

**Examining the Path from Relationship Conflict to Work Disengagement:
A Phenomenological Study of Employee Perspectives**

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Abstract

Relationship conflict in the workplace is a persistent organizational problem that undermines employee well-being, diminishes work engagement, and contributes to voluntary turnover.

Although prior research has linked relationship conflict to disengagement and turnover, there has been limited attention given to understanding how employees experience this progression. The problem addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement, resulting in voluntary employee turnover. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progressed from relationship conflict to work disengagement, with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. The conceptual framework for this study was the conservation of resources theory, which conceptualizes relationship conflict as a stressor that depletes emotional and psychological resources, leading to disengagement and eventual withdrawal from work roles. The research methodology involved a qualitative phenomenological design to gain deep insights into the participants' perspectives. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who had experienced relationship conflict in the workplace. The study identified nine themes from three research questions that focused on how employees experience relationship conflict, the progression toward disengagement, and potential organizational strategies to reduce disengagement and turnover. The findings of this study indicated that relationship conflict in the workplace triggers severe emotional strain and physiological stress that negatively affects employee well-being. The recommendations for practice include increasing leadership engagement and involvement, providing conflict management training and organizational support through formal human resources processes, and fostering healthy work environments that prioritize employee well-being. Recommendations for

future research include longitudinal designs, cross-cultural replication, and exploring pathways across different industry sectors to broaden the understanding of resource-driven disengagement. This study contributed to the literature by addressing the gap in understanding the lived experience through which relationship conflict progresses to work disengagement and turnover while providing insight to organizations regarding potential effective intervention strategies.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Introduction to Conceptual Framework.....	6
Introduction to Research Methodology and Design.....	8
Research Questions	11
Significance of the Study.....	12
Definitions of Key Terms	14
Summary.....	14
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Conceptual Framework	19
Workplace Conflict	28
Relationship Conflict.....	30
Resource Loss	32
Work Disengagement	42
Voluntary Turnover.....	47
Strategies Used to Address Disengagement-Driven Turnover.....	50
Gaps in the Literature	56
Summary.....	57
Chapter 3: Research Method	60
Research Methodology and Design.....	61
Population and Sample	69
Instrumentation	71
Study Procedures.....	73
Data Analysis	75
Assumptions.....	77
Limitations	79
Delimitations.....	81
Ethical Assurances	83
Summary.....	85
Chapter 4: Findings.....	87
Trustworthiness of the Data.....	89
Results	94
Comparison of Results to the Literature Review	130
Summary.....	136

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary.....	138
Discussion.....	139
Recommendations for Practice	154
Recommendations for Future Research.....	158
Study Summary.....	161
References	167
Appendix A IRB Approval Letter.....	205
Appendix B Demographic Questionnaire	206
Appendix C Interview Protocol Script.....	208
Appendix D Interview Questions.....	210
Appendix E Recruitment Letter	211
Appendix F IRB Consent Form.....	212

List of Tables

Table 1 Participant Demographics	97
Table 2 Self-Reported Outcomes of Relationship Conflict	98
Table 3 Interview Questions for Research Question 1.....	100
Table 4 Research Question 1 Themes	101
Table 5 Interview Questions for Research Question 2	112
Table 6 Research Question 2 Themes	112
Table 7 Interview Questions for Research Question 3	120
Table 8 Research Question 3 Themes	121

List of Figures

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: The Progression from Relationship Conflict to Work Disengagement Using the Conservation of Resources Theory	24
Figure 2 Theme 1: Emotional Intensity During Conflict Mind Map.....	101
Figure 3 Theme 2: Stress Activation and Physiological Responses Mind Map	104
Figure 4 Theme 3: Resource Depletion and Emotional-Cognitive Exhaustion Mind Map	107
Figure 5 Theme 4: Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement Mind Map	113
Figure 6 Theme 5: Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions Mind Map.....	115
Figure 7 Theme 6: Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support Mind Map.....	117
Figure 8 Theme 7: Leadership Involvement and Engagement Mind Map.....	122
Figure 9 Theme 8: Training Leaders in Effective Conflict Management and Strengthening HR Processes Mind Map	124
Figure 10 Theme 9: Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future Outlook	127

Chapter 1: Introduction

Workplace relationships are instrumental in shaping organizational outcomes as interpersonal dynamics influence employee well-being and overall workplace effectiveness. Dysfunctional workplace conflict exacerbates these challenges by negatively shaping employees' perceptions of their work environment and colleagues (Adamovic, 2022). Workplace conflict often arises from different perspectives, such as personalities, aspirations, cultural backgrounds, values, and communication styles, which creates relationship conflict (Bansal & Garg, 2024). Relationship conflict, rooted in interpersonal incompatibilities, often begins with minor disagreements but can escalate over time into ongoing tensions that undermine organizational performance and lead to widespread disruption (Bruce et al., 2025; Dachasa, 2022). Unresolved or poorly managed relationship conflict has severe implications which contribute to heightened stress, demotivation, and disengagement from work, ultimately affecting both individual well-being and workplace productivity (Irwan, 2024).

In today's highly competitive work environment, where employees frequently compete for essential resources, relationship conflict has become an even more pressing concern. Relationship conflict's volatile and counterproductive nature weakens group cohesion and collaboration by diminishing overall work effectiveness (Adamovic, 2022; Striler et al., 2021). Research has highlighted that relationship conflict significantly contributes to workplace stress, increased emotional exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and lower organizational commitment (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Irwan, 2024). Relationship conflict is inherently dysfunctional, disrupting the workplace by lowering morale and fostering interpersonal tension. This disruption often leads to heightened stress, decreased job satisfaction, and diminished organizational commitment (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Irwan, 2024). If conflict is not effectively

managed, employees may begin to disengage from work and ultimately seek alternative employment opportunities (Ahmad, 2022).

Relationship conflict is a psychological stressor that simultaneously threatens and depletes employees' resources. Thus, the loss of positive emotional resources, such as affective well-being, heightens the risk of work withdrawal and disengagement (Choi et al., 2024). Emotional exhaustion, a form of work-related strain, depletes employees' social and emotional resources, resulting in additional cognitive and emotional efforts required to cope, leading to further emotional strain and exhaustion (Anjum et al., 2022). Individuals experiencing strain from conflict often struggle with self-regulating their emotions and behavior, making them more prone to expressing negative emotions, heightening the chances of future disputes (Somaraju et al., 2022). Over time, these stress-induced behaviors heighten the risk of voluntary turnover which poses substantial financial and operational burdens for employers (Ahmad, 2022; Climek et al., 2024). Understandably, employees are less likely to remain in work environments that fail to support their mental well-being, as work-related stress is strongly associated with diminished work engagement (Xue et al., 2022). Research has consistently demonstrated that the quality of co-worker relationships significantly affects employee experiences, with strained relationships contributing to adverse consequences, including increased turnover (Abugre & Acquah, 2022).

As personal and social conflicts escalate, employees become increasingly likely to seek alternative employment (Xue et al., 2022). Over time, prolonged exposure to workplace stress due to escalating conflict can push employees to seek less demanding work environments, exacerbating voluntary turnover rates (Caillier, 2021). This pattern underscores the need for organizations to proactively address relationship conflicts before they escalate into widespread disengagement and attrition. In 2023, voluntary turnover, or employees choosing to leave their

organizations, was one of the most costly expenses and comprised the majority of overall employee turnover in the United States (Job Openings and Labor Turnover, 2024). The Society for Human Resources (SHRM) survey results reported a significant increase in relationship conflict in the workplace over a 4-year period (Choi et al., 2024). Relationship conflict is pivotal in shaping employees' turnover intentions, often leading to voluntary departure (Ahmad, 2022). When workplace relationships deteriorate, the consequences extend beyond individual employees, creating ripple effects that disrupt team cohesion and impact multiple stakeholders (Bruce et al., 2025).

As stress levels rise and employees struggle to cope with ongoing stress, their likelihood of seeking alternative employment opportunities increases, further reinforcing the cycle of voluntary turnover (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). Despite tracking and documenting turnover statistics, organizational productivity, and financial impacts, Li (2023) noted a dearth in literature exploring the lived experiences of employees as they progress from workplace conflict to disengagement and, ultimately, turnover. Li (2023) found that relationship conflict between employees and supervisors or among coworkers led to work disengagement through exhaustion or isolation, highlighting the need for more insights that would help determine the pathway from relationship conflict to work disengagement. Irwan (2024) focused on varying types of conflict and how they impacted employee behaviors and found that relationship, or interpersonal, conflict produces undesirable employee outcomes, particularly work disengagement. However, the specific process by which conflict impacts work disengagement is not fully understood, leading to the suggestion for future research to explore how relationship conflict impacts employee well-being and leads to work disengagement (Irwan, 2024).

Recognizing that a poor work climate amplifies disengagement and heightens turnover risk, identifying intervention strategies can help organizations mitigate the negative impacts of voluntary turnover (Irshad et al., 2023; Zahid & Nauman, 2024). The research was important because employees may become withdrawn, unmotivated, and less committed to their organization as they struggle to recover lost resources. Addressing this issue bridged a critical research gap by uncovering key insights into the factors driving turnover, ultimately aiding in developing effective retention strategies and reducing significant organizational costs.

Additionally, this study extended the application of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by examining how resource loss associated with relationship conflict contributes to employee disengagement and turnover. This understanding can help inform organizational efforts to identify early intervention points that support employee well-being and improve retention outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement which results in voluntary employee turnover (Li, 2023). Relationship conflict involves negative encounters through personal disagreements and interactions between two or more people (Yue & Thelen, 2023; Zahlquist et al., 2023). Continual conflict results in worker distress that can reduce job commitment (Wogwu et al., 2023). Work disengagement is the emotional, cognitive, or physical distancing from work by employees, commonly through voluntary measures taken to leave an organization (Afrahi et al., 2022; Climek et al., 2024; Li, 2023). Ideally, employees remain engaged through strong workplace connections, but when these connections weaken, turnover intentions increase (Bhebhe, 2020; Xue et al., 2022).

Interpersonal conflicts can reduce employee motivation and create stress and isolation that can harm the organization (Irwan, 2024; Li, 2023). Impaired individual productivity disrupts organizational effectiveness and damages the work environment (Bălașa et al., 2023; Castellini et al., 2022). In 2024, the employee turnover rate in the United States totaled 62.6 million, with voluntary separations accounting for 61.5 percent (*Job openings and labor turnover*, 2025). Beyond lost productivity and operational continuity, turnover imposes significant financial burdens, with recruitment and training costs reaching nearly 200% of an employee's annual salary (Ahmad, 2022; Climek et al., 2024). While prior studies have examined workplace conflict and turnover separately, there is a paucity of literature that has explored the lived experiences of employees progressing from relationship conflict to disengagement, highlighting a critical gap in understanding this phenomenon. If this problem persists and organizations fail to uncover the effects of relationship conflict and its progression toward work disengagement, employee turnover costs will persist. High employee turnover impacts critical stakeholders, accounting for 25% of annual expenses, reduced productivity of remaining employees, and reduced customer satisfaction (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. The study's logical progression links relationship conflict to work disengagement via reduced well-being (Kusum & Yadav, 2024; Somaraju et al., 2022). As stress and disengagement take hold, organizational productivity decreases and turnover occurs as a consequence (Afrahi et al., 2022). While work disengagement is commonly linked to employee turnover, research has lacked

insight into how employees experience the transition from relationship conflict to disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Li, 2023). Relationship conflict has been shown to reduce engagement and influence turnover intentions which highlights the need for a deeper understanding of this process (Li, 2023).

Once approval was obtained by National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A), participant recruiting was conducted through Instagram and LinkedIn social and professional networks. The target population was multi-level employees within various business settings who have experienced the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement. The eligibility criteria included a) having experience working in a for-profit business and b) having experienced relationship conflict with coworkers, supervisors, or team members. A Qualtrics demographic questionnaire was developed to query about experiences regarding relationship conflict at work, resource loss, behavioral changes, and disengagement that led to them leaving the job. By using purposive sampling, participants who responded affirmatively to the demographic questionnaire and had experienced the phenomenon were selected to participate. A sample of 20 individuals were invited to participate, ensuring the sample met the sampling criteria regarding the study's purpose (Bloomberg, 2023; Sinfield et al., 2023). Once participants were identified, they received a follow-up request for an interview and were provided with a Microsoft Booking link to schedule an interview using the MS Teams platform.

Introduction to Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by the conceptual framework of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. COR theory explains that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and conserve emotional, psychological, and social resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Workplace relationship conflict

involves interpersonal tensions and employee disagreements stemming from differences in values, beliefs, or goals. These conflicts can result in negative interactions, communication breakdowns, and disruptions to team dynamics, ultimately impacting overall workplace cohesion (Dahiya et al., 2025). Workplace relationship conflict acts as a stressor that initiates resource loss, leading to disengagement as employees attempt to preserve what remains of their resources. The four interconnected stages of the conceptual framework include relationship conflict, resource loss, work disengagement, and employee turnover (Adeyemi, 2022; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023; Li, 2023). By framing the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement as a resource-driven process, this model shed light on the psychological mechanisms that underpin employee disengagement (Bakker, 2022).

Relationship conflicts negatively impact employees' well-being, introducing stress and strain that diminishes psychological and emotional resources (Irwan, 2024; Zahid & Nauman, 2024). Recently, unresolved workplace conflicts have trended upward to the extent of threatening the psychological health of employees (Kusum & Yadav, 2024). Depleted resources can cause individuals to become more susceptible to ongoing stressors caused by the conflict (Somaraju et al., 2022). Stress caused by resource loss can lead to a loss spiral that reduces an employee's ability to cope with the ongoing strain, resulting in work interruption (Somaraju et al., 2022; Zahlquist et al., 2023). Using personal resources to help regulate emotions during conflict results in further resource drain that impedes positive emotions required for well-being (Choi et al., 2024). When recovery of resources seems unachievable, employees decide to disengage from work as a response to chronic work stress, viewed as the only way to recover resources (Hämmig, 2024).

COR theory framed the research problem by highlighting how relationship conflict depletes employees' resources, driving disengagement and turnover. COR theory proposes that people seek to protect and preserve emotional and physiological resources, particularly mental and physical well-being, and the impact of resource loss can be severe (Kusum & Yadav, 2024). The theory guided the study's purpose by exploring how employees perceive and respond to emotional and physiological resource loss, aiming to inform organizational strategies for conflict management and employee retention. Additionally, COR theory shaped the study's research questions by exploring employees' experiences of resource loss, the factors contributing to disengagement, and why turnover became the ultimate resolution. This framework bolstered the theoretical understanding of resources needed for work engagement and provided potential practical strategies for early conflict intervention and resolution.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

When selecting an approach or design, the researcher must determine the research focus, units of analysis, and desired outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2025). The research methodology that was used for this study was qualitative methods. Qualitative research is marked by its use of exploratory language, using terms like "understanding" or "meaning," emphasizing the depth of human experience, and relying on inductive reasoning where categories and patterns emerge from direct engagement with participants or the data (Firdaus et al., 2021, p. 3). This approach enables researchers to generate contextually grounded insights that help explain complex social phenomena (Firdaus et al., 2021). Qualitative research methods uncover deeper insight into participants' emotional and social perspectives that influence behaviors (Rana et al., 2023). While there are criticisms of the subjectivity of qualitative research, Dzogivic and Bajrami (2023) contended that the qualitative approach is the best way to discover patterns within social

contexts due to its personal approach and use of common understanding and interpretation of meaning when interacting with participants. Qualitative dialogue emphasizes the participants' perspectives, personal meanings, and expressive language and can enhance phenomenon understanding, which is helpful for interdisciplinary studies examining the how and why of a phenomenon (Hamilton & Finley, 2019; Leburic & Vlado-Mandarić, 2024).

Previous research around relationship conflict has included quantitative and qualitative methods seeking an understanding of how relationship conflict impacts employee well-being or its relationship to disengagement. Li (2023) investigated the relationship between relationship conflict and work disengagement, discovering that conflict negatively impacts work engagement and job performance via exhaustion. Castellini et al. (2022) examined workplace conflicts and their effect on employee health by analyzing nearly 1,500 employee clinical assessments over 3 years. They found that workplace interpersonal conflicts are consistently increasing, increasing risks for adverse health effects (Castellini et al., 2022). An investigation into the relationship between workplace relational conflict and the negative emotional response of employees found that conflicts cause stress that produces negative emotional responses (Sommovigo et al., 2023). As a collection of interpretive approaches, qualitative research does not prioritize one methodological practice over another. The key challenge lies in thoughtfully aligning the research design with the specific problem, purpose, and research questions (Bloomberg, 2023). Aligning methodology with the research problem is essential, making the phenomenological study best suited for exploring how employees experience the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of their lived experiences (Emon, 2024).

Phenomenological research seeks to understand a specific phenomenon by uncovering individual perspectives and exploring the social experiences of participants (Emon, 2024; Rana et al., 2023; Sinfield et al., 2023). By using a phenomenological approach, the study's focus was to understand the shared experience of relationship conflict that progressed to work disengagement by interviewing individuals who could describe the shared experience. Therefore, a phenomenological research design was best suited to address the research problem, fulfill the research purpose, and answer the research questions, as it explored how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement from the employees' perspective. Edmund Husserl founded the study of phenomenology and was the starting point for the movement (Husserl, 1931). Later, in 1927, Martin Heidegger famously contributed to the terminology by including the ideas of lived experiences, making meaning of phenomena through the internal processes of perception and subjectivity (Heidegger, 1927; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

Phenomenological research aims to provide descriptive, interpretive data from a lived experience while facilitating deeper insight, which is the purpose of the proposed study (Bloomberg, 2023). This qualitative phenomenological study used an interview guide with open-ended questions that were used for the semi-structured interview, consisting of pre-determined questions so participants could provide personal perspectives with detailed, rich responses. Interview guides containing topics to explore and questions to pose to participants should be used during interviews to provide structure and conversational flow (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Ruslin et al., 2022). When researchers seek a deeper understanding of the participant's viewpoint, semi-structured interviews are ideal and benefit the study by having focus and allowing further exploration through follow-up questions that provide deeper insights and data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Triangulation was achieved by using multiple data

collection methods, including demographic questionnaire, interviews, and observational field notes. Additionally, interview transcripts were provided to participants for cross checking to ensure accuracy and strengthen the credibility of the study. As data were collected, significant responses were identified, given equal importance, and thematically grouped through categorization and coding based on participant responses to interview questions and field notes. Textural and structural descriptions derived from participants provided examples of what participants experienced and thematic analysis formed the essence of the entire experience. Data analysis was aided by NVivo, as thematic analysis through coding using NVivo software is useful in identifying patterns and meanings within participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Larsen & Adu, 2021).

