model occurred [35]. In 2015, statisticians at the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated ethnic minority groups had lower levels of volunteers in civic organizations [36]; within this group, there were few leaders in executive positions who represented diverse communities. Webster and Haandrikman associated these statistics with the existence of external and internal barriers [37]. However, the exact cause of the low participation among racial and minority groups in voluntary roles as representatives of organizations remained unclear.

Leadership. Leadership had a symbolic component based on trust [38]. Trust in a leadership relationship was understood as dependent on the leader's behavior. Klausner explained that individuals had expectations about partner's interaction which formed from social frames specific to the interaction, experiences, and history. The outcomes and courses of social interactions could not be predicted because of the individual

subjectivity [38]. One researcher implied that an individual's subjectivity occurred through routines formed from previous experiences [28]. Researchers cautioned that a lack of cultural knowledge in new environments could force representative leaders to withdraw into old patterns; gains in trust could be lost.

Leadership was a factor that could stimulate producing a work environment based on trust, integrity, and fairness; essentials for corporate success, economic development, and growth [24]. Leadership, viewed in this context, was a process of social interaction [1], [38]. When the theories of Mead [17] and Blumer [18] were applied in practice settings, individuals were encouraged to change perspectives, acquire new roles, and take responsibility for bringing new participants into the democratic process. When each person showed a willingness to engage with issues concerning others, the group developed active and meaningful interactions collectively.

Barriers. Historically, minorities had been victims of barriers and negative stereotypes which limited access to executive-level leadership opportunities in corporations [7], [39]. The United States is a multicultural society [34]; diversity is central to the country's position in a globalized business environment; however, the country's painful history of racism, prejudice, discrimination, and violence was evident [39]. Competitive environments and changing times required small business owners to remained updated and equipped with the latest skills demanded for successful leadership [40]. Consistently, researchers showed that small business owners (specifically, ethnic minorities) often lacked the financial capabilities for operation [7], [39]. Local chambers of commerce and the representatives of civic organizations emerged as essential to community development [40].

Class status of representatives signified respectability and membership into elite organizations [5]. Even though, some members of chambers of commerce saw the selection process as extreme, many preferred to seek out full membership. Historically, representatives' operation of chambers of commerce involved limited trade [3]; currently, the roles expanded to include new member recruitment, and addressing socioeconomic concerns, as well as job creation. Researchers found an individual's socioeconomic status significantly associated with whether he or she volunteered as representatives of organizations [41]. Researchers also indicated that a well-rounded education, perseverance, and dedication remained key attributes to successful business owners interested in volunteering for leadership positions [42]. Education, assets, income, or wealth, which ensured individuals higher status of respectability in society, also garnered more prestige among organizational leaders seeking volunteers [32].

Education was the strongest and most consistent predictor of voluntary participation for organizations among ethnic minority groups and the general population. Educated were aware of social issues, had knowledge and cognitive competence, and required skills to take on actions for social good [39]. People with higher education viewed the importance of causes not directly connected to them as opportunities and supported such causes [32].

2 RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

2.1 Methodology and Design

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of small business owners with racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds to determine the barriers that prevented these business owners from acquiring leadership positions in local chambers of commerce. The qualitative research method was the best choice for this study since the purpose was to understand the experience and perspectives of the participants [43]. An interpretive phenomenological design was an appropriate choice when the goal was to ensure the researcher gained insights from the participants [44]. As guided by Moustakas [45], an interpretive phenomenology was necessary to understand the meaning of the phenomenon without linking prior biases or engagement concerning the research question.

Four defining characteristics of interpretive qualitative research further guided this study [44]. First, the study occurred in natural settings [46]. Second, data collection captured the participants' perceptions and experiences corroborated this view [47]. Third, qualitative research is a reflexive design for gathering data and the analysis process may continue to change as the study unfolds [48]. Fourth, standardization is not applicable to all methods of data collection and analysis [44].

2.2 Population and Sample

The target population consisted of current ethnic minority members of three local chambers of commerce located in the towns of Norwich, Waterford, and Mystic, Connecticut. Selection of the participants for this study came from lists furnished by the local chambers in New London County, Connecticut. After approval was received from the Northcentral University Institutional Review Board, eligible participants were recruited. Gender was not a factor, but the preferred age of prospective candidates was between 18 and 64. To ensure reliability and transferability, past members were invited to contribute to this study. A key assumption was that each participant had in-depth knowledge and had experienced barriers that affected decisions to become leaders.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Approval to conduct the study was received from the Northcentral University's Institutional Review Board prior to contacting potential participants. Essential consideration of this research was to obtain the consent of each participant to avoid ethical issues. Data were collected from 8 participants.

The Seidman's three interview series model offered structure, practicality, and sense of creativity by using a combination of van Manen's conceptualization of hermeneutic phenomenology [49], [50]. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the source of the data collected. These inquiries captured the participants' thoughts, ideas, and feelings concerning related to the barriers that prevented ethnic minorities from seeking voluntary leadership roles in local chambers of commerce. Another useful strategy for this study included the use of the critical incident technique (CIT); for this purpose, information learned using this method helped the researcher understand the participant's behaviors. The CIT allowed the re-

searcher to observe the reactions of the participants and determined whether such conduct impacted the research topic [51].

Data analysis involved summarizing and describing the participant's experiences for member-checking and to ensure saturation. For this study, a combination of inductive and deductive strategies for data analysis helped with the development of themes [45], [52]. The use of a data analysis software, Dedoose© [54], supported the development of a comprehensive audit trail [53]. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used coding development and application, to simplify theme identification, indexing, and data storage and retrieval.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Data Reliability and Validity

Frequently, the reliability and validity of qualitative results are questioned. The trustworthiness of the collected data was addressed in four ways. Creating an audit trail with the CAQDAS was appropriate; there was emphasis on collecting and securing all relevant data. Primary and secondary data were sourced for triangulation to establish credibility. Data dependability (stability) was established by adequately and thickly presenting information garnered during the interviews. Utilizing Dedoose© provided records of decisions made during the analysis; further demonstrating dependability and confirmability. Transferability of results was addressed through triangulation between the data, extant literature, and publicly available information.

The research was geographically bounded by the towns of Norwich, Waterford, and Mystic, Connecticut. Limitations included the smallness of the population, the drawbacks of conducting qualitative interviews, and the constraints associated with observations and time.

3.1 Results

Guided by symbolic interaction and identity theory, the analysis of the results of this study discovered similarities to findings of other scholars. The results also showed some differences indicating slow, but progressive changes in the business environment. The participants discussed their thoughts and understandings of the meanings attached to some perceived barriers, such as learning a second language. The results showed the participants did not feel affected by a communication barrier; participants touted high levels of language skill and ease of communication with others. Only 2 of the 8 participants rated their language skills less than optimal and wanted to improve broaden vocabulary.

Regarding cultural barriers, participants attached high importance to cultural values, but some did not interpret this as significant to decision-making processes. The results of this study suggest that the meaning assigned to barriers evolved as participants continue to adapt to their environments. The result indicated that over time, people's interpretation of negative experiences relating to cultural barriers might morph.

In response to views on leadership, the 8 participants acknowledged that leadership experience in any capacity was

good for the individual and for the community. The participants rated their views on a 0 to 10 scale; each indicated scores of above 8. Participants gave different interpretations of leadership and its utility; not all agreed on the prospects of acquiring a representative leadership role in their local chambers of commerce. Participants enjoyed volunteering for other organizations, but when asked about committee involvement, three participants indicated that time constraints prevented active involvement. Any consideration of acting in a leadership capacity was not a high priority. Fifty percent of participants felt exclusion was a barrier and 38% felt comfortable and included when engaging in activities with familiar members. Among these participants, finding familiar members proved problematic; when asked to identify and apply meaning to other ethnic minority business relationships, all the participants had different views on what those connections meant.

Two other themes relevant to this study emerged from inquiries regarding perceptions about entrepreneurship. The researcher wanted to explore and understand why the participants chose to become owners of businesses. In this group, business ownership symbolized leadership. Participants indicated freedom, control, personal satisfaction, and job security.

An inquiry was made about views and experiences of prejudicial treatment in business. Participants were asked to determine the role of prejudice as barrier affecting decision-making processes. The results confirmed that all participants understood the meaning and had experienced some form of prejudice. During the interviews, the researcher asked each partaker to give examples of critical incidents specific to prejudicial treatment that occurred in the past. All 8 of the participants recounted differing experiences that shaped worldviews, but none acknowledge a correlation between the experience and the current choice not to be an active representative leader.