Research Questions

The research questions are a critical part of the foundational elements of a study, highlighting the problem and satisfying the purpose by answering the research questions (Bloomberg, 2023). Research questions guide the direction of the study, maintaining a focus on exploring the stated problem and gap in the literature (Parthasarathy et al., 2023). Research questions are a fundamental piece of qualitative inquiry and influence all other aspects of the study, including methodology, data collection, and data analysis (Kross & Giust, 2019; Purvis et al., 2024). Well-crafted research questions significantly influence discovery by guiding the research process and addressing all components, and they can lead to significant breakthroughs and contributions to practice (Gillespie et al., 2024; Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1

How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?

RQ2

How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

RQ3

What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?

Significance of the Study

Relationship conflict causes employee exhaustion and social isolation, resulting in disengagement (Li, 2023). Relationship conflict harms employee job performance, produces stress, and increases work disengagement, eventually leading to turnover that damages productivity, morale, and the organization's bottom line (Anusha & Rajesh, 2024; Iqbal & Raja, 2024). The negative impacts on organizations through turnover caused by work disengagement are significant while having an impact on the profitability and sustainability of a company (Ahmad, 2022; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). Therefore, understanding how relationship conflict progresses to work disengagement is essential in providing solutions or mediation mechanisms for organizational leaders. Employee engagement helps organizations gain a competitive advantage because engaged employees generally meet or surpass productivity goals and are more likely to maintain long-term employment with the organization (Irwanto et al., 2024; Olakh & Johri, 2025). Work engagement provides contagious energy and enthusiasm, resulting in engaged work teams demonstrating higher coordination, collaboration, and overall performance (Bakker, 2022). Engaged employees are more connected to the organization's mission and objectives, demonstrating higher well-being that enhances work engagement, increases performance, and improves organizational sustainability (Rasool et al., 2021). Additionally, employee engagement

is positively related to exceptional job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, and low turnover (Fulmore et al., 2023).

Research has shown that work engagement is positively influenced by the work environment, colleague relationships, and employee well-being (Prajapati, 2022). Organizational culture is directly related to employee engagement, with positive environments fostering greater commitment and performance of employees (Dabrai, 2024; Pulekar & Savale, 2025). Positive work environments positively impact the psychological resources of employees, improving resiliency and optimism critical to retention (Abdou et al., 2025). Work engagement enhances employee well-being and shows that engaged employees surpass performance expectations, demonstrate loyalty, reduce absenteeism, and lower turnover rates (Abdullah et al., 2024; Özçınar et al., 2024). Research has found that employee engagement has a significant impact on business success, with notable differences in organizational outcomes, such as productivity, profitability, and employee turnover, between top-performing and low-performing organizations, suggesting that a combination of employee engagement and well-being is best for organizational outcomes (Prajapati, 2022). This study was significant because organizations with engaged employees experience greater productivity. Therefore, if the experiences that lead to disengagement are identified early, then there is potential for organizational improvement and mitigation regarding how relationship conflict progresses to disengagement while harming employee well-being and eventually leading to turnover. This study helped fill the research gap that does not adequately address the lived experience of individuals who progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement from their perspective (Li, 2023).

Definitions of Key Terms

Relationship Conflict

Relationship conflict is a form of interpersonal conflict characterized by personal disagreements, emotional tension, and incompatibility between coworkers, often arising from differences in values, communication styles, goals, or personalities (Li, 2023; Yue & Thelen, 2023).

Resource Loss

Resource loss is the reduction or loss of physical, emotional, or psychological resources that result in negative emotions exceeding positive emotions (Choi et al., 2024).

Voluntary Turnover

Voluntary turnover is the act of employees willingly leaving an organization (Ahmad, 2022).

Work Disengagement

Work disengagement is the emotional, cognitive, or physical withdrawal from one's job responsibilities (Afrahi et al., 2022; Li, 2023).

Summary

This study explored how relationship conflict leads to work disengagement and voluntary turnover. Research has emphasized that when employees experience frequent personal disagreements and emotional tensions, it negatively affects their well-being, resulting in productivity and efficiency loss for the organization (Irwan, 2024). The financial impact of employee turnover is substantial, often ranging from 90% to 200% of the departing employee's annual salary (Jian et al., 2022). These expenses can add up through recruiting and hiring costs, lost labor, and reduced productivity, posing significant challenges for organizations at multiple levels (Mengjiao et al., 2024; Samašonok, 2024). While prior studies have identified correlations

between employee conflict and turnover, few have investigated the process from the employee perspective, resulting in a lack of understanding surrounding the lived experiences of employees who progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement and turnover (Irwan, 2024; Li, 2023). Relationship conflict reduces employees' emotional and psychological resources, initiating a progression toward disengagement and eventual departure (Kusum & Yadav, 2024).

To explore this phenomenon, the qualitative phenomenological design focused on understanding how individuals experience the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement, seeking an in-depth exploration of employees' lived experiences, which is essential when investigating personal and contextually rich experiences like interpersonal conflict and disengagement (Rana et al., 2023; Sinfield et al., 2023). The goal was to gather employee perspectives regarding the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement so that organizations can develop mitigation or intervention strategies to prevent voluntary turnover. The study was grounded in the COR theory that conceptualizes conflict as a stressor that results in resource loss, leading to disengagement and turnover (Bakker, 2022; Somaraju et al., 2022). The COR theory conceptual framework consists of four stages: relationship conflict, resource loss, work disengagement, and voluntary turnover. The research questions were designed to explore how employees experience relationship conflict, the reasons for progression to work disengagement, and how disengagement influences their decision to leave the organization. The answers to the research questions were pivotal in understanding the employees' lived experiences and seeking possible solutions for organizations experiencing turnover impacts following employee disengagement.

Understanding the lived experiences of employees who progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement can assist in developing organizational strategies that reduce

employee turnover due to disengagement. Disengaged employees display low commitment levels, increased absenteeism, and reduced productivity that negatively impact organizational operations and profit margins (Dabrai, 2024). Understanding the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement is not only helpful and critical for employee well-being but for organizational leaders to develop practical strategies to recognize and mitigate relationship conflict early enough to prevent work disengagement and reduce turnover (Anusha & Rajesh, 2024; Fulmore et al., 2023). Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on the conceptual framework and foundational elements for the study by identifying key themes related to the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement and voluntary turnover.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace contributes to work disengagement, leading to voluntary employee turnover (Li, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement to inform strategies to reduce voluntary turnover within organizations. This phenomenon has garnered attention due to its negative consequences for employees and organizations. So et al. (2023) found that relationship conflicts account for 25-50% of all workplace conflicts and are synonymous with negative organizational outcomes. Dahiya et al. (2025) characterized relationship conflict as emotionally driven animosity and disruptive disagreements or disputes that cause tension and anxiety among workers. Relationship conflict arises from personal differences that cause tension and friction among workers (So et al., 2023). Relationship conflict consists of negative interpersonal interactions and difficulties with co-workers that predict counterproductive work behaviors and lead to decreased organizational commitment (Dahiya et al., 2025).

Relationship conflict reduces productivity and influences an employee's decision to leave the organization (Bălașa et al., 2023; Iqbal & Raja, 2024). Nearly 90% of employees encounter workplace conflict, with over 25% reporting being personally harmed by it, highlighting the pervasive and damaging nature of such tensions (Constantina-Alina et al., 2023). Given these findings, it is important to examine the next stage in the progression, focusing on how relationship conflict contributes to work disengagement. Among conflict types, relationship conflict stands out as a significant impediment to organizational productivity due to its emotional and interpersonal toll (Constantina-Alina et al., 2023). Relationship conflict leads to work disengagement and increases the potential for voluntary turnover (Ahmad, 2022; Choi et al.,

2024; Kundi & Badar, 2021). Work environments influence employee disengagement as a coping mechanism for stress and exhaustion that result in turnover (Afrahi et al., 2022). An engaged employee is a connected employee, so each time an employee becomes disengaged and decides to leave the organization, productivity and profitability are negatively impacted (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021; Xue et al., 2022). The literature review examines prior research to understand this progression further and establishes a foundation for this study.

The purpose of the literature review is to provide an in-depth examination of prior research and establish the conceptual framework for the study. A literature review consists of an in-depth analysis and synthesis of current knowledge of a topic to advise future work, identify gaps, or propose future studies (Cabrera et al., 2023; Chigbu et al., 2023). Methodical processes to search, identify, select, synthesize, and analyze literature help answer research questions and provide a general synopsis of a particular research problem (Ebidor & Ikhide, 2024). This literature review first introduces the conceptual framework. The guiding framework for the study was the conservation of resources (COR) theory, which posits that when valued resources are lost, individuals experience significant stressors (Hobfoll, 1989). General workplace conflict is introduced, followed by relationship conflict and its impact on employees and organizations. Then, the review demonstrates how relationship conflict results in resource loss, which is derived from COR theory and is the foundation of the study. As resource loss increases, the literature review will demonstrate how those losses lead to emotional stress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity, resulting in further resource loss. Then, the literature discusses how continual resource loss incites the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement, followed by voluntary turnover. Last, the literature review introduces the organizational benefits of timely and effective conflict resolution strategies.

The information discovered in this review is from peer-reviewed journal articles published within the past five years. Various historical and empirical works originated more than five years ago. This literature review includes studies found in the National University Library, Google Scholar, EBSCO, Science Direct, and ProQuest. The keywords used were *workplace conflict, employee conflict, impact of conflict on employees, relationship conflict and disengagement, how work disengagement impacts turnover, personal resource loss, conservation of resources theory, and conflict management*. The literature in this review includes peer-reviewed and scholarly articles. In the next section, the study's conceptual framework provides a theoretical grounding for interpreting employee experiences related to the research problem and purpose.

Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by the conceptual framework of the conservation of resources (COR) theory, created in 1989 by Steven E. Hobfoll. The COR theory states that individuals are motivated to obtain, safeguard, and preserve their emotional, psychological, and social resources and that the potential loss of those resources poses a significant threat (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll defined resources as the valued "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" such as self-esteem, resourcefulness, status, or employment (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). He also recognizes that social interactions help provide and preserve valuable resources while addressing the individual reaction to stressful situations that threaten resource loss and impede resource attainment (Hobfoll, 1989). Later, Hobfoll expanded his theory to address work and organizational settings, focusing on work stress and workplace conflict. He introduced the idea that stress is not only about work overload, but is more related to the imbalance between resources and loss and recovery (Hobfoll, 2001). Hobfoll (2001) contends that even when

resource loss is equal to gain, resource loss results in more significant outcomes. He further suggests that events triggering resource loss result in social, emotional, or physiological responses, finding a strong connection to emotional distress (Hobfoll, 2001).

Hobfoll (2011) furthered his assertion that stress causes resource loss, which can lead to a resource loss cycle that impacts well-being, later bringing workplace stress and conflict into view. COR theory has been one of the leading theories related to organizational stress for the previous 20 years (Hobfoll et al., 2017). COR theory introduced the idea of the resource loss cycle, noting that when stress triggers resource loss, more resources are needed to offset those losses, thereby suggesting that individuals who experience resource loss are predicted to experience future resource loss (Hobfoll, 2011). Hobfoll extended COR theory past stress to understand individual use and conservation of their resources related to gains and losses resulting from emotional exhaustion, highlighting the contexts of interpersonal relationships at work and the social system as a resource used for addressing work stress (Hobfoll et al., 2017).

A modern approach has been used to integrate COR with work stress and emotional well-being, focusing on individual processing of resource loss and the emotional toll that leads to disengagement from work (Afrahi et al., 2022; Agarwal et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2022). Xue et al. (2022) found that work stressors illicit employee disengagement because employees prefer not to work in environments that harm their well-being. Individuals place high value on their resources and are motivated to safeguard and preserve them, and may resort to defensive behaviors such as considering leaving the organization to do so (Chen et al., 2024). Anasori et al. (2021) asserted that employees who experience depleted emotional resources try to conserve remaining resources, reducing work engagement and performance. Since work engagement requires

substantial resources, distressed employees will likely face a resource deficit and need their remaining resources to maintain emotional stability (Anasori et al., 2021).

Resource loss causes individuals to feel emotionally drained or exhausted and predicts turnover intention (Chen et al., 2024; Islam & Chaudhary, 2024). Emotional exhaustion in the workplace can harm employees' psychological and physical health, reducing work performance that can significantly impact the organization (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Resource loss has a nearly immediate impact on individual psychological wellness through stress, anxiety, and depression and is considered a significant workplace challenge (Mubarak et al., 2022; Zhou & Chen, 2021). These negative impacts on individual well-being are usually observable within 24 hours (Somaraju et al., 2022). Adverse physiological and emotional reactions derived from a stressful work environment consume substantial emotional resources, initiating a potential loss spiral that results in greater emotional strain (Islam & Chaudhary, 2024). COR theory explains that the loss of resources leads to stress and emotional distress, and research has found that emotional exhaustion has a profound impact on employees' job performance and voluntary turnover rates (Zhou & Chen, 2021).

Hobfoll introduced the concept of the resource loss spiral, stating that when individuals face stressors, they tend to focus their energy on conserving remaining resources instead of gaining resources, increasing the likelihood of future resource loss (Somaraju et al., 2022). He also suggested that once the resource-loss spiral begins, further loss happens faster and impacts to individuals are greater (Hobfoll et al., 2017). When resources are first lost, individuals exhibit stress responses, which causes further resource loss, compounding the impacts that lead to a cycle of stress and resource loss (Jiang et al., 2023). Jiang et al. (2023) challenge the COR theory's primacy of resource loss principle, which argues that resource loss is more impactful

than resource gains, finding that increasing positive elements, such as support, may weigh more than the damage caused by resource loss. Their research suggested that timing may play a factor, as individuals may respond quickly in stressful situations to cope or protect themselves, suggesting immediate impacts may fade and become normal over longer periods of time (Jiang et al., 2023). Although Meurs et al. (2022) contradicted this assertion by noting that continually elevated anxiety levels impede the ability to manage and cope with stress, and do not become normal, but rather lead to chronic conditions related to stress and well-being. Results implied that the resource loss spiral must be interrupted to prevent further mental problems (Meurs et al., 2023). Meurs et al. (2022) and Jiang et al. (2023) agreed that individuals with more resources are better able to cope with stressors than those without fewer resources and that organizations can help mitigate resource loss spirals by providing organizational resources, such as support. Mitigation strategies designed to replenish resources and help employees develop coping skills and to soften the impact of initial resource loss can reverse the cycle and induce resource gain instead (Jiang et al., 2023).

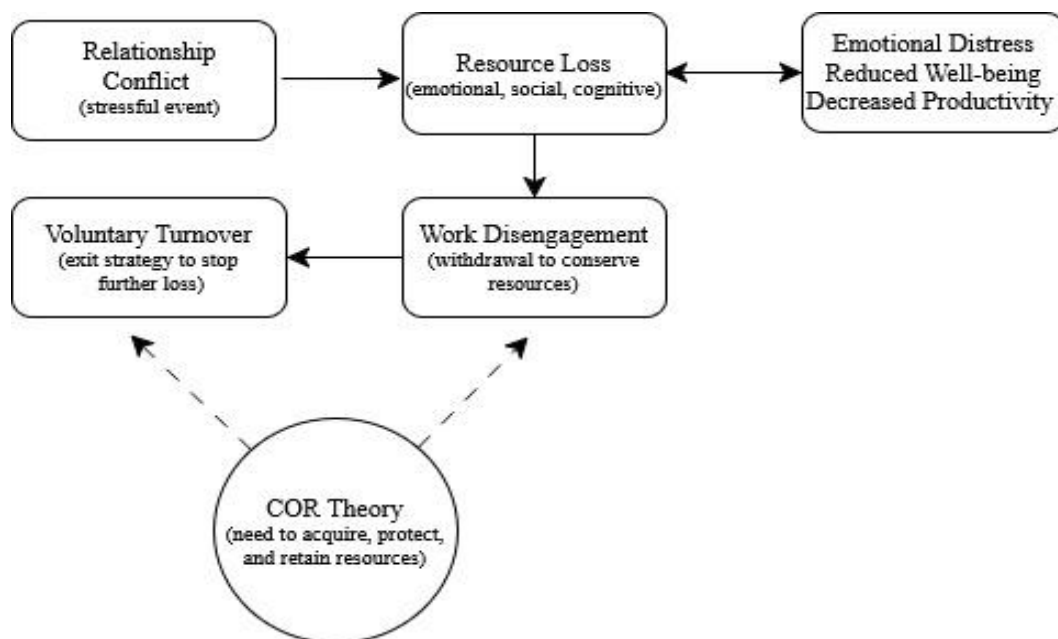
According to COR theory, well-being is a universally valued resource that can be depleted when an employee's effort in conserving their existing resources fails when exposed to resource loss situations (Hayat & Afshari, 2021). Raza et al. (2023) found that stressful events in the workplace cause emotional exhaustion that consistently reduces emotional resources. Resource loss due to emotional exhaustion causes employees to exhibit adverse behavioral patterns (Raza et al., 2023). Okros and Virga (2023) and Liu (2024) suggested that supportive work environments are a significant resource and are key to attaining personal resources that improve well-being. When the workplace provides an environment where employees have positive emotional connections with co-workers, emotional resources are strengthened and

reduce the potential for emotional distress (Wang et al., 2023). Building on this theoretical foundation, the conceptual framework examines how relationship conflict in the workplace contributes to resource depletion that causes emotional distress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity along its path towards work disengagement. This conceptual framework offers a lens to understand the progression of employees' experiences from relationship conflict to disengagement and, ultimately, to voluntary turnover. To visually represent this phenomenon, the following conceptual framework illustrates how relationship conflict initiates a cycle of resource depletion, resulting in emotional distress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity, ultimately culminating in work disengagement and voluntary turnover. COR theory interacts with work disengagement as a coping mechanism to protect and retain resources and voluntary turnover as a final measure taken to prevent further resource loss. Figure 1 illustrates how relationship conflict is a stressful event that causes the loss of emotional, social, and cognitive resources for employees. This resource loss leads to emotional distress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity of workers, resulting in further resource loss, followed by withdrawal through work disengagement and ultimately voluntary turnover.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: The Progression from Relationship Conflict to Work Disengagement

Using the Conservation of Resources Theory



Note. This figure was adapted from depictions illustrating how conflict, exhaustion, and engagement influence turnover and how organizational support impacts wellbeing and job performance (Xue et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). The current adaptation demonstrates the contexts of this study, including the presence of relationship conflict as a stressor, the resulting resource loss that leads to emotional distress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity. These impacts lead to more resource loss, which leads to work disengagement and eventual voluntary turnover (Author’s creation, 2025). Adapted from “Signifying the relationship between psychological factors and turnover intention: The mediating role of work-related stress and moderating role of job satisfaction,” by J. Xue, H. Wang, M. Chen, X. Ding, and M. Zhu, 2022, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, p. 6 (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.847948>). CC BY and

“How do determiners of job performance matter during Covid-19? The conservation of resource theory,” by W. Zhao, L Shao, M. Zhan, and M. Peng, 2022, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, p. 5 (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.774552>). CC BY.

COR theory was coupled with the job demands-resources (JD-R) model to find that resource loss is a stressor that results in work disengagement as a coping mechanism to preserve resources and prevent further loss (Afrahi et al., 2022). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model assumes that all occupations contain stress factors categorized as job demands and job resources. The alignment with COR theory supplements resource gain or loss to help explain stress and psychological issues within the workplace (Bakker, 2022). While some studies that combine the JD-R model and COR theory are beneficial in an organizational context, it was not appropriate for this study, as the JD-R model provides no relevance or perspective to personal resource loss and its impact on work disengagement.

Overall, negative co-worker interactions impact employee mental state and cause a mental and emotional withdrawal from work, creating a desire to seek new employment (Agarwal et al., 2024). Daily stressors are the most significant predictors of resource loss, and at work, resource depletion is harmful and increases job stress and decreases well-being (Snyder et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Individual communication at work can cause stress, especially if interactions become threatening to the point of resource depletion, which can lead to reduced well-being (Sarwat et al., 2021). Wang et al. (2021) explored the concept of COR theory’s resource caravan passageway principle, which studies the interaction of resources in the workplace, with individual and situational factors working together to influence outcomes. They found that work resources (the work environment) and individual personal resources (the perceptions of that environment) work together and play a crucial role in employee behavior or

decisions (Wang et al., 2021). Sarwat et al. (2021) recognized that employees in today's organizations experience job demands and expectations that create stressors by heightening the need for personal and organizational resources. These job stressors hinder employees' ability to fulfill their job demands due to the energy needed to deal with the stress, harming their overall well-being. To achieve optimal well-being, people must experience freedom from stressful situations and have positive relationships that promote growth and development (Sarwat et al., 2021).

COR theory, developed by Hobfoll, opposes Lazarus and Folkman's stress-appraisal theory. Stress-appraisal theory is not generally studied in an organizational context and suggests that stress only occurs after something happens (Hobfoll et al., 2017). Stress-appraisal theory only interprets stress as a post-event. Therefore, it was not suited for this study because this study focused on resource loss and outcomes beyond stress in an organizational context. Many studies couple COR theory with Job-Demand Resources (JD-R) theories that agree that there is a connection between organizational commitment, engagement, and employee well-being (Chambel & Carvalho, 2022). However, their main differences appear in their focus, as COR theory addresses resource loss as a catalyst for employee behaviors while JD-R theory centers on job characteristics and their role in well-being (Demerouti, 2025). Therefore, using JD-R theory for this study would not provide rich insights into how relationship conflict influences resource loss and its impact on work engagement.

The key components of COR theory were related to this study because individuals are motivated to acquire, protect, and preserve valuable resources such as emotional well-being and psychological stability, and under persistent stress, resources are further threatened or depleted (Afrahi et al., 2022; Hobfoll, 1989; Xue et al., 2022). Relationship conflict is a form of

interpersonal conflict characterized by personal disagreements, emotional tension, and incompatibility between co-workers (Li, 2023; Yue & Thelen, 2023). Relationship conflict predicts emotional exhaustion and strain following resource depletion or loss (Venz & Nesher, 2022). Resource loss is the reduction or loss of physical, emotional, or psychological resources that cause negative emotions in individuals (Choi et al., 2024). Resource loss due to relationship conflict causes work disengagement and psychological withdrawal as a coping strategy to protect remaining resources (Cavallari et al., 2025). Work disengagement is when employees emotionally, cognitively, or physically withdraw from their job duties (Afrahi et al., 2022; Li, 2023). Reacting and coping with stressful situations through disengagement are predictors of voluntary turnover (Afrahi et al., 2022). Voluntary turnover occurs when employees willingly leave their place of employment (Ahmad, 2022).

Applying COR theory to this study highlighted how relationship conflict initiates a cascading effect beginning with resource strain, progressing to work disengagement, and potentially culminating in voluntary turnover (Agarwal et al., 2024; Wogwu et al., 2023). This framework helped examine the lived experiences of employees navigating this phenomenon, where disengagement and turnover reflect efforts to conserve their remaining resources. Based on these foundations, COR theory offered a meaningful lens through which to view the research questions guiding this study. COR theory provided a relevant conceptual foundation for understanding how employees respond to relationship conflict in the workplace. Conceptual frameworks offer a structured understanding of topics or problems and help clarify and integrate diverse perspectives on studied issues (Brydges & Batt, 2023). Kouam (2024) and Van Der Waldt (2024) cited that conceptual frameworks that are informed by theoretical frameworks, are the roadmap that helps organize research ideas and shape research methods, designs, data collection

approaches, and sampling strategies. They also assist researchers in identifying gaps in the literature and articulating their study's contribution to the field (Kouam, 2024; Van Der Waldt, 2024). COR theory provided the foundation of how resource loss due to relationship conflict can progress to work disengagement and turnover.

Recent studies have used the COR theory framework similarly to this proposed study. An exploration of COR theory found that the work environment is a resource for employees and can enhance well-being, suggesting that organizations that create supportive environments promote employee well-being and foster engagement (Demerouti, 2025; Yucel et al., 2025). Zahid and Nauman (2024) found that organizational climates relate to employee behaviors. Exposure to workplace situations leads to significant resource loss and stress (Naseer & Raja, 2021). Dealing with relationship conflict requires and expends significant emotional resources, and the remaining resources are insufficient to work effectively, thereby taking measures to protect them (Lu & Zhou, 2025). COR theory affirms that emotional resource loss due to relationship conflict can lead to work disengagement and employees considering quitting their jobs due to the emotional strain and the desire to retain remaining resources and reduce further loss (Báez-Borrero et al., 2025; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023).

Workplace Conflict

Conflict has always existed at every level in society, including the workplace, and continues to be a persistent challenge for employee well-being and organizational performance (Adeyemi, 2022; Mwogereze, 2023). Workplace conflict is a significant issue for organizations, as poorly managed or unresolved conflicts harm employee well-being and reduce performance and productivity (Teratai & Iskandar, 2024). Some studies suggest that workplace conflict can be functional, improving creativity in problem solving, innovation, and promoting growth, but can

also be dysfunctional, causing distress resulting in reduced productivity, employee harm, and turnover (Adeyemi, 2022; Egerová & Rotenbornová, 2021). De Dreu and Weingart (2023) suggested that while minimal conflict can aid in confronting issues, recognizing differing perspectives that boost creativity, these benefits dissipate as conflict increases and performance declines. Types of workplace conflict include task conflict, which includes disagreements about work, and relationship conflict, which is rooted in personal disagreements and tension between individuals (Shrestha & Singh, 2024). Task and relationship conflicts are sometimes linked, existing together and shaping each other (Castellini et al., 2022).

While research suggests that some instances of workplace conflict can improve worker experiences and boost productivity in an organization, most find that employees who experience toxic work environments are less engaged in work and experience performance deficiencies due to stress (Shrestha & Singh, 2024). Adeyemi (2022) and Anjum et al. (2022) found that high levels of workplace conflict reduce productivity and harm employee well-being by creating emotional strain. Additionally, workplace conflict causes negative employee behavior that hurts team relationships, induces stress, and results in higher turnover intentions (Bijalwan et al., 2024; Zahid & Nauman, 2024). Comprehensive research showed that while some forms of conflict may provide positive outcomes, the overall impact of unresolved detrimental conflict harms individual and organizational productivity (Bruce et al., 2025; Naseer & Raja, 2021).

Task conflicts in the workplace occur due to misunderstandings and differing perspectives or non-consensus regarding work processes are considered constructive, while relationship conflict refers to interpersonal disputes based on personal incompatibilities and is emotion-based (Aghaei et al., 2022; Cai & Ali, 2024; Luo & Lu, 2020). Some scholars argue that task conflict can improve employee innovation and enhance decision making and that, when

managed effectively, it improves employee productivity (Aghaei et al., 2022; Shrestha & Singh, 2024). While task conflict can improve some work contexts, performance will be negatively impacted if it becomes persistent or emotional (Shrestha & Singh, 2024). Some research suggests that task conflict can have positive effects, while other studies highlight its potential negative impacts (Choi et al., 2024; Shrestha & Singh, 2024). However, scholars consistently agree that relationship conflict is uniformly harmful to employees and organizations (Cai & Ali, 2024; Choi et al., 2024). Vapiwala and Pandita (2024) suggest that when task conflict arises, personal tensions increase, adding to emotional stress and depleting resources. Although task conflict is sometimes considered productive in organizations, relationship conflict is overwhelmingly considered harmful (Castellini et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2024; Shrestha & Singh, 2024). Xue et al. (2022) assert that relationship conflict depletes emotional resources, causing stress that severely reduces work engagement. Previous research consistently reveals that while task conflict may provide partial benefits in some instances, relationship conflict is not associated with positive outcomes and, instead, risks employee well-being and organizational sustainability (Adeyemi, 2022; Bruce et al., 2025).

Relationship Conflict

While general conflict heightens tension among individuals, relationship conflict directly causes psychological stress by depleting emotional resources and results in counterproductive work behaviors (Choi et al., 2024; Dahiya et al., 2025; Lu & Zhou, 2025; Venz & Nesher, 2022). Relationship conflict with coworkers is a common issue in the workplace, consisting of interpersonal interactions of disagreement between individuals due to conflicting interests, differences of opinion, values, beliefs, or personality clashes (Ahmad, 2022; Bruce et al., 2025). Relationship conflict commonly occurs due to individual incompatibilities, personality

differences, or miscommunication, leading to emotional tension and distrust (Dachasa, 2022; Iqbal & Raja, 2024; Li, 2023). Relationship conflict with coworkers generally uncovers underlying differences within the work team, reducing morale and creating workplace tension (Adamovic, 2022; Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Irwan, 2024). When relationship conflict becomes a regular part of employees' work groups, it erodes the social bonding of work groups and prevents them from building strong, high-quality connections with the organization (Somaraju et al., 2022; Yue & Thelen, 2023). Most employees believe that relationship conflict can be avoided and is counterproductive, potentially leading to destructive and adverse outcomes (Dachasa, 2022). Relationship conflict, derived from interpersonal tensions, sets the foundation for negative employee reactions that impact job responsibilities and outcomes (Choi et al., 2024).

Workplace relationship conflict results in counterproductive employee behavior that demonstrates negative attitudes and reduced efforts that threaten harm to the organization (Ahmad, 2022; Zahid & Nauman, 2024). Iqbal and Raja (2024) and Losada-Otalora et al. (2020) contend that poor work relationships result from prevailing relationship conflict and cause significant problems within the workforce, such as diminished physical health and reduced performance of employees. Relationship conflict has harmful consequences, impacting employee attitudes and performance and causing friction and animosity among workers (Raub et al., 2021). Workplace relationship conflict is a stressor that depletes individual resources and leads to disengagement (Li, 2023). Framed by COR theory, relationship conflict depletes employee resources, pushing them to disengage from work to escape (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023). Bruce et al. (2025) and Shrestha and Singh (2023) found that relationship conflict in the workplace is underreported, and employees who experienced this conflict exhibited increased avoidance behaviors, absenteeism, and stress. Castellini et al. (2022) found that relationship

conflicts have consistently increased in the workplace, some short, significant events, and others are more subtle and escalate over time, causing severe emotional distress. As emotional strain accumulates and avoidance behaviors escalate, relationship conflict emerges as a key driver of disengagement and diminished performance (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Irwan, 2024).

The stress from relationship conflict causes employees to behave in ways that violate workplace norms and cause anxiety for themselves, their colleagues, and the organization (Iqbal & Raja, 2024; Kundi & Badar, 2021). Relationship conflict in the workplace is consistently linked to a range of adverse psychological and behavioral outcomes (Khan & Azam, 2022). Research on relationship conflict reveals significant harmful impacts on individuals and is widely recognized as one of the most significant sources of workplace stress (Khan & Azam, 2022; Somaraju et al., 2022). Ibrahim et al. (2021) and Jung et al. (2024) found that relationship conflict at work is linked to negative mental and physical health outcomes for employees. Employees faced with relationship conflict at work experience resource loss, predicting elevated levels of work disengagement, significantly increasing potential for voluntary turnover (Iqbal & Raja, 2024; Li, 2023). Given the detrimental effects of relationship conflict, specifically the significant threat to emotional and psychological resources, employees resort to counterproductive behaviors like work disengagement (Striler et al., 2021).

Resource Loss

COR theory posits that people feel stressed when they predict or experience the loss of something important to them (Hobfoll et al., 2017). In an organizational context, resources can include emotional and psychological strength relating to optimism, resilience, emotional regulation, or social connections (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2017). Zhou and Chen (2021) state that following the loss of valuable resources, protection of further loss is hindered,

resulting in a continuous cycle of resource erosion. Stress brought on by the depletion of personal resources can induce a loss spiral that further exacerbates stress and resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2017; Liu, 2024). Anasori et al. (2021) and Bon and Shire (2022) suggest that employees under stress experience a resource deficit, and that resource loss is significantly tied to psychological distress.

The drain on valuable resources caused by workplace stressors can cause employees to struggle to cope, become overwhelmed as they work to preserve remaining resources, and lead to a downward spiral of ongoing resource depletion (Ahmad, 2022; Striler et al., 2021). Resource drain leads to emotional exhaustion, increasing emotional strain as efforts to manage and cope with resource loss deepen emotional impacts (Anjum et al., 2022; Naseer & Raja, 2021). When personal resources are threatened or lost, emotional strain and psychological withdrawal emerge, making increased stress more likely (Cavallari et al., 2025; Somaraju et al., 2022). The erosion of resources can weaken employees' social connections at work and lead to feelings of isolation and reduced overall well-being (Kundi & Badar, 2021; Somaraju et al., 2022). Stressors caused by relationship conflict cause resource depletion for employees, limiting their ability to manage work demands and further heightening stress levels (Somaraju et al., 2022).

When employees experience continuous relationship conflict at work, escalation is likely, and begins to deteriorate critical resources needed to work effectively, causing a spiraling effect (Somaraju et al., 2022; Zahlquist et al., 2023). Relationship conflict is regarded as one of the most significant stressors within a workplace (Somaraju et al., 2022). Jung et al. (2024) and Dahiya et al. (2025) found that relationship conflict is linked to psychological distress in the workplace as it involves emotional investment, severely depleting social, emotional, and psychological resources. Psychological strain and physiological well-being significantly erode as

interpersonal conflict persists (Prince et al., 2024). De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia (2023) draw on the COR theory that stressful work events deplete individual resources, and the resulting reactive thoughts and behaviors are for the protection of remaining resources and to avoid further resource loss. When employees consistently experience conflict, their reactions are motivated by ways to handle the stress created by the conflict event, sometimes resorting to defensive behaviors (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023; Irshad et al., 2023). Irshad et al. (2023) further stated that interpersonal conflicts are viewed as a threat to personal resources, and it is essential for individuals to simultaneously protect and pursue resources.

When faced with workplace conflict that depletes resources and reduces well-being, employees will assume a defensive position (Losada-Otálora et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion and anxiety are symptoms of psychological and physiological stress and indicate that emotional resources have been threatened or lost (Jung et al., 2024; Striler et al., 2021). With eroding valuable resources, employees struggle to meet work demands and experience emotional strain due to prolonged stress (Liu, 2024; Somaraju et al., 2022). Continuous resource loss due to workplace relationship conflict and stress heightens employee emotional strain, harms their overall well-being, and hinders their work productivity (Somaraju et al., 2022; Zhou & Chen, 2021). Resource loss triggered by workplace stressors, particularly relationship conflict, initiates a harmful cycle that erodes well-being and drives disengagement (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Li, 2023).

Emotional Distress

Relationship conflict causes significant stress and resource drain, causing emotional strain (Prince et al., 2024). Continual exposure to relationship conflict in the workplace creates stress and anxiety, reducing emotional resources, increasing emotional strain, and causing work

disengagement (Hong et al., 2025; Mdhlalose, 2025). As relationship conflict depletes emotional energy and employees become emotionally exhausted, conflict may persist as a reaction to stress and create harm to overall well-being (Báez-Borrero et al., 2025; Dahiya et al., 2025). Resource loss from continual relationship conflict drains emotional resources, resulting in feelings of helplessness and anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Cavallari et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024; Cortina et al., 2022; Khan & Azam, 2022). Emotional exhaustion is a prolonged condition of physical and psychological fatigue that arises from overwhelming personal or work demands combined with persistent stress (Islam & Chaudhary, 2024). Depleted emotional resources require individuals to make emotional effort to cope with stress, thereby exacerbating emotional exhaustion (Akhlaghimofrad & Farmanesh, 2021). Anjum et al. (2022) and Ahmad (2022) found that negative emotions are linked to anxiety and anger which lead to emotional exhaustion. Stress from relationship conflict causes emotional resource loss, leading to negative emotional reactions, reducing energy and enthusiasm, and causing withdrawal (Choi et al., 2024; Naseer & Raja, 2021). Increased negative emotional responses to conflict can further elevate stress and result in potential long-term health issues (Sommovigo et al., 2023).

Relationship conflict stress causes emotional strain that hinders job performance and increases an employee's desire to leave the organization (Abbas et al., 2025; Anjum et al., 2022). Since relationship conflict is emotion-driven, it results in strain that causes destructive thoughts and behaviors that predict significant impacts to overall emotional well-being (Danauskė et al., 2023; Esbati & Korunka, 2021). Negative emotions reinforce stress and vice versa, creating a cycle of continual emotional distress (Feng et al., 2023). Emotional strain is linked to quiet quitting, a new term describing a type of mental detachment from work where employees reduce work commitment and mentally disconnect from the organization due to environmental stress

(Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Workplace stress has a profound impact on individual well-being through emotional exhaustion, causing coping methods such as work disengagement and reduced organizational commitment (Dilekçi et al., 2025). Stressful work environments produce stress and anxiety, impacting work engagement, reducing productivity, and increasing turnover (Mdhlalose, 2025).

While some withdrawal methods help individuals cope with stress and reduce stress in the short term, over time, emotional strain will increase (Ahmad, 2025; Saleh et al., 2025). Singh et al. (2023) believe that the way employees behave at work reflects how they feel, and if they feel bad, then motivation and commitment will suffer. Employees who experience emotional strain due to relationship conflicts at work that reduce their overall well-being seek to detach from work and seek new employment (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Kuriakose & Sreejesh, 2023a). These patterns reflect that relationship conflict takes a significant toll on employees' emotional state through resource loss, and as emotional strain intensifies, overall well-being begins to suffer consequently. This growing emotional strain not only disengages employees from their work and undermines their overall psychological and emotional well-being (Abdullah et al., 2024; Ahmad, 2022).

Reduced Sense of Well-Being

Li (2023) and Irshad et al. (2023) stated that employee well-being, essential to organizational success, is significantly compromised by prolonged workplace stress and interpersonal conflict. The well-being of employees in the workplace is essential for attaining business success, resulting in favorable effects such as improved employee retention rates and enhanced productivity (Irshad et al., 2023). Conversely, continual conflicts in the workplace can have adverse impacts that threaten the overall well-being of employees (Mihaylova, 2021). A

harmful work atmosphere jeopardizes this well-being, as circumstances that pose a risk to resource depletion can lead individuals to feel overwhelmed, resulting in stress and adversely affecting their overall health (Rasool et al., 2021). Psychological studies indicate that employee well-being encompasses both physical and mental health, which are vital for complete life satisfaction and effective performance (Abdullah et al., 2024). When stress surpasses an optimal threshold, it can lead to reduced organizational performance due to the discomfort it causes among employees (Ayo-Ogunlusi & Azeez, 2025). Continuous workplace stress can adversely affect physical well-being, leading to more significant health issues (Cortina et al., 2022; Cranage & Foster, 2022).

Workplace relationship conflict significantly raises stress levels, anxiety, and depression, which in turn increases negative emotions and reduces overall well-being (Bruce et al., 2025; Caillier, 2021; Choi et al., 2024; Khan & Azam, 2022). Saundry and Urwin (2021) found that among employees who reported experiencing relationship conflict, 56% indicated they were dealing with stress, anxiety, and/or depression. Loh et al. (2024) found that work stressors result in psychological distress, sick leaves, and turnover. Poor relationships with colleagues are a major cause of job stress, resulting in psychological and behavioral reactions from employees (Vallasamy et al., 2023). Elevated stress can harm well-being by causing anxiety and negative emotions that manifest in distress (Vallasamy et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Research further argued that a poor organizational psychological safety climate is a critical detriment to employee well-being (Loh et al., 2024). Approximately 485,000 employees leave their jobs annually due to conflict (Saundry & Urwin, 2021). Given the discoveries of negative outcomes, organizations must take notice of the significance of employee well-being as findings reveal that employees who are absent from work environments that threaten their well-being often report improved

mental health, enhanced physical well-being, greater overall wellness, and reduced symptoms of psychological stress (Kuriakose & Sreejesh, 2023b).

Positive relationships among colleagues are crucial to fostering employee well-being (Kuriakose & Sreejesh, 2023a). Elevated levels of workplace relationship conflict lead to feelings of frustration, anger, and anxiety (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022). Such conflicts elicit negative emotions that drain resources and impact overall well-being (Irshad et al., 2023). Experiencing chronic anxiety results in elevated physiological responses to stress, making resource availability critical to buffering these responses (Meurs et al., 2023). Research reveals that relationship conflict in the workplace causes negative emotions such as anxiety and fatigue (Jung et al., 2024). Anxiety can lead to elevated physical and psychological arousal in individuals, resulting in them being more focused on future stressors, diverting resources, and leaving them with insufficient resources to cope with future stressful events, thereby exacerbating the issue (Feng et al., 2023). Moreover, workplace limitations can result in emotional fatigue, irritation, and a decline in overall well-being (Striler et al., 2021; Yue & Thelen, 2023). Workers subjected to negative encounters with coworkers face a heightened likelihood of developing anxiety, depression, and deterioration in physical health (Yue & Thelen, 2023).

Employees who experience relationship conflicts, including disputes, quarrels, or other forms of incivility or physical aggression, are particularly susceptible to feelings of depression, frustration, and diminished self-esteem (Prince et al., 2024). Aligning with Hoboll's resource-loss concept, when stress requires you to draw on other resources to cope, further resource loss is induced and leads to resource loss spirals (Zhou & Chen, 2021). When conflict threatens resources, emotional distress occurs, inducing psychological strain and increasing the resource

loss (Sommovigo et al., 2023). All of these events describe the resource loss spiral, which sees resource loss continue with accelerated speed and impact on the individual (Hobfoll et al., 2017). As employee well-being deteriorates and the cycle of resource loss and emotional strain intensifies, employees begin to disengage from work, increasing turnover risk (Li, 2023; Somaraju et al., 2022).

Decreased Productivity

Employee performance is critical for organizational productivity and sustainability (Pulekar & Savale, 2025). To be productive, workplace organizational environments must focus on the well-being of their employees (Ling et al., 2025). Workers with positive outlooks and mindsets are more productive and motivated to achieve organizational financial and customer-related goals (Adeyemi, 2022; Ouhammou & Manar, 2024). An organization's products or services are available to consumers due to the work performed by employees, making it important to understand how co-worker interactions drive individual behaviors that impact work productivity (Bakker, 2022). Maniendaran et al. (2025) and Irwan (2024) attested that individual stress levels impact work performance and that when experiencing stress, employees are likely to perform poorly, becoming demotivated and reducing overall productivity. Stressful work environments harm individuals and organizations through performance reductions and limited efforts by employees (Mdhlalose, 2025). Ezeadim and Ananomo (2025) described work environments as the conditions within the workplace that impact employee commitment to the organization and influence performance. Workplace stress and employee well-being carry short and long-term impacts on individual and organizational performance (Ezeadim & Ananomo, 2025).

Reduced workplace well-being reduces employee productivity and performance due to resource loss and conservation efforts (Irshad et al., 2023). When employees continue to work in a state of reduced well-being, productivity loss occurs (Saundry & Urwin, 2021). Poor co-worker relationships exacerbate stress levels and create toxic work cultures that harm team collaboration and decrease productivity (Bijalwan et al., 2024). Extended exposure to stressful work environments costs organizations through employee absenteeism, a decline in performance, and production shortfalls (Ayo-Ogunlusi & Azeez, 2025; Kwala et al., 2025; Meurs et al., 2023). Work environments riddled with incivility and co-worker conflicts impede communication and collaboration, hurting the work team's ability to function effectively and resulting in reduced productivity (Bijalwan et al., 2024). Aligning with COR theory, when workers are using their resources to deal with conflict, the focus on work is reduced, leading to a reduction in productivity (Dela Vega et al., 2025).

Negative worker relationships cause poor work behaviors that produce negative outcomes such as poor productivity (Abugre & Acquaaah, 2022; Adeyemi, 2022). Conflict creates emotional harm, interpersonal distrust, poor productivity, and ineffectiveness that negatively impact the organization (Adeyemi, 2022). Dachasa (2022) estimated that the more relationship conflicts exist in an organization, the more significant reduction in job performance. Relationship conflict significantly reduces job performance as employees become avoidant, experience health issues, or remain absent from the workplace, all resulting in a loss of production (Bruce et al., 2025; Khan & Azam, 2022). When employees remain at work, conflicts cause stress that can lead to communication lapses as employee commitment levels decline (Anwar Ul Haq et al., 2023). Poor co-worker relationships often result in employees becoming cynical and engaging in counterproductive behaviors by refusing to share knowledge, resulting in productivity lapses

(Akhlaghimofrad & Farmanesh, 2021). Costs associated with lost productivity due to poor workplace relationships ranged from nearly \$700 billion to \$2 trillion annually, highlighting a major problem for organizations (Dhanani et al., 2021).

Workplace relationship conflict is directly related to performance and productivity, particularly in teams (Dahiya et al., 2025). Relationship conflict hampers team building, collaboration, and the overall environment, socially and professionally (Lu & Zhou, 2025). When employees experience relationship conflict at work, creative and innovative work behaviors are significantly reduced (Koroglu & Ozmen, 2022). When team members feel stressed, anxiety builds and reduces team and organization commitment, impairing effective decision making (Iqbal & Raja, 2024). While some research suggests that task conflict is beneficial, Shrestha and Singh (2023) found that task conflicts harm employee performance via reduced collaboration and productivity of all team members. When emotional and cognitive resources are consumed by relationship conflict at work, attention to work tasks and production are reduced, and efficiency suffers (Irwan, 2024).

Ongoing relationship conflict causes workers to decrease commitment so that they can use resources to manage the conflicts, resulting in reduced productivity, minimal output, and low organizational performance (Wogwu et al., 2023). Banerjee and Malik (2025) found that relationship conflict is so prevalent in the workplace that organizational managers spent nearly half of their time dealing with relationship conflicts between employees. Yue and Thelen (2023) concluded that relationship conflict harms cognitive capabilities at work and creates significant distractions from task completion, resulting in low performance and team functioning. When work groups experience relationship conflict, individual arguments arise, and a lack of consideration for all members can cause negative outcomes regarding rule compliance,

cooperation, or helping behaviors (Yue & Thelen, 2023). Conflicts with co-workers impede innovative work behaviors that harm team functioning and productivity (Shrestha & Singh, 2024; Yelgin & Geylan, 2024). Relationship conflict impacts trust and cohesion, leading to detrimental work behaviors such as increased verbal conflict or refusing to communicate with co-workers altogether (Choi et al., 2024). Kundi et al. (2023) argued that relationship conflict at work is unavoidable, creating emotional and attitudinal reactions that hinder job performance. Job performance is impacted because when employees are distracted from their tasks to deal with conflict, their performance declines (Kundi et al., 2023).

Thornton and Fletcher (2024) cited that the most significant impact of unresolved restorative conflict at work is the breakdown of co-workers' communication. These disruptions directly impact organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Thornton & Fletcher, 2024). Unmanaged conflict can make workplace stress worse, resulting in counterproductive behaviors by employees that harm organizational performance and efficiency (Maniendaran et al., 2025; Rasool et al., 2021). Counterproductive behaviors by employees cause stress and anxiety for other employees, reducing their productivity and furthering stress and poor performance (Faheem et al., 2023). As the presence of ongoing stress and relationship conflict in the workplace consistently harms productivity, disengagement becomes a significant factor in reductions to work and team collaborative efforts toward organizational goal achievement (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025).

Work Disengagement

Work engagement is essential to organizations, as they depend on engaged and committed employees to remain productive and sustainable (Mubashir & Siddiqui, 2023). Employee engagement in the workplace fosters a sense of unity within the organization (Rasool

et al., 2021). Employee engagement fosters better job performance, tying in well-being and health as critical factors in creativity, productivity, and organizational success (Abdullah et al., 2024). Ling et al. (2025) described engaged employees as vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed, referring to the three dimensions that demonstrate energetic, enthusiastic, resilient, inspired, focused and immersed in their work. These behaviors and attitudes are the basis for engagement and predict positive outcomes and performance of individuals and organizations (Ling et al., 2025). Work engagement is a critical component to reducing voluntary turnover, as engaged employees are more dedicated and less likely to look for new job opportunities (Memon et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2022). Zahari and Kiliannan (2023) found that engaged employees are proactive and committed to working towards shared organizational objectives and delivering positive outcomes.

A poll of over 15,000 U.S. workers uncovered that only 32% of employees were engaged, 50% mentally detached due to stress, and 18% significantly disengaged (Ling et al., 2025). Globally, disengaged workers cost the economy \$7.8 trillion in lost productivity (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). The idea of work disengagement has developed in conjunction with workplace stress, recognizing that poor work climates result in employee disengagement, reduced productivity, and turnover intentions (Pulekar & Savale, 2025; Xie et al., 2025). In the workplace, disengagement can begin as minor noticeable behaviors such as procrastination or low participation, then graduate to more severe forms of absenteeism and eventually total disengagement, resulting in reduced productivity, absenteeism, or even total withdrawal (Saleh et al., 2025; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). As employees disengage from work, they no longer attempt to contribute meaningfully or work collaboratively with co-workers (Dela Vega et al., 2025). Disengaged employees lack enthusiasm, experience heightened stress, and reduce work

output, leading to long-term individual and organizational performance issues (Irwan, 2024). Additionally, disengaged employees demonstrate attitudinal and behavioral reactive signs during detachment, demonstrating work indifference, a lack of desire to work, and eventually complete withdrawal from work (Shen & Ren, 2023).

Shen and Ren (2023) and Saraiva and Nogueiro (2025) found that most individuals cite organizational culture, poor peer relationships, and work atmospheres that threaten their well-being as the most significant causes for disengagement. In 2022, as over 50 million workers voluntarily left their organizations, company culture was mentioned as a significant motivating factor (Parent-Lamarche & Saade, 2024). Pathan (2022) suggested that employee commitment levels are highly reliant on organizational culture, noting that more positive work cultures result in higher employee commitment levels and reduced turnover. Workplace climates that cause employees to experience perceived psychological or emotional stress cause work disengagement in the employees impacted (Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023). Toxic work environments result in stress and anxiety for employees that breeds negativity through work groups (Rasool et al., 2021). A toxic work environment significantly intensifies disengagement, as employees increasingly refuse to tolerate dysfunctional work cultures (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). When employees perceive the work environment as toxic, they are more likely to discontinue cooperation and disengage from work (Mdhlalose, 2025). Workplace stressors cause employees to withdraw and disengage, leading to detachment from work, peers, and the organization (Hamouche et al., 2023). Workplace stress causes emotional strain and chronic stress for employees, resulting in work disengagement that significantly impacts individuals and organizational performance (Afrahi et al., 2022; Hämmig, 2024).

Job and personal resources are important factors in employee engagement as disengaged employees are less involved in their work and show decreasing loyalty (Rahmadara & Rachmawati, 2025). Generally, individuals react irrationally to negative events at work because emotional and psychological resource depletion triggers cognitive responses that influence the employee's actions (Agarwal et al., 2024). Workplace stress causes emotional distress that results in employee work disengagement (Xue et al., 2022). Work disengagement is used as a coping mechanism for ongoing strain and exhaustion, resulting in substandard job performance (Li, 2023). Employees who experience toxic work environments and negative relationships with co-workers tend to be unwilling to engage in their work (Shen & Ren, 2023). Co-worker relationships impact engagement and, when negative, cause protective disengagement behaviors (Afrahi et al., 2022; Zahid & Nauman, 2024). Parent-Lamarche and Saade (2024) cited that for the individual, relationship conflict results in negative employee attitudes, declining performance, and reduced well-being. For the organization, it prevents establishing an attractive and retention-strong work climate (Parent-Lamarche & Saade, 2024). When employees are disconnected, morale decreases, and dysfunction creeps in in the form of disengagement (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Relationship conflict represents a significant stressor that induces negative thoughts and withdrawal actions, adversely affecting work engagement due to the emotional tension and psychological impacts on employees (Dilekçi et al., 2025; Esbati & Korunka, 2021). Stress caused by relationship conflict predicts withdrawal from team efforts and work disengagement among employees (Irwan, 2024; Yelgin & Geylan, 2024). Behaviors from conflict create unpleasant working atmospheres that negatively influence work engagement, leading to more stress and reduced productivity (Mubashir & Siddiqui, 2023). Yelgin and Geylan (2024)

suggested that direct co-worker interactions impact employee engagement. Relationship conflicts in the workplace exacerbate work disengagement, heightening negative attitudes and feelings that lead to escape measures such as leaving the workplace permanently (Samašonok, 2024). Since relationship conflict causes resource loss and work engagement requires the use of cognitive resources, employees are exhausted and disengage from work to protect remaining resources (Li, 2023; Rasool et al., 2021).

Aligning with COR theory, resource depletion due to relationship conflict can cause work disengagement to take hold at high levels (Bansal & Garg, 2024; Li, 2023). COR theory relates to engagement by highlighting the resource loss principle that states when employees' resources are depleted due to negative work situations, engagement is reduced as a coping mechanism for resource protection (Rasool et al., 2021; Shen & Ren, 2023). To protect emotional resources, employees withdraw from work by distancing themselves and reducing organizational engagement (Saleh et al., 2025). Abbas et al. (2025) stated that the availability of personal resources at work influences employees' engagement and performance. While Wijayati et al. (2022) suggested that engagement in work does not necessarily lead to enhanced job performance in all fields, most studies did find that job performance positively influences job performance (Abbas et al., 2025). Disengagement due to emotional exhaustion depletes employees of the energy necessary to commit their work (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). As individuals require personal and social resources to manage stress, Cavallari et al. (2025) viewed work disengagement as a coping mechanism for resource depletion. Withdrawal through work disengagement, whether short or long-term, helps employees protect resources needed to function effectively (Cavallari et al., 2025). Prolonged detachment from the work environment

increases emotional strain and decreases commitment, leading to complete disengagement to preserve coping resources (Cavallari et al., 2025).

Hammig (2024) and Mdhlalose (2025) suggested that work disengagement is a long-term response to workplace stressors or strain that reduces productivity and heightens turnover risks. Work disengagement is usually followed by and has historically been positively associated with the voluntary turnover in an attempt to escape a work climate that has depleted an employee's personal resources (Ahmad, 2025; Climek et al., 2024). Employees exposed to work environments that negatively impact emotional resources generally react by demonstrating frustration and planning to leave the company, as they no longer believe that the company deserves their commitment (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023). Workplace stress due to poor co-worker relationships further disconnects employees and leads to voluntary turnover (Dilekçi et al., 2025). Voluntary turnover is indicative of a work culture that enables behaviors and attitudes that lead to employee apathy, demotivation, and disengagement (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025).

Voluntary Turnover

Organizations with suboptimal and continual relationship conflicts among employees frequently see significant voluntary employee turnover (Abugre & Acquah, 2022). The prevalence of workplace incivility between employees reveals a marked decline in employee engagement that significantly contributes to increased turnover rates (Agarwal et al., 2024; Akhlaghimofrad & Farmanesh, 2021). Workers who experience negative co-worker relationships have an increased propensity to seek alternative employment with better work climates (Bijalwan et al., 2024; Khan & Azam, 2022). Ahmad (2022) found that there is a strong positive correlation between voluntary employee turnover intentions prevalence of interpersonal conflicts.

Additionally, as individuals contemplate quitting, the likelihood of relationship conflict increases, creating a cycle that exacerbates employee retention problems (Ahmad, 2022). Employee turnover due to workplace conflict creates undue stress, reduces employee job satisfaction, and results in an increase in turnover intentions (Caillier, 2021).

Work-related stress significantly influences employee turnover intentions as employees under considerable stress seek less demanding job opportunities outside of their organization (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). Job-related stress substantially impacts employee job satisfaction which is directly tied to their intentions to leave the organization (Ahmad, 2022). Relationship conflict in the workplace brings emotional distress to employees, causing them to disengage from work innovation and consider resigning from their positions (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023). A toxic workplace leads to elevated levels of stress, a decline in productivity and morale, and an increase in the rate at which employees leave the organization (Dewangan, 2025; Fulmore et al., 2023). The degree to which job stress increases the likelihood of voluntary employee turnover can be explained through the lens of conservation of resource theory, as individuals are motivated to conserve and protect resources against stressors, leading to a heightened desire to exit the work environment (Ahmad, 2022).

Organizations with a culture of toxicity frequently encounter significantly higher attrition rates that escalate costs associated with recruitment and the onboarding of new personnel (Dewangan, 2025). Poor co-worker relationships result in numerous adverse outcomes that include apathy, mistrust toward colleagues, cynicism towards the company, and counterproductive behaviors that damage organizational functionality (Abugre & Acquah, 2022; Ahmad, 2022). Negative workplace behaviors contribute to creating toxic work climates that lead to heightened stress, absenteeism, and rising levels of turnover (De Clercq &

Belausteguigoitia, 2023). Elevated turnover rates due to poor coworker relationships signify a persistent challenge due to the financial burdens associated with the recruitment of new talent, training requirements for new hires, and the loss of seasoned experience that disrupts productivity when employees leave the organization (Ahmad, 2022; Bijalwan et al., 2024). New employees require considerable time and effort to reach the proficiency and experience levels of their predecessors (Fulmore et al., 2023). Employee turnover creates numerous adverse outcomes that include financial costs associated with hiring new employees, operational lapses after experienced workers leave, and the resulting loss of morale by the employees left behind to fill operational gaps (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). The indirect financial impacts of employee turnover include significant work disruptions, loss of valuable knowledge, productivity declines, and reduced service quality (Climek et al., 2024).

Climek (2024) noted that as workforce demographics change, employee retention has become critical to organizations. As workers aged 65 and older are projected to leave the workforce entirely, presenting a major loss of knowledge and experience that are invaluable to their organizations (Climek et al., 2024). Shaw (2024) cited that Millennials, who prioritize work expectations differently, make up over one-third of the U.S. workforce and will fill 75% of the workforce globally by 2025, highlighting the need for organizations to consider cultural changes to attract and retain these demographics. Well-being through job engagement was identified as a requirement for the next-generation workers, citing this as a way to attain organizational continuity by reducing turnover (Shaw, 2024). Additionally, the millennial generation values work that generates vigor, dedication, and absorption, the three dimensions of work engagement, underscoring the critical nature of positive work environments to reduce turnover (Climek et al., 2024).

Strategies Used to Address Disengagement-Driven Turnover

Employee engagement is a significantly challenging and critical part of organizational performance and retention (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Avian et al., 2025). Therefore, addressing this impact through proactive strategies to prevent disengagement and re-engage workers is critical (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). Saraiva and Nogueiro (2025) noted that the most effective approaches considered both the needs of employees alongside organizational objectives. Additionally, when employees felt like their values were aligned with the organization, engagement and performance improved (Larissa, 2024). To sustain employee work engagement, organizations must first develop a supportive work climate (Grailey et al., 2021). Additionally, implementing resource-based initiatives can ensure employee well-being and motivation (Li et al., 2024; Sonar & Pandey, 2023). Finally, creating and utilizing proactive conflict resolution strategies benefits the individual and strengthens the organization (Akram, 2023; Munduate et al., 2022). These strategies highlight how fostering supportive environments can enhance engagement and reduce disengagement-driven turnover, setting the foundation for a positive organizational culture.

Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture and climate directly influence work disengagement and turnover rates and significantly increases when employees perceive the workplace as toxic and emotionally threatening (Parent-Lamarche & Saade, 2024; Shen & Ren, 2023). Perceived organizational support refers to an employee's belief that the organization will prioritize their well-being, and when employees sense this support, they tend to reciprocate through commitment and high levels of engagement that result in exceptional performance (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Employees who perceive their organization to be supportive are more engaged in

work and unlikely to look for alternative employment, resulting in reduced recruitment and training costs for the organization (Hamraia et al., 2024; Sonar & Pandey, 2023). Employees who feel well supported are likely to be engaged in work and increase productivity, innovation, and commitment to superior performance for the organization (Elufioye et al., 2024). Larissa (2024) reported that employees were most engaged in work when organizational cultures promote innovation, collaboration, and inclusiveness, resulting in better performance and overall effectiveness of the company. Supportive work environments provide psychological safety and encourage open communication and innovation resulting in positive work engagement (Grailey et al., 2021; Inoue et al., 2023; Platania et al., 2022). Supportive workplace climates that involve employee involvement and consider employee psychological safety results in improve cognitive and emotional performance capabilities through high levels of work engagement (Hidayat et al., 2024).

Open and nurturing climates foster employee cooperation and collaboration that increase employee involvement and improve workplace relationships (Sonar & Pandey, 2023). When social work conditions are positive, employees create collaborative cultures that predict commitment and engagement (Ezeadim & Ananomo, 2025). Wang (2023) and Elufioye et al. (2024) found that when employees received proper support, managing conflicts proved to be successful. When resolving conflicts, encouraging open communication helps instill a supportive work culture where employees feel safe expressing their ideas or concerns, influencing employee work engagement and relationship building (Sonar & Pandey, 2023). Organizational cultures that value respect, collaboration, and teamwork manage conflict through constructive communication and collective problem-solving that strengthen organizational sustainability (Munduate et al., 2022; Omodan, 2023; Wang, 2023).

Effective leadership is pivotal in shaping organizational cultures, establishing an atmosphere that promotes open communication, and demonstrating support for employee well-being through their actions (Elufioye et al., 2024). Hidayat et al. (2024) found that inspirational leaders who set the example for employees naturally garnered higher levels of work engagement from employees. Sustaining employee engagement requires leadership capabilities that constructively manage different types of conflict while improving morale and engagement (Avian et al., 2025; Castellini et al., 2022; Shrestha & Singh, 2024). Avian et al. (2025) contended that high levels of work engagement were achieved through a leadership approach that aligns with organizational needs. They further recommended that to improve employee work engagement, organizations should prioritize developing transformational leaders approaches, as these are best suited for this responsibility because they inspire, motivate, and support employees, resulting in work engagement (Avian et al., 2025). Castellini et al. (2022) suggested that high levels of relationship conflict in an organization were a result of poor or nonexistent leadership. Therefore, organizations should consider a strategy for leadership development to develop or improve employee engagement within the company (Hidayat et al., 2024).

Resource-Based Initiatives

Organizations develop human resource (HR) strategies to oversee personnel, including policies and procedures to attract and retain employees, which are essential to creating a workplace atmosphere that enhances employee involvement and propels the organization to succeed (Sonar & Pandey, 2023). Hamraia et al. (2024) found that traditional HR practices failed to achieve employee engagement. Alhajaj and Ahmad (2024) suggested that financial rewards were no longer a priority for employees. However, inclusion in decision making, communication, and empowerment significantly impacted work engagement, as employees who

felt trusted tended to be more motivated to perform and are highly engaged in their work (Alhajaj & Ahmad, 2024). Fulmore et al. (2023) discovered that HR methods that encouraged employee participation improved engagement and reduced turnover. Employees who perceive their organization as supportive are more engaged in work and unlikely to look for alternative employment, resulting in reduced recruitment and training costs for the organization (Hamraia et al., 2024; Sonar & Pandey, 2023).

As organizations recognize the importance of employee well-being, human resource (HR) strategies must be supportive, inclusive, and focus on creating work environments where employees feel valued (Elufioye et al., 2024). Li (2024) suggested that effective participative HR strategies positively impacted employee well-being. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) argued that HR practices should provide mutual benefits for employees and the organization (Li et al., 2024). HR managers should provide employees with essential resources that reduce conflict (Wang, 2023). Sonar and Pandey (2023) posited that resource-based HR practices prioritized employee well-being and created cultures that improved morale and boosted organizational performance. Van Beurden (2022) and Sonar and Pandey (2023) suggested that employee engagement was influenced by HR practices that prioritize positive work climates, foster engagement, improve productivity, and resolve conflicts effectively. They also recommended that HR leaders only utilize measures that are considered useful and helpful and to consider querying employees for their opinion on the value of HR practices (Sonar & Pandey, 2023). Human resources practices that provide open communication within the organization and safe work climates have more engaged workers (Anasori et al., 2021). Sonar and Pandey (2023) stated that conflict resolution is a major consideration for HR professionals and is critical to maintaining a positive work climate.

Abbas et al. (2025) found that optimistic leaders increased the resources employees need for psychological well-being while at work, suggesting organizations focus on employee psychological well-being. When employees have effective leaders providing the resources needed, work engagement and productivity improve (Abbas et al., 2025). Zhou and Chen (2021) suggested that organizational leaders were essential to ensuring work climates provide employees with psychological safety. Leaders who are open, actively listen, request feedback, and motivate employees to work vigorously help create psychological safe work environments. (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Leaders who empower employees build trust and positively influence engagement (Afrahi et al., 2022). Saleh et al. (2025) found that when employees trusted their leaders, withdrawal behaviors decreased. When employees experience workplace events that reduce well-being, leaders must provide assistance for them to regain the resources needed to improve well-being (Irshad et al., 2023). Regarding conflict, emotionally intelligent leaders promote effective communication between individuals that allows for resolution (Chaudhary & Arora, 2023).

Conflict Resolution

Given that conflicts in organizations are unavoidable and the impact that they pose to employee engagement and job performance, organizational leaders must remain proactive in developing intervention strategies (Banerjee & Malik, 2025; Munduate et al., 2022). Organizational managers and leaders need to understand the conflict phenomenon, including the different types of conflict, to ensure they use the appropriate resolution strategy (Akram, 2023). Munduate et al. (2022) suggested that the strategies used to manage or resolve conflict reflected the organization's culture. Understanding the causes of relationship conflict is essential in developing strategies for recognizing the signs of discord, preventing continual conflicts, and

creating a positive workplace culture (Akram, 2023). Banerjee and Malik (2025) recommended that organizations develop conflict resolution procedures that involve employee interaction, ensure respectful climates, prioritize civil behavior, and develop a mitigation plan. Managing conflict is a critical skill required for leaders and employees as it can positively impact work productivity (Chaudhary & Arora, 2023). Akram (2023) and Ngcobo (2024) posited that effectively resolving conflict required open communication, active listening, and empathy so that involved parties remain collaborative and de-escalate the conflict. Conflict resolution strategies require open dialogue to resolve conflicts constructively and collectively, and can be accomplished through negotiating, mediation, and arbitration, which can be used to resolve conflicts constructively and collaboratively (Omodan, 2023). Shrestha et al. (2024) suggested that organizations consider training leaders to identify and resolve employee conflicts, finding the transformational leadership approach as the most effective method.

Kilag et al. (2023) stressed that conflict resolution should be a civilized interaction between parties willing to negotiate, communicate, and compromise to reach positive outcomes, with Wang (2023) noting that effective conflict resolution was critical to organizational sustainability. Munduate et al. (2022) found that mediation, an alternative dispute resolution strategy, was being used worldwide and was the best approach for coworker conflicts. Mediation provides an individual, the mediator, as the go-between that assists disputants in working towards a sustainable future state (Brummans et al., 2022). Using a third party to facilitate communication between disputants proved more effective for problem-solving, negotiating, and final agreement (Munduate et al., 2022). Ngcobo (2024) and Paul et al. (2023) found that mediators were effective when they acknowledged and understood the emotions involved in conflict. Managing emotions during mediation requires supportive climates for expression and

emotion management, resulting in successful conflict resolution (Ngcobo, 2024; Paul et al., 2023). Dachasa (2022) and Saundry et al. (2021) found that facilitated interventions, such as mediation, were most effective in resolving conflict and successful in repairing employee relationships. Munduate et al. (2022) found that mediation is effective for managing relationship conflicts. Mediation can be a useful resolution tool when two parties have failed to negotiate or reach an agreement, resulting in relationship fractures causing psychological distress and negative emotions (Munduate et al., 2022).

Gaps in the Literature

Kundi and Bader (2021) found that studies into the impact of relationship conflicts on work behaviors were limited. While highlighting this lack of empirical studies, it is important to consider how continual relationship conflicts create untenable work environments that harm individuals and organizations (Irwan, 2024). There are significant research gaps in exploring how relationship conflict impacts work behaviors, recommending future examinations of how relationship conflict influences work behaviors and engagement (Kundi & Badar, 2021). Li (2023) found that research about disengagement from conflict was significantly lacking, specifically regarding strain and resource considerations. The concept of resource loss spirals suggests that increased strain can exacerbate conflicts, leading to a cycle where resource depletion fuels further discord, which in turn heightens strain (Somaraju et al., 2022). Addressing these gaps provided insights into how relationship conflict influences the behaviors and attitudes of employees and potentially help in creating interventions to mitigate those effects.

Afrahi et al. (2022) found that research focusing on the outcomes of work disengagement had been neglected and suggested that future studies examine the antecedents and outcomes of work disengagement and the impacts on employees. Research has notably failed to examine

negative co-worker interactions, the impact on well-being, and how employees recover from workplace stressors (Kuriakose & Sreejesh, 2023b; Meurs et al., 2023). Li (2023) found a paucity of research considering the impact of relationship conflict on work engagement, with their own study finding no in-depth qualitative data. Therefore, they recommended future qualitative research on the daily progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement (Li, 2023). While quantitative studies are important for providing data, informative qualitative approaches can provide deeper insight into employee perspectives of their work experiences (Báez-Borrero et al., 2025; Elufioye et al., 2024). Using a qualitative lens to understand employees' perception of organizational culture can provide insights for HR practices that can potentially reduce disengagement (Bhebhe, 2020; Özçınar et al., 2024). Therefore, using a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study was best suited for exploring the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement from the employee perspective.

Summary

The literature review identified relationship conflict as a prevalent and harmful form of workplace conflict that depletes emotional, psychological, and social resources (Choi et al., 2024; Li, 2023). Nearly 90% of employees face workplace conflict, with over 25% reporting personal harm from it (Constantina-Alina et al., 2023). The literature review utilizes the conservation of resources (COR) theory as its conceptual framework, classifying relationship conflict as a stressor that initiates resource loss, emotional strain, and eventual disengagement (Xue et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). COR theory contends that individuals are motivated to protect their emotional and psychological resources, and when threatened or lost due to conflict, employees experience stress, leading to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2017). This cycle of resource depletion can result in a

downward spiral, negatively impacting both individual well-being and organizational performance (Jiang et al., 2023; Zhou & Chen, 2021).

Research consistently demonstrates that relationship conflict causes resource depletion, leading to emotional exhaustion, reduced well-being, and decreased job performance (Somaraju et al., 2022; Zhou & Chen, 2021). As individuals seek to protect remaining resources, they often withdraw from work responsibilities, resulting in disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Cavallari et al., 2025). Ahmad (2022) and De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia (2023) found that prolonged disengagement frequently escalated to voluntary turnover as a coping strategy to escape toxic environments that threaten their well-being. Emotional strain harms psychological well-being and predicts withdrawal behaviors and long-term disengagement (Islam & Chaudhary, 2024; Mdhlalose, 2025). Organizational cultures that lack psychological safety and emotional support exacerbate these outcomes (Parent-Lamarche & Saade, 2024; Loh et al., 2024). However, Avian et al. (2025), Sonar and Pandey (2023), and Elufioye et al. (2024) found that supportive workplace climates that exercised open communication and involved employees in organizational initiatives using effective leadership experience enhanced engagement and reduced turnover intentions. Additionally, resource-centric HR practices and proactive conflict management approaches, such as mediation, were critical to mitigating conflict (Akram, 2023; Munduate et al., 2022).

Work disengagement, described as a lack of emotional, cognitive, or physical investment in work, is a clear predictor of turnover (Li, 2023; Shen & Ren, 2023). Disengaged employees demonstrate reduced morale, increased absenteeism, and diminished performance, creating operational disruptions and financial losses for organizations (Bijalwan et al., 2024; Climek et al., 2024). Pathan (2022) and Rasool et al. (2022) found that disengagement often resulted from

organizational climates perceived as toxic or unsupportive. The literature identifies several gaps, including the need for more qualitative research on the progression from conflict to disengagement and the impact of resource loss on employee attitudes and behaviors (Afrahi et al., 2022; Kundi & Badar, 2021; Li, 2023). This study addressed these gaps by employing a qualitative, phenomenological approach to exploring the progression of relationship conflict to work disengagement from the employees' perspective to provide insights into potential organizational strategies to improve work engagement and reduce employee turnover. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology and the reasoning for selection, defines the population and sample for the study, and introduces materials used to recruit and interview participants. The study procedures are detailed, including the data analysis process and any underlying assumptions regarding the study. Finally, limitations and delimitations are described, along with the ethical considerations and assurances for the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement which results in voluntary employee turnover (Li, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. Bloomberg (2023) defines qualitative research as an explorative approach that seeks a deep understanding of social issues from the perspective of the research subjects. Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) stated that qualitative research explains experiences and collects new information to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. They firmly believe that qualitative research approaches are best for exploring social problems and provide the best opportunity for finding patterns in behavior (Dzogovic & Bajrami, 2023).

This chapter describes the selected research methodology and design, alternative methodologies and designs considered, and the reasoning for using the qualitative phenomenological design for this study. Additionally, the chapter describes the population, sampling frame, and sample size for this study. The development of the demographic questionnaire and the interview protocol and how they were used are explained, along with the field-testing approach. The steps for data collection are detailed step by step so that future replication of this study is possible. Data analysis tools, such as NVivo software, are explained. Finally, this chapter concludes with assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations for this study.

Research Methodology and Design

The methodology and design used in this study was a qualitative phenomenological study to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement. Qualitative research seeks to gain a deep understanding of a social activity from the perspective of individuals involved (Bloomberg, 2023). Creswell and Poth (2025) noted that it was appropriate to use qualitative research to explore an issue or problem to gain a deeper understanding of the issue rather than using predetermined information. Qualitative research methods seek to understand individual perspectives that provide a deeper understanding of behaviors related to a particular phenomenon (Rana et al., 2023). Through in-depth interviews, qualitative research aims to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon using the verbal explanations or expressions of affected subjects (Pyo et al., 2023). Rather than quantitatively measuring something, qualitative research provides deeper insight into why things occur in social contexts and why people behave or act in specific ways (Negou et al., 2023). Qualitative research goes beyond the numbers and provides flexible approaches that add context to the accounts of individuals who experience a phenomenon (Sapkota, 2024).

Quantitative and qualitative research methods contain strengths and limitations, have individual styles and assumptions, and view social contexts from different perspectives (Firdaus et al., 2021). Quantitative methods seek to describe conditions, explore relationships, or investigate cause-and-effect phenomena, relying on statistical and experimental frameworks for analysis, while qualitative research strives to understand complex human experiences through interpretation, areas overlooked by quantitative studies (Bloomberg, 2023; Sapkota, 2024). Quantitative studies aim to test hypotheses and identify causal relationships using quantifiable and measurable data through surveying or testing processes (Pyo et al., 2023). Quantitative

methods examine topics to quantify results and achieve consensus where researchers are external to the inquiry, using large, random samples for the study (Bloomberg, 2023). Sapkota (2024) further suggested that quantitative approaches did not adequately address social phenomena and failed to fully understand the social world. Therefore, the quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study, as the researcher was centrally involved in the social exploration of the phenomenon, gaining insights only from those who had experienced the study's problem.

Seeking understanding, being flexible to change, and being involved in the research are the hallmarks of a qualitative study (Bloomberg, 2023; Firdaus et al., 2021). When exploring social phenomena, qualitative methods are recommended, increasing the potential for finding deeper insights into the phenomenon (Negou et al., 2023). Lucas et al. (2022) and Pyo et al. (2023) believe that qualitative research offers a fresh perspective and potential for advancing fields of study or finding new fields of study for understudied or undiscovered topics. When underlying information does not exist about a phenomenon, qualitative studies can provide context through observation and recording of participants' attitudes and behaviors related to the phenomenon, and recommend further research (Orel & Mayerhoffer, 2021). A strength of qualitative research is that it provides stakeholder involvement in research direction, providing flexibility when new events unfold, and is cyclical through constant review and adaptation during a study's duration (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Javadian et al. (2023) found that theory development and generation were critical strengths of qualitative research. Additionally, Bonnell et al. (2022) found strength in qualitative methods, as participant involvement was viewed positively, as they felt their voices were being heard. This method benefits the study as potential new theories can be developed where none previously existed (Bonell et al., 2022).

Qualitative studies such as case studies, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, and ethnography were considered alongside phenomenology, but deemed inappropriate for this study's aim of exploring individual perceptions and emotional experiences of workplace conflict, which was best suited to phenomenological methods. For instance, case studies also seek in-depth knowledge about events that produce patterns using similar sampling and data collection methods (Taherdoost, 2022). Case studies investigate the phenomenon as a case tied to an event, organization, or group, potentially investigating the specifics of the conflict and how it was managed (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Taherdoost, 2022). This study explored the complexities of the phenomenon beyond a single event. Additionally, case studies place great weight on describing the details and explanation of a specific phenomenon, seeking to discover what happened, how it happened, and why it happened to better understand the phenomenon (Firdaus et al., 2021; Negou et al., 2023). This study was not focused on the specifics of a phenomenon, but rather the lived experiences of those who experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, a case study was not appropriate for this study. Further, Taherdoost (2022) found that on-site data collection was necessary for case studies. The researcher did not select this method because the study was primarily concerned about the perspectives of participants who experienced the phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself. Additionally, gaining authentic perspectives from employees experiencing conflict in the workplace may have proven challenging if sharing these perspectives where the problems occurred, making a neutral data collection point more appropriate than on-site collection.

Narrative inquiry research methods emphasize individual stories about life events, requiring the researcher to delve deeply into the life of the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Ugwy & Eze, 2023). A narrative inquiry generally seeks to investigate one or two individuals

with experience in a specific problem (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Islam & Sayeed Akhter, 2022). This study involved 20 participants and examined their experiences related to the phenomenon. Due to the limited sample size and substantial time needed for an in-depth exploration of individual narratives, the use of narrative inquiry was not deemed suitable for this research. Narrative inquiry can also pose a problem of who truly owns the story, who can tell the story, and competing narratives on an individual's story (Bloomberg, 2023). This study included transcription of participant responses verbatim, share and conclude those transcriptions, and then have NVivo analyze the information to formulate themes, with the researcher sharing the results from the analysis.

Grounded theory research is considered a rigorous and systematic approach to developing theory from collected data rather than being theory-driven with preconceived ideas (Lim, 2025). Lim (2025) and Ugwy and Eze (2023) noted that grounded theory's iterative approach allows theories to evolve concurrently with data collection, coding, and comparison. These capabilities create a weakness of this approach due to changes occurring that may redefine who can participate in the study (Ugwy & Eze, 2023). As the researcher learns information and changes direction, recruiting the appropriate participants can become difficult and time-consuming, drawing data collection out to an indeterminate period (Ugwy & Eze, 2023). Although grounded theory provides a basis for qualitative research to stand on its own merits, this approach was not appropriate for this study. Specific recruitment criteria were required to address the gaps in the literature, align with the conceptual framework, and adhere to the timeline required for this study.

Ethnographic studies offers deep insights into cultural or social realms, requiring prolonged immersion into a specific and natural setting (Lim, 2025). Ugwy and Eze (2023) noted

that a researcher conducting an ethnographic study must be prepared to fully immerse themselves in a community or organization, spending weeks or months observing and developing a full picture to verify their theory. Ethnography research focuses on group behaviors resulting from shared meaning (Negou et al., 2023). This approach was not appropriate for this study because of the significant time requirements. In addition, this study did not seek to understand a group's shared meaning but instead focused on the individual perspective of participants experiencing a phenomenon. When a study is primarily focused on exploring the richness of the individual lived experience to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning from participant perspectives, phenomenology is most appropriate (Lim, 2025; Negou et al., 2023; Ugwy & Eze, 2023).

Phenomenology is well-suited for qualitative research, as it involves in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences, offering essential and illuminating insights (Sinfield et al., 2023). A phenomenological study aims to understand the perspectives of participants' experiences and explain the understanding and interpretation of those experiences (Larsen & Adu, 2021). Phenomenology originated with Edmund Husserl and argued that we see our world through a lens of experiences and that consciousness shapes the way we see the world (Larsen, 2023). From a first-person viewpoint, phenomenology seeks to carefully examine how any given person experiences things, which leads to the underlying basis of human experiences (Gallagher, 2022; Husserl, 1931). Husserl (1931) argued that to truly understand another individual's experience, one must understand that each person's world exists from their own viewpoint while living in the same world. For instance, he uses an example of two people looking at a tree from different sides, both seeing a tree, but seeing it differently from their own angles or standing positions (Husserl, 1931). This philosophy aligned with this study, as workplace conflict is in

essence a conflict where each person involved or exposed to that conflict can interpret it differently and display varying reactions to that conflict. This study aimed to discover how relationship conflict in the workplace affects individual employees' and their work engagement.

Merleau-Ponty later added to phenomenology with embodied consciousness, including how we experience the world consciously in both thought and body. He stated that the mind and body are not separate, as when we feel embarrassed, our body reacts with the blushing of cheeks or the pounding of the heart (Larsen, 2023; Larsen & Adu, 2021). This view of phenomenology contends that each person's world knowledge is based on individual perspective through experiences that carry meaning (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956). In a critique of general philosophy, Merleau-Ponty rejected the separation of mind and body, arguing that perception includes active bodily responses. While Husserl believed that consciousness was primary, Merleau-Ponty contended that perception was the starting point of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The combination of Husserl's philosophy of consciousness and Merleau-Ponty's addition of physical reactions, combining the mind and body in perceiving and reacting to the world, made phenomenology the appropriate method for this study, as it sought to understand how individuals perceive and react to relationship conflict within the workplace.

As qualitative research methods share similarities and differences in approach, past and contemporary phenomenological studies have been used to understand how individuals perceive and understand events or experiences (Taherdoost, 2022). Phenomenology focuses on exploring phenomena from the participant's perspective, yielding rich insights across industries, demographics, and cultural contexts. For instance, Szklarski (2007) conducted a phenomenological study with 145 Swedish teenagers to understand conflict experiences. Using self-reporting, the study found that anger and mental strain were prevalent and influenced how

conflicts were experienced and managed (Szklański, 2007). Nielsen and Cairns (2009) used a phenomenological approach to explore how anxiety impacted the development of relationships, with eight participants who identified as having social anxiety completing open-ended written questionnaires about their experiences. The study found that individuals with social anxiety have difficulty forming trusting relationships due to social insecurities (Nielsen & Cairns, 2009). Workplace-focused phenomenological studies have also provided valuable insights. Anselmo-Witzel et al. (2017) explored the job satisfaction of Generation Y nurses by investigating lived experiences in the workplace. The study included in-depth semi-structured interviews of 10 Generation Y nurses, discovering themes including relationship issues and job strain resulting in reduced job satisfaction (Anselmo-Witzel et al., 2017). Miri et al. (2021) investigated employee turnover in Tehran by sampling 10 workers who voluntarily left their jobs within a 4-year span. The study used semi-structured interviews for data collection, found job satisfaction, organizational rigidity, and forms of favoritism as the causes for turnover, and that it was an issue that progressed over time (Miri et al., 2021). To explore employees' perspectives on remote work to discover its impact on productivity and job satisfaction, Murphy (2021) conducted 16 interviews to gather information on participants' experiences. Findings suggested that positive workplace cultures that provided the feeling of group belonging improve employee well-being, and that email communications did not positively replace face-to-face conversations with coworkers (Murphy, 2021). Kazi et al. (2022) examined turnover intentions among 21 banking employees and found that biased rewards, limited upward mobility, and poor communication were key factors contributing to resignation.

In the hospitality sector, Liu-Lastres et al. (2023) used a phenomenological approach to interview 31 current and former hospitality workers to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic

affected their current and future career choices. The study found that stress affected career decisions, and during that vital time, most decisions were based on personality, industry, and internal relationships (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Similarly, Heydarikhayat et al. (2024) explored the lived experiences of hospital nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological study selected 14 participants through purposive sampling and used in-depth semi-structured interviews along with reviewing crisis management reports. The study found four themes, including attrition, societal distrust, organizational performance, and inequality, which were identified as threats to effective hospital management (Heydarikhayat et al., 2024).

Additional studies have focused on organizational culture and motivation. Morvati et al. (2024) embarked on a phenomenological study to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivational factors in developing healthy work environments for nurses. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 13 nurse leaders over a 3-month period. Findings showed that motivational factors of developing health-promoting environments included a sense of responsibility in promoting well-being, mutual trust, learning, and involved leadership within the workplace (Morvati et al., 2024). Dere and Basibuyuk (2024) explored generational conflict through interviews with 19 participants, finding that societal shifts and reduced intergenerational socialization drove workplace tensions. Brun et al. (2025) studied workplace stress among eight office employees. They found that organizational demands, poor stress management, and environmental conditions were key sources of stress (Brun et al., 2025).

Aligning with previous phenomenological research, the present study sought to explore employees' lived experiences with relationship conflict in the workplace and the emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal responses that follow. Phenomenology is inherently investigative, aiming to uncover how individuals interpret and respond to their experiences (Negou et al.,

2023). Rooted in individual meaning-making, phenomenology offers researchers a way to understand subjective realities (Daruhadi, 2024; De Boer & Zeiler, 2024). Researchers using a phenomenological approach seek answers to how an individual experienced a phenomenon and how they felt during that experience (Daruhadi, 2024). These are the central questions that this study sought to answer, and given the gaps in the literature, a qualitative phenomenological design was the most appropriate choice.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was multi-level employees within various business settings who have experienced the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement. The eligibility criteria included participants that had a) experienced working in a for-profit business and b) had experienced relationship conflict with coworkers, supervisors, or team members. A Qualtrics demographic questionnaire was used to determine which respondents met the criteria (Appendix B). Simple demographic information was collected, such as gender, age ranges, industry, and job title or responsibilities when the experience occurred. The questionnaire was developed in Qualtrics and reflected the study's purpose by including questions about relationship conflict at work, how it affected them emotionally, mentally, and professionally, and how they experienced the progression towards disengagement. The demographic questionnaire was distributed to the researcher's Instagram social and LinkedIn professional network connections.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who responded to the demographic questionnaire, met the established criteria for inclusion, and were willing to participate in an interview for the study. Bonyadi (2023) stated that purposeful sampling selected individuals with first-hand experience of the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling is a purposeful

sampling method that selects only participants who have met the researcher's criteria (Bloomberg, 2023). The reason for selecting this method was the researcher's aim of gaining insight from individuals who have experienced the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement, and purposeful sampling ensured that a suitable sample could be selected by establishing this criterion. Sample sizes are selected from criterion-meeting participants' willingness to be interviewed for data collection, and prove difficult in qualitative research, as recommendations for sample size vary across the literature (Bonyadi, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Larsen & Adu, 2021; Negou et al., 2023). Bonyadi (2023) recommended selecting 1 to 20 participants, Larsen and Adu (2021) recommended selecting 3 to 25 participants, and Creswell and Poth (2025) recommended selecting 5 to 25 participants. For this study, a sample of 20 individuals were invited to participate, ensuring the sample met the sampling criteria regarding the study's purpose (Bloomberg, 2023; Sinfield et al., 2023). Once sample participants were identified, they received a follow-up request for an interview and were provided with a Microsoft Booking link to schedule an interview using the MS Teams platform. Selected participants were informed of the research topic, that participation was voluntary, and that they could end their cooperation at any time during the study. Participants were also informed that the interview would require a time commitment of up to one hour and a \$100 eGift card incentive would be provided for participation in the study.

Data saturation is when an ongoing study produces no new data or information, and data collection is concluded (Lu et al., 2024). Ahmed (2025) stated that data saturation is critical to achieving complete and reliable qualitative research findings. Reaching data saturation demonstrates that the research process was thorough and adequately represents participant experiences (Ahmed, 2025). When a phenomenon has been adequately explored and no new data

or themes appear, saturation has been reached (Ahmed, 2025). Ahmed (2025) suggested that some qualitative research designs benefit from small sample sizes focused on in-depth exploration. They cited that data saturation can be achieved when data collection and analysis are continual until saturation is reached (Ahmed, 2025). To ensure data saturation and qualitative rigor, this study incorporated multiple strategies while using an iterative data collection and analysis approach, refining methods as new themes emerged. NVivo was used to annotate recurring themes, insights, and any changes to track incoming data. During interviews, follow-up questions were used to gain deeper insight into emerging themes. Mwita (2022) found that spending enough time collecting data improves the probability of data saturation. They recommended an average interview time of 60 minutes to gather enough information (Mwita, 2022). Lastly, sampling plays a role in saturation, as purposeful sampling with a focused, small sample is most appropriate for reaching saturation (Sebele-Mpofu, 2021). Aligning with previous literature suggestions for sample sizes, this study selected 20 participants to reach saturation.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol was developed based on research questions to ensure consistency and depth in data collection (Appendix C). Upon approval by the IRB, the researcher conducted data collection using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gather data for this study. Dunwoodie et al. (2023) suggested that pre-determined open-ended interview questions, termed an interview protocol, should be developed from the overarching research questions. An interview protocol, or script, that includes a study introduction, open-ended questions, and a closing helps prevent researchers from invoking personal beliefs or opinions during interviews (Siedlecki, 2022). Jimenez and Orozco (2021) suggested that effective interview protocols seek to gain unknown information about events experienced and perceived

by interviewees. Protocols that allow participants to share openly increase the potential for uncovering new insights (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). The researcher developed an interview protocol to guide the discussion. The interview protocol was carefully developed to capture general information such as the date, time, and location of each interview. The protocol provided a systematic approach for confirming participants' verbal consent and enabled an orderly transition through open-ended questions that encouraged comprehensive responses from participants. Furthermore, the protocol concluded with a structured closing and provided participants with a transcript copy for their review and verification through member checking. There were 10 interview questions that the researcher developed to answer the research questions that sought to examine the participants' experience in progressing from relationship conflict to work disengagement in the workplace (Appendix D). Creswell and Poth (2025) recommended that five to seven open-ended questions be included in an interview protocol, making the 10 selected questions appropriate for this study.

Field testing provides researchers an opportunity to receive feedback or input regarding research instruments or tools (Bloomberg, 2023). The researcher conducted field testing of the interview protocol and questions with a small sample of individuals from the target population, but who were not included in the final study sample. Tate et al. (2023) and Dunwoodie et al. (2023) recommended that field testing be conducted to allow researchers to practice interviews with members of the target population. They found that it provides researchers the ability to determine question appropriateness, understanding of interview questions, the realistic time requirement of interviews, and to revise the interview protocol or questions, if necessary (Dunwoodie et al., 2023; Tate et al., 2023). Therefore, following Bloomberg (2023), after approval of the dissertation proposal and IRB permission, the researcher conducted field testing

with two potential participants to test feasibility and find potential improvement areas prior to full implementation of the study.

Study Procedures

After obtaining approval from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collection began. The recruitment material was distributed to the researcher's Instagram social and LinkedIn professional networks (Appendix E). The recruitment letter explained the study and provided a link to a demographic questionnaire. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study completed the questionnaire and provided their contact email address to proceed further with an interview with the researcher. Based on the questionnaire responses, the researcher selected a diverse group of participants who reflected a range of relevant experiences for an interview. Those selected individuals were emailed a link to schedule a date and time for a virtual interview conducted via Microsoft Teams. The procedures for data collection included individual interviews conducted by Microsoft Teams, which allowed some participants to overcome distance restrictions. De Villiers et al. (2022) found that face-to-face interviews were minimally better than video interviews and that participants were more vocal in video interviews. Video interviews allow observing a participant's facial expressions, body language, and in-person processes (De Villiers et al., 2022; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

Once the virtual interviews were scheduled, the researcher sent each participant the IRB consent form to review before interviews occurred (Appendix F). Prior to starting the interview, informed consent was obtained for the interview and recording, and the purpose of the study was explained. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. The interviewer requested consent to record the interview and reminded the participants that their identity and responses would remain

confidential and anonymous in any report. Once verbal consent was obtained, the interview recording began via MS Teams with a backup recording device in case of unplanned technical issues with recording the interview.

Qualitative interviews allow participants to explain, in detail, how a particular event made them feel, allowing researchers to ask follow-up questions to gain deeper insight into a phenomenon (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). With an interpretive focus, phenomenological interviewing proves valuable in combining the researcher's personal experiences with interview participants, particularly how lived experiences guide actions and behaviors (Bloomberg, 2023). This study explored how employees felt when faced with relationship conflict in the workplace and how those feelings drive behavior or decisions, making the qualitative interview the appropriate choice. While examining non-verbal communications from participants during the interview, researchers can take notes to provide greater context for responses (Donkoh, 2023). The researcher also recorded observations of participants' non-verbal actions and body language using detailed notes. The interviewer transcribed each interview using the MS Teams software, then exported to an MS Word document that was uploaded into NVivo for analysis. Following transcription upload, each file was named by participant number. Initial codes were created using open coding, focusing on participants' words or phrases. After coding, clusters were developed through sorting to compare across participants to find shared relationships, resulting in emerging themes.

Member checking is a process intended to provide data credibility, where researchers provide findings to participants for validation (Larsen & Adu, 2021; McKim, 2023). McKim (2023) and Motulsky (2021) stated that during member checking, data transcripts are provided to participants for feedback, allowing them to correct potential transcription errors or remove

information that they do not want to include. They cited that member checking is a way to ensure participants feel involved in the research process while increasing the accuracy of data and proper representation in analysis (McKim, 2023; Motulsky, 2021). Member checking is widely recommended in confirming the trustworthiness of qualitative results (Motulsky, 2021).

Following the interviews, the researcher provided all participants with the transcripts from their interview. Participants were asked to confirm that the transcript accurately reflected their answers to questions and statements made during the interview. They were also allowed the opportunity to revise or remove any information that was inaccurate or that they did not wish to include in the study. Once reviewed, participants either approved of the transcript or requested rephrasing or removal of some statements. Once each participant approved their transcript for use in the study, they were sent the \$100 eGift card as an incentive in appreciation for participating in the study.

Data Analysis

To effectively analyze data, it must be appropriately organized and managed through transcription, note-taking, labeling, and categorizing information (Bloomberg, 2023). Bloomberg (2023) suggested a step-by-step process for analyzing data, including assigning codes, categorizing data, and identifying themes. For phenomenological analysis, Creswell and Poth (2025) suggested that researchers should first consider personal experience with the phenomenon, set those opinions aside, and focus solely on the participants' responses. To analyze effectively, researchers should comprise a list of significant statements, annotate verbatim descriptions from participants, describe contexts, and group them into themes or clusters (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Ahmed (2025) found that when text data was the primary source, NVivo software provided researchers effective code tracking, theme development, and

saturation monitoring capabilities. NVivo manages and analyzes qualitative data to produce codes or categories, providing data security (Ahmed, 2025).

Qualitative software advancement enhances the potential for providing reliable and replicable data, while NVivo best provides categorization, coding, and thematic analysis for text-based data (Allsop et al., 2022; Tang, 2023). Limna (2023) cited that NVivo provides systematic storage and organization of data, allowing for interview audio and transcription importing, along with other included notes, into one centralized area. Further, NVivo can analyze data using thematic coding techniques to find commonalities and draw inferences supporting findings (Limna, 2023). Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher remained immersed in the data, transcribing immediately and verbatim following the interview, keeping the process iterative, using NVivo to organize and code the data thematically. Phenomenological data analysis involves pattern finding across individuals and then grouping participant statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Allsop et al. (2022) cited that open coding is most effective for reviewing transcripts by focusing on and reflecting the words of interview participants. NVivo software aids researchers in establishing codes, assigning descriptors to the codes, and identifying how many interviews contain particular codes, and as codes become more frequent and salient, clear themes can be defined (Allsop et al., 2022). The researcher used NVivo to organize interview transcripts, review and highlight pertinent verbiage or expressions from participants, create codes and grouping related codes, and identify patterns across interviews to define themes through continual reviews for consistency. Themes were also logged into a data summary table as a secondary, backup source.

Triangulation in research describes a process of examining a phenomenon by integrating divergent sources and approaches to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding and

improving the overall quality of findings (Donkoh, 2023; Dzogovic & Bajrami, 2023). Multiple forms of data help researchers achieve better quality by reducing potential errors, resulting in greater reliability and consistency in the study (Dzwigol, 2022). Triangulation helps confirm study findings, mainly when consistency occurs, deficiencies are reduced, and results are accurate (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Methodological triangulation strategies can combine questionnaires with interviews for in-depth examination of a phenomenon and improve the reliability and validity of findings (Donkoh, 2023). Bloomberg (2023) included that combining multiple data collection methods in a study helps achieve triangulation in qualitative studies. For this study, triangulation was achieved by the demographic questionnaire, conducting interviews, and completing field notes of participant observations during those interviews. Bloomberg (2023) states that qualitative research begins and ends with the researcher, whose role is to remain deliberate and thoughtful when engaging with study participants, responsive to emerging themes, and maintain systematic data collection and analysis procedures. The researcher remained reflective during the study by keeping a journal to note thoughts, questions, assumptions, and to provoke critical thinking throughout the study.

Assumptions

Assumptions are defined as something that is accepted as true without doubt or evidence (Bloomberg, 2023). Researcher assumptions are premises that may be proven true or unwarranted during the study (Bloomberg, 2023). Researchers will inevitably bring individual assumptions about reality to a study and should explicitly discuss them so that they are clear to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Bracketing through continual reflection and researcher self-awareness is essential to suspending pre-conceived beliefs and assumptions, relieving researchers of personal bias so that they can capture authentic descriptions of the lived

experiences of participants (Lim, 2025). The researcher followed Lim's (2025) and Ahmed's (2024) suggestions to remain open-minded, reflexive, and document biases, assumptions, or perspectives throughout the study.

Workplace culture plays a significant role in how employees approach or deal with conflict. As a business owner, the researcher experienced conflict in a different setting, where conflicts directly affected customer service, productivity, and retention. Compared to the researcher's military experience, where an individual could not simply quit their job, in the private sector, that was not the case, which led to the researcher's further understanding of how harmful conflict can be to a business. The assumption was that allowing relationship conflict to go unresolved would lead to a toxic work environment that harms workers and the organization. Toxic organizational cultures with minimal support led to stress, disengagement, and high turnover rates (Ahmad, 2022; Dewangan, 2025; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). Toxic workplaces harm communication, collaboration, and efficiency of organizations, resulting in resentment, disengagement, and productivity loss (Bijalwan et al., 2024).

Additionally, it was assumed that if conflict is not managed through effective leadership, it could spiral quickly and eventually drive good employees away and harm the company due to the talent loss and costs to hire and train new individuals. Irwan (2024) found that it is critical for managers and leaders to engage in relationship conflict early, as this helps maintain respectful work environments and prevent harmful results such as disengagement and turnover. Leaders who are proactive in approaching conflict promote organizational transparency and accountability (Akram, 2023). Leadership and management have been tied to several significant factors in organizations, including employee engagement and positive work cultures (Dabrai, 2024; Elufioye et al., 2024; Hidayat et al., 2024; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). Pathan (2022)

found that leadership within an organization is the most significant factor in the commitment and retention of employees. To account for assumptions, the researcher posed open-ended questions to encourage participants to describe their own experience without shaping their responses, used follow-up questions to allow participants to share unanticipated meanings, invited participants to add information that the researcher did not directly ask for, applied bracketing to set aside personal beliefs, and transparently documented the lived experiences of the participants and the methods used to gather and analyze the data.

Finally, it was assumed that the participants selected for this study would meet the established inclusion criteria, have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, and provide honest, detailed, and meaningful responses relevant to the research questions. The interview protocol was assumed to effectively facilitate the elicitation of deep, personal insights through open-ended questions. Another assumption was that accurate and descriptive field notes would be taken during and after each interview to support contextual understanding of the data. The researcher assumed a high level of self-awareness regarding personal biases and assumptions, as well as a clear understanding of the relevance of the study's theoretical framework to support a sound conceptual foundation. Finally, it was assumed that there was sufficient knowledge in the selected qualitative method to collect, analyze, and interpret the data effectively, ensuring that the findings accurately and authentically represented the voices of the participants.

Limitations

Limitations are external factors that threaten the strength and scope of a study (Bloomberg, 2023). A limitation of qualitative studies, including phenomenology, is a lack of objectivity and generalization to the broader population (Annisa, 2024; Larsen & Adu, 2021; Scârneci-Domnişoru, 2024). The qualitative researcher is not concerned with generalization and

prefers a systematic approach to achieving insight through relevant contextual factors (Scârneci-Domnişoru, 2024). Further, Larsen and Adu (2021) insisted that generalization does not reveal the experience of a phenomenon, which is the goal of phenomenological study. To mitigate limitations that threaten transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability, the researcher continually journaled to clarify and present biases, used interviews and observations for triangulation, and provided transcripts to participants to review the researcher's conclusions. A study's use of purposeful sampling, detailed information, and thick descriptions allows readers to determine the quality of the research and make comparisons to other similar studies or contexts (Bloomberg, 2023).

Some participant-centered details can pose potential limitations to the study. For example, access to or attainment of participants can prove difficult (Cheron et al., 2022). The study mitigated limited access to participants by including workers from any for-profit business industry in its criteria. A limitation of phenomenological research includes its inability to be objective due to data being primarily obtained through interviews and the phenomenon only being viewed from participant perspectives (Annisa, 2024). Since the purpose of phenomenological research was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience, it was essential to interview participants who have experienced this phenomenon. Understanding that participants' responses would be based on individual experiences, open-ended questions were used to allow participants to express themselves at their own discretion. Following interviews, member checking was conducted for review and to allow participants to amend any of their responses. Additionally, to avoid the limitation of reduced participant diversity that is sometimes a result of purposive sampling, the researcher strived to achieve diversity in industry, gender,

age, and job titles or roles within the accessible population, and clearly annotated these in findings.

Technology could have posed some limitations to this study. De Villiers et al. (2022) suggested that virtual interviews could pose challenges that make it a stressful experience. They found that it was more difficult to pick up on nonverbal cues, possible messaging delays due to connectivity, uncomfortable periods of silence, and self-consciousness of being watched (De Villiers et al., 2022). Additionally, virtual interviews may lead participants to keep their cameras off to conceal their locations (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). To mitigate these technological limitations, the researcher conducted technology testing to ensure any potential virtual or internet issues were detected and resolved. The researcher also practiced building rapport to ease the potential discomfort of participants, explained the importance of using cameras to see them during the interview, and informed them on how to use virtual background options in case of privacy concerns.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the researcher's choices or boundaries to narrow a study (Bloomberg, 2023). The researcher selected a qualitative phenomenological design to understand employees' decisions when experiencing relationship conflict in the workplace. The existence of many types of workplace conflict is well documented (Adeyemi, 2022; Cai & Ali, 2024; Castellini et al., 2022). The prevalence of relationship conflict has been recognized as the most destructive to employees and organizations (Ahmad, 2022; Castellini et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2024). The researcher narrowed the framework by using COR theory to explore the effects of conflict on employees' personal resources and the resulting sense of emotional well-being that eventually determines behavior. Additionally, the study was delimited to employees in for-profit

organizations who had experienced relationship conflict, allowing for a focused examination of how such experiences influence disengagement and turnover-related decisions.

Phenomenology considers the concept that lived experiences have impacts on both body and mind, tying the mental effects to resulting physical behaviors (Larsen, 2023; Larsen & Adu, 2021). Therefore, the researcher narrowed the scope of the study to explore how relationship conflict impacts the mental state of an employee and how those impacts influence withdrawal behaviors. The study sought to gain deep insights into employees' lived experiences with a limited sample population of adult participants who had experienced relationship conflict in the workplace within the past five years. Employees who experienced the phenomenon more than five years ago or left their jobs for other reasons were excluded from the sample. The researcher used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gain deep insights into participants' perspectives, allowing them to provide as much information as they want.

Semi-structured interviews provide substantial benefits to research by providing focus while allowing participants freedom of expression, further enhancing the researcher's understanding of information (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Cheron et al., 2022). These research decisions related to the existing literature and conceptual framework by addressing the literature that highlights how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to disengagement and turnover (Afrahi et al., 2022; Li, 2023). The phenomenological design allowed for in-depth exploration of employees from their perspectives. The study design also allowed the researcher to address the emotional and psychological dimensions of the phenomenon by giving voice to the participants. By addressing the gaps in the literature, the research questions addressed the emotional and interpersonal experiences related to conflict and the final phase of progression to disengagement and turnover.

Ethical Assurances

Drolet et al. (2023) define ethical dilemmas as occurrences in which people seek to prioritize their interests at the expense of ethical governance. Researchers may face situations that threaten the integrity and principles that guide their conduct during a study (Drolet et al., 2023). This study received approval from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. Following the Belmont Report's basic ethical principles, this study exercised respect through autonomy, beneficence through the absence of harm to individual participants, and justice through sample selections directly related to the problem being studied (Shore, 2006). All participants were treated with respect and dignity, allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, provided with a copy of their transcript for verification and transparency, provided a copy of the study's results upon request, and given anonymity. All participants' personal information was anonymized through coding, with all interview data stored electronically in a password-protected computer and cloud file. All research data will be kept for three years, after which it will be deleted and destroyed permanently.

In qualitative research, the researcher becomes active and involved in the study, remaining reflexive to their own perspectives and experience, staying open to change, and seeking deep understanding of the experience (Bloomberg, 2023). During this study, the researcher took an insider role and immersed themselves in the study. Understanding that there are some biases the researcher held due to personal and professional experiences, reflection was paramount to mitigation. The researcher, a conflict avoider in all contexts, has experienced and managed relationship conflict personally and professionally. The researcher recognized some personal biases about how individuals engage in or respond to conflict in the workplace. To overcome these biases, the researcher remained open-minded and continually reflective,

journaling thoughts and ideas throughout the study's data gathering and analysis. Taking time to think analytically and logically helps reduce errors and biases during research (Drolet et al., 2023). Lim (2025) stated that researchers who are aware of their biases are better able to remain flexible, reflexive, and responsive throughout a study. The researcher also used triangulation to help reduce bias and improve confirmability, while using NVivo data analytic software reduced the researcher's influence on analysis and findings.

The researcher's experience as a military leader and business owner provided many assumptions regarding conflict. Even when working within a unit, ultimately training for conflict, some individuals did not react well to interpersonal or relationship conflict, as some showed significant signs of distress, discomfort, or fear of reporting. The researcher witnessed a variety of reactions that included avoidance, negative reactive behaviors, and mental health impacts that resulted in clinical visits. Thus, the researcher assumed that workplace conflict can result in withdrawal or further instigation, depending on the individuals involved. During some conflicts, workers only sought leadership intervention when the conflict had become untenable and needed leadership intervention. While most people prefer and practice avoidance, these behaviors are ineffective at preventing future conflict within the workplace (Bruce et al., 2025; Thornton & Fletcher, 2024). When conflict goes unresolved, workers fear reporting the escalating conflict, making the resolution improbable (Bruce et al., 2025). As the researcher was aware of potential bias towards relationship conflict, reflexive journaling and bracketing were used iteratively to ensure openness to participants' perspectives and to suspend judgement.

Creswell and Poth (2025) describe bracketing as researchers setting aside personal experiences to allow for new perspectives about the phenomenon being studied. The researcher acknowledged personal discomfort with conflict and while recognizing that avoidance can be

counterproductive, the researcher tends to avoid relationship-based conflict and would be unlikely to remain in a work environment characterized by ongoing interpersonal tension and stress. Firsthand involvement with unresolved conflict as an organizational leader and business owner has provided an internal perspective of individual and organizational harm from unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace. To mitigate the potential bias and to suspend judgment during this study, the researcher engaged in bracketing through ongoing reflexive measures such as journaling during data collection and analysis, noting assumptions, reactions, and changing perspectives, and staying focused and prioritizing participant perspectives without judgment. Respecting the phenomenological principles of epoché by actively suspending preconceptions through bracketing ensures authenticity in participants' descriptions of their lived experiences (Larsen, 2023; Larsen & Adu, 2021).

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore how employees experience the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement that results in voluntary turnover. Framed by conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study aimed to gain rich, contextualized insights into participants' lived experiences. The choice of phenomenology was proper due to the focus on understanding individual perspectives, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Purposive sampling to recruit 20 participants who had experienced this phenomenon within the past five years provided a recent recollection of events, using semi-structured interviews to highlight the perspectives of employees who experienced work disengagement due to relationship conflict at work. An interview protocol was developed to guide data collection, and NVivo software was used for data organization, systematic coding, and theme development. Triangulation through the demographic questionnaire, interviews,

participant observation, and member checking through participant transcript review was incorporated to support the trustworthiness of the study and its findings. Participant confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection was also conducted per institutional and professional guidelines. Chapter 4 discusses the trustworthiness of the data, results of data collection, and the comparison of results to the literature review.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem to be addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement which results in voluntary employee turnover (Li, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. Following approval by National University's IRB, data collection began by distributing the recruitment letter to the researcher's LinkedIn professional network and Instagram social network. The recruitment letter explained the study, its activities, and eligibility criteria with a link to the demographic questionnaire. Respondents who met eligibility criteria and agreed to an interview were contacted via the email provided and given a calendar link to schedule an Microsoft Teams interview.

Prior to the interview, participants were emailed the IRB consent form, and verbal consent was obtained from all participants before the interview began. The sample size consisted of 20 participants, and interviews were conducted over a 2-month period. Participant interviews were recorded and transcribed, maintaining anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, which were assigned via a numbering system corresponding to the order in which the interviews occurred. Field testing was conducted to test the appropriateness of the interview protocol and questions. Two individuals participated in field testing interviews that resulted in minimal changes applied to the verbiage in interview questions 5 and 8 for clarity and flow. The field testers' feedback was removed from data collection and were not included in the participant sample.

Building on the conservation of resources (COR) theory, the findings of the qualitative phenomenological study provided insight into the resource dynamics underlying relationship conflict, work disengagement, and turnover decisions. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to investigate each participant's lived experience, as phenomenological research aims to understand how individuals experience and feel about a specific experience (Negou et al., 2023; Ugwy & Eze, 2023). Phenomenology is underscored by its commitment to understanding individual perspectives by capturing subjective experiences (Lim, 2025). Each participant's perspective provided insight into how relationship conflict was experienced, its impact on the individual, the progression towards work disengagement, and how these collective experiences influenced turnover decisions. Participants' responses to interview questions addressed the following research questions:

RQ1

How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?

RQ2

How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

RQ3

What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?

The study provided deep and descriptive details as participants explained progressions in which relationship conflict triggered emotional and psychological strain. These emotional reactions resulted in cumulative resource loss that shaped behavioral withdrawal and declining work engagement, culminating in considering, intent to quit, or actual turnover for many participants. This chapter will focus on the trustworthiness of the data, including credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Next, the study's results will be outlined by presenting the themes that reflect participants' lived experiences, beginning with their experiences of conflict, followed by the factors that led to disengagement, and concluding with the conditions that shaped their decision to stay or leave the organization. The chapter will conclude with an evaluation of the study's findings, associated with each of the three research questions and themes. This evaluation highlights the central role of resource loss, the emotional and cognitive burden of unresolved conflict, and the organizational conditions that either mitigated or intensified disengagement.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness is the key to research relevance and crucial to qualitative studies (Adler, 2022). As qualitative studies explore the experiences, behaviors, and attitudes of participants, it is critical to ensure trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). The data collection for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews that utilized open-ended questions, allowing participants to discuss their experiences with the phenomenon openly and thoroughly, thereby providing deep insights into their individual perspectives and the reasoning behind their decisions. The data was coded using open and axial coding processes using NVivo software. Adler (2022) stated that transparency is the basis of trustworthiness in qualitative research. All procedures for data collection and analysis were thoroughly documented to ensure clear transparency throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility is enhanced by the accurate representation of participants' feelings, thoughts, and actions that demonstrate complex patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2025). To bolster credibility and ensure accuracy of the study, strategies such as journaling, triangulation, seeking

negative cases, and member checking were used. First, a demographic questionnaire was deployed to screen for potential participants who met the established criteria. Only those who met all criteria were selected as samples for interviews. During interviews, observations were conducted to note body language or non-verbal cues that supported or contradicted what the participant expressed. Creswell and Poth (2025) stated that, following interviews, participants should be provided with transcriptions of their interviews to verify that their perspectives were appropriately captured. After the interviews, each participant was emailed their completed transcripts for review through member checking, allowing for changes upon request, and obtaining approval to use the finalized version in the study. Additionally, reflective journaling was conducted continually to facilitate open self-reflection and to identify and address potential personal biases or subjective perspectives.

Lastly, methodological triangulation combines methods to achieve depth when exploring a specific phenomenon (Donkoh, 2023). This study accomplished triangulation by analyzing data from interviews, observational field notes, and responses to the demographic questionnaire. Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021) stated that using questionnaires, along with open-ended interview questions, helps triangulate and strengthen qualitative results. For example, some participants may not have selected a specific outcome on the demographic questionnaire but later described it during the interview. These variations may have been due to the interpretation of questionnaire items or their experiences being discussed in greater detail during the in-depth interviews. Interviews were the primary data source, consistent with phenomenological methodology, as they can achieve deeper insights and thick descriptions (Bloomberg, 2023). Therefore, interview data were prioritized for thematic analysis, while questionnaire responses

were used for contextual support and to triangulate findings rather than to serve as definitive measures.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of readers to determine whether the process used can be applied in other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2025). The screening process, purposive sampling of eligible participants, as well as the methods for data collection and analysis, have all been conducted with a high degree of rigor and thoroughness. The approach to purposive sampling involved recruiting participants who had experienced workplace relationship conflict that led to disengagement and potential decisions regarding turnover. This approach enabled the selection of individuals who could offer in-depth insights into the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement. The participants sampled varied in terms of gender, age groups, and industry. Ahmed (2024) stated that explaining the research process in detail enables readers to determine whether the findings apply to various settings, thereby enhancing transferability. The selected participants that agreed to conduct an interview were contacted via email and scheduled a date convenient for them.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted in a virtual research setting using Microsoft Teams. This setting provided a private, flexible, and accessible space allowing participants to join from locations where they felt comfortable and psychologically safe, which enhanced disclosure and supported richer descriptions of their lived experiences. The participants came from diverse age groups and six different organizational settings, including retail, food service, healthcare, logistics, information technology, and insurance. The participants also held varying positions within their organizations that they experience conflict. The interviews were

recorded with the participants' consent, and 10 open-ended questions were posed, along with follow-up questions to facilitate deeper exploration.

Participants described interactions that precipitated relationship conflicts with managers or peers as including personality clashes, poor communication, or uneven power dynamics. Further exacerbating the problem was leadership inaction and unresolved strain that influenced their work engagement and turnover decisions. Regardless of demographic, workplace, or industry, the commonly shared themes were the emotional intensity of conflict situations, stress activation and strain responses, patterns of disengagement, and resource depletion. These descriptions explained what happened, how participants experienced it, its impact on their well-being, and how it influenced their work engagement. While these descriptions were related to the study's purpose, the responses could be transferred to other contexts of work-related conflicts that induce emotional or behavioral responses.

Lastly, data analysis was conducted by uploading transcripts verbatim and using NVivo software to aid in establishing codes through open coding, followed by axial coding to create categories from patterns. Using NVivo helps researchers in coding, identifying code frequency, drawing conclusions from similarities, and developing themes (Allsop et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Limna, 2023). A first round of open and inductive coding was conducted, where codes were created as data emerged, resulting in the creation of 280 codes. The second round of coding combined any replications or redundancies and merged codes when necessary. Axial coding was used to identify patterns and create 20 categories, ultimately leading to the identification of 9 themes that align with and answer the research questions.

Dependability

Dependability shows stability and consistency of data over time through a logical process that is clearly tracked and documented (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Documenting research decisions and maintaining an audit trail enables future researchers to replicate a study, thereby enhancing the reliability of the results (Ahmed, 2024). This study provided sufficient procedural detail such that researchers using the same recruitment procedures, instruments, and analytic approach could reasonably expect similar results. This dependability was achieved by using consistent recruitment procedures, the same demographic questionnaire, the same interview protocol and questions, and replicable data analysis procedures. All participants were recruited using the same process. The same recruitment post was distributed through the same social and professional networks. The same demographic questionnaire was used for all participants. Every participant had the same eligibility criteria, ensuring consistency in the samples. Each participant completed the same semi-structured interview using an identical protocol script. Every interview was conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams and followed the same procedures. Each transcript underwent the same sequence of analytic actions, which included a review of completeness and accuracy, cross-checking, and coding the data. A detailed audit trail documented all methodological decisions, ensuring that another researcher using the same participants and procedures could obtain similar results.

Confirmability

Confirmability implies that findings are derived from the research rather than being influenced by the researcher's bias or subjectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2025). To achieve confirmability, researchers refrain from influencing the findings by using strategies such as member checking to ensure the accuracy of participants' perspectives and journaling to reduce

potential bias (Ahmed, 2024). To ensure accuracy, member checking was completed, ensuring that all transcripts were reviewed and approved by participants for use in the study. Additionally, detailed responses to questions were transcribed verbatim, using direct quotes to capture impactful statements and convey their perspectives. The researcher employed bracketing through reflexive journaling to account for personal feelings and beliefs throughout the entire study. Before interviews, the researcher reflected on personal experiences and expectations, setting those aside as they entered each discussion, remaining neutral and focused solely on the participant. During the interview, the researcher noted instances of alignment, surprise, or empathy during the participant's descriptions. After the interview concluded, a more profound reflection was journaled to further reflect on and remain aware of personal perspectives and biases. Journaling memos and observation notes were included in the audit trail documentation for transparency. Lastly, during open coding, the researcher used participants' own words, allowing codes to emerge from the data while setting aside their own assumptions and expectations. This process ensured that the findings reflected participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's influence and that the analytical findings were grounded in the data.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. The study examined the effects of the conflict on individual well-being and the resulting cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Participants reported that when they experienced relationship conflict within the workplace, regardless of whether the conflict involved peers or supervisors, they experienced emotional, physiological, or cognitive reactions. Participants described these

reactions as contributing to stress and depletion over time. Many participants reported that once disengagement occurred, they began to consider leaving or quitting their jobs, given the lack of resolution, as they saw no positive future outlook in their current position. Finally, participants provided insights into how their organization could have been more supportive and preventative of work disengagement due to the relationship conflict they were experiencing. Overall, participants cited leadership engagement and involvement, conflict management and resolution training, and creating healthy work environments as key to improving employee retention.

Following National University IRB approval, a recruitment letter was posted to Instagram social and LinkedIn professional networks. Respondents who completed the demographic questionnaire and agreed to an interview were contacted via the email address provided and received a link to the researcher's Microsoft Teams calendar to schedule the interview at a time and day convenient for them. Prior to the interview, participants were emailed the IRB consent form and the link to the interview in Microsoft Teams. Field testing of the interview protocol was conducted with two participants who met the eligibility criteria but were not included in the final sample. The review and discussion of interview questions resulted in minimal changes to the interview questions for clarity and flow. After six weeks and past the midpoint of the data collection period, the researcher did not receive as many participants as desired, having only interviewed seven of the twenty desired participants. Therefore, a modification to the study was submitted to the IRB to allow an incentive of a \$100 eGift card for participation. Once approved, the new recruitment letter was posted to social and professional networks, which increased responses to the questionnaire and led to a higher number of individuals agreeing to an interview, resulting in the desired number of study participants being interviewed to ensure data saturation.

Interviews were conducted via MS Teams with individuals who met all eligibility requirements for the study. The interviews employed open-ended questions to enable participants to share, in detail, their experiences of workplace relationship conflict, its impact on them individually, and the resulting behaviors and actions. MS Teams software was used to transcribe all interview recordings. All transcripts were provided to participants for approval of use in the study. Once approval for use was obtained, the researcher emailed each participant a \$100 eGift card as an incentive for participation in the study. Additionally, observations during interviews were documented using a field notes document for each participant. This document was used to annotate non-verbal expressions or gestures of participants as they answered questions and shared their experiences. A personal journal was also used by the researcher to document each interview, taking field notes of anything significant that was expressed, statements that piqued interest for further exploration, or personal thoughts about what the participants were sharing. The average length of all 20 interviews was 47 minutes, each ranging from 23 to 85 minutes. Data saturation was reached with 20 participants, as no new information was obtained thereafter.

The participant sample was diverse, including a wide range of ages, genders, and industries. Of the 20 participants, 14 were female (70%), and 6 were male (30%). The participant age ranges included 10 individuals aged 18-24 (50%), 5 aged 25-34 (25%), 1 aged 35-44 (5%), 2 aged 45-54 (10%), and 2 aged 55 and above (10%). Industries represented included 7 individuals in retail (35%), 4 in food service (20%), 3 in healthcare (15%), 3 in logistics (15%), 2 in information technology (10%), and 1 in insurance (5%). Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Industry
P1	F	18-24	Retail
P2	M	18-24	Food Service
P3	M	55+	Healthcare
P4	F	18-24	Food Service
P5	M	45-54	Logistics
P6	F	18-24	Retail
P7	F	18-24	Retail
P8	F	25-34	IT
P9	M	25-34	Logistics
P10	M	35-44	IT
P11	F	25-34	Food Service
P12	F	25-34	Retail
P13	F	45-54	Healthcare
P14	F	18-24	Healthcare
P15	F	18-24	Retail
P16	F	18-24	Insurance
P17	F	55+	Retail
P18	F	18-24	Retail
P19	F	18-24	Logistics
P20	M	25-34	Food Service

All 20 participants (100%) reported experiencing relationship conflict in their workplace within the past 5 years. Table 2 presents participants' self-reported outcomes of workplace relationship conflict from the demographic questionnaire, which were used to triangulate the findings from interviews and observations. As shown in Table 2, participants consistently reported that the conflict contributed to adverse emotional and work-related outcomes.

Table 2

Self-Reported Outcomes of Relationship Conflict

Outcome	Results
Increased stress	20
Feeling emotionally strained	18
Disengagement from work	16
Reduced productivity	13

Research Question 1:***How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?***

Participants described relationship conflict as emerging from a series of interpersonal issues, including communication problems, personality differences, and power imbalances with both coworkers and supervisors that created ongoing tension. Eight of the 20 participants (40%) described conflict with their managers, 10 (50%) with coworkers, and 2 (10%) experienced conflicts with both. Conflict with managers or supervisors was consistently described as creating power imbalances that led to a threatening, emotionally intense, and resource-depleting environment. Conflict with coworkers was typically experienced as interpersonal tension and personality clashes.

There were four interview questions that related to RQ1. These interview questions asked participants to describe a specific experience with relationship conflict within their workplace. Additionally, they were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the conflict, the impact on their emotional well-being and stress, and any personal resources that were reduced during that time. Individual responses to each question were analyzed using NVivo software. The interview questions related to RQ1 are presented in Table 3.

Table 3*Interview Questions for Research Question 1*

Research Question	Interview questions
How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe a specific time when you experienced relationship conflict in your workplace? 2. What emotions or thoughts did you experience during or after the conflict? 3. How did the conflict affect your emotional well-being and stress levels during that time? 4. Can you describe what personal resources you feel were depleted during this experience (e.g., energy, self-esteem, or emotional strength)?

Data analysis of the interview questions began with the first round of open coding and immersion in the data. Next, a second round of coding included removing repeated or redundant codes, merging codes, or creating a code hierarchy. Categories were created as common patterns emerged across participants, finally culminating in the development of themes. There were three themes that emerged for RQ1. The themes included Theme 1: Intense Emotionally Conflict Situations, Theme 2: Stress Activation and Physiological Strain Responses, and Theme 3: Resource Depletion and Emotional-Cognitive Exhaustion. The themes for RQ1 are presented in Table 4.

Table 4*Research Question 1 Themes*

Themes	Files	References
Emotional Intensity During Conflict	19	24
Stress Activation and Physiological Strain Responses	20	53
Resource Depletion and Emotional-Cognitive Exhaustion	20	47

A mind map for each theme is depicted in Figures 2-4. To illustrate how participants described their emotional experiences during workplace conflict, Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the key dimensions of emotional intensity that emerged from the data.

Figure 2*Theme 1: Emotional Intensity During Conflict Mind Map*

Theme 1: Emotional Intensity During Conflict. Participants described relationship conflict as an emotionally intense experience characterized primarily by feelings of anger and frustration. When asked to reflect on their emotions and thoughts during conflict, anger was expressed by 9 of the 20 participants (45%), while frustration was reported by 10 participants (50%), reporting that the emotionally intense reactions were common among those experiencing relationship conflict. Anger emerged when there was perceived disrespect, unfair treatment, or unresolved interpersonal tension and frustration, reflecting participants' feelings towards repeated conflict, ineffective communication, or lack of resolution. These emotional responses were not described as isolated or fleeting, but rather sustained and mentally taxing.

Participant narratives illustrated how emotionally intense reactions to relationship conflict were experienced. P20 shared that when the conflict occurred, they felt “more frustrated and angry at times.” More significantly, P7 explained, “I was angry, and I don't enjoy being angry at work. I don't enjoy being angry in public, and I don't enjoy being angry at people that I have to work with. So, I'd prefer to leave.” P6 shared, “I had a lot emotionally already going on, and then that (the conflict) happened, and I was angry.” P9 described an emotional escalation when the situation felt beyond their control, stating:

During the conflict, it was first of all frustrating, disappointing, and then it got into anger. You know when you're angry about something, and you find yourself in a situation where you really cannot do anything, or it seems like you can't do anything about it. It becomes anger.

P16 also shared an escalation over time by sharing, “Initially, I kind of brushed it off, like I didn't really care too much. But the emotion kind of switched towards anger.” Further, P3 stated, “First

out, it was kind of shocking, and then there were just more and more little things, and it just continued to kind of bubble up to the surface. It was frustrating. It was anger.”

Participants also emphasized the importance of suppressing emotional reactions to maintain professionalism. P11 shared, “I felt frustrated because I obviously have to remain professional, and it's very hard.” Similarly, P15 stated:

Internal anger that I didn't let anyone else see that I just kind of balled up inside, and then when [she] would leave, we would all be so angry, all the rest of the employees. The entire time, we would just be talking about how upset we were.

P4 shared that they took their frustrations and anger with them after leaving the workplace, sharing, “I would just get mad, and at the end of the night, I would go home and rant to my family. They had to hear about it because it made me so mad.”

A combination of frustration and anger caused emotional impacts and reactions for some participants. P10 stated, “During the conflict, I think I was having a mix of frustration and concern. Then my emotions, too, somehow got in the way. I was a little emotional because I felt frustrated.” P14 stated, “Everything frustrated me, and then I would get anxiety about feeling like I was so glued to the job while in this mental cycle of ‘you're needed, you're wanted, but you're not,’” showing emotional reactivity to conflicting signals for their leadership. P6 shared a reactive response to the conflict situation by sharing, “I was angry and frustrated, and I said things that didn't need to be said.” As anger and frustration persisted, participants reported experiencing stress responses and impacts on their well-being, serving as a precursor to heightened psychological and physiological strain, which is explored in the following theme. Figure 3 visually represents the stress-related and physiological responses described during ongoing conflict.

Figure 3*Theme 2: Stress Activation and Physiological Responses Mind Map*

Theme 2: Stress Activation and Physiological Responses. Participants described significant activation of both psychological and physical responses when experiencing relationship conflict in the workplace. When discussing the impact of the conflict on their well-being and stress levels, increased stress and anxiety were the most frequent outcomes, with 16 of the 20 participants (80%) reporting elevated stress levels and 10 participants (50%) describing increased anxiety. When asked what effect the conflict had on their stress levels, P11 stated, “I’m so stressed out [at work], and then it kind of takes a mental toll.” P16 and P18 added, “The conflict, [over time], definitely raised my stress levels” and “the conflict elevated my stress level in the moment.” P19 shared that the stress of the conflict added to their anxiety and caused compounding stress, stating, “My stress was very, very high, the anxiety continued, and the stress continued.” P6 reflected on how excessive their stress was by saying, “