3.1 Links to the Body of Knowledge

The study indicated positive benefits for both the volunteers and the representatives of the organizations. The idea of minority representatives as part of voluntary organizations improved well-being and increased market labor prospects. When administrators of chambers of commerce included ethnic minorities in their leadership pool there were positive benefits for the organization [35]. Participants proffered varying views on volunteering for civic organizations.

The results in the study were consistent with the literature regarding the role leadership has in society [28], [38]. Participants agreed that ethnic minority leadership representation in a civic organization was necessary and important. However, views varied on why few minorities pursued leadership roles in their local chamber of commerce. Social networking is a way for businesses to share ideas and resources [3]. Chambers of commerce offered opportunities for business owners to get together at social events to network. Social networking helped business owners develop trust for their peers and make new connections [3]. The participants in this study felt networking assisted with making contacts and or connecting with resources beneficial to business growth. Participants genuinely welcomed the opportunities to network with peers but felt uncomfortable when they did not see familiar faces or in recog-

nizable environments. Business owners represented important players in economic development, advancing the well-being of nations and job creations [55]. Ethnic minority business owners remain interested in the economy, social, and environmental values. The participants in this study expressed expectations of business growth given the affiliation with the chambers of commerce, and remained confident that, with access to resources, could do well.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the interviews resulted in themes describing the participants' perceptions of their interpretations of barriers that influenced decision-making processes. The participant pool for this study consisted of 50% African Americans, Asians (38%), and Hispanics (12%); they shared their perceptions and thoughts about the barriers that had influenced their decisions to consider leadership roles in a chamber of commerce. Consistent with findings in other studies, participants in this study accepted less visible and less central positions compared to their White counterparts [56].

Participants in this study felt excluded from leadership roles; some participants expressed decisions not to pursue future roles. The feeling of exclusion was consistent among the group; this was expressed as concern that representatives of the local chambers of commerce did not ask them (minorities) to participate in a leadership role. Ethnic minorities faced several barriers and the perceptions of exclusion from leadership positions were not new issues [57], [58]. Exclusion from organizational leadership opportunities remains problem, even with the rising growth of ethnic minorities in the population.

Other barriers such as culture, education levels, and language skills the participants in this study did not consider significant obstacles [39], [42]. Socioeconomic status influenced ethnic minority's decision concerning roles as leadership representatives [32], [41], [42]. In this study, Hispanic business owners felt strongly about their culture in comparison to the Asian or African American groups. Business owners from all the ethnic groups interviewed agreed their respective cultures had some tradition of volunteering, although they did not all admit culture had influenced their leadership decisions. Hispanic business owners in this study felt minorities stood better chances with higher education [41]; however, business owners from other ethnic groups (African American or Asian) did not seem concerned about the levels of their education.

Similar results showed barriers in the form of language skills did not appear as a major obstacle for the ethnic minorities interviewed in this study. The presence of language barriers often affected Hispanics [32], [41], [42]. Educational impediments led to limited or sometimes no access to much-needed resources, for example, information about capital. Of the three minority groups interviewed, African American participants felt the most at ease with their language skills. Although the Hispanic and Asian groups both felt they could improve their vocabulary, the level at which they spoke and communicated in English was adequate.

The findings showed, all the participants felt a sense of independence because of the freedom entrepreneurship allowed. Some partakers expressed that in the world of entre-

preneurship, they understood freedom meant the ability to make and be responsible for all business-related decisions. Participants in this study perceived business ownership as freedom to make their choices and decisions [41]. Consistent with the findings in previous studies, the themes emerged in this study indicated networking and people preferred familiar faces and surroundings proved relevant to ethnic minorities.

A key recommendation for practice is that representatives of local chambers of commerce, civic and non-profit organizations use these findings enhance understanding of barriers and obstacles that affect or impede the decisions of ethnic minorities to pursue leadership opportunities within chambers of commerce. Multiethnic leaders represent valuable contributors to local communities, but historically, minorities were often victims of barriers and negative stereotypes [39], [59]. Leaders of chambers of commerce might reject the history exclusive selection to embrace the current and changing demographics. A leader representing minorities might influence the decisions of others to remain active participants which could translate into increased membership in local organizations.

Future research is encouraged in several areas. Researchers should consider expanding the literature on ethnic minority leaderships representation in a broader group of civic and non-profit organizations. Additional explorations of members of smaller chambers of commerce neighboring counties and cities might expose new facets of the problem. Finally, and to validate the results of this study, quantitative inquiry into leadership characteristics of minority members of chambers of commerce is advised.

4 References

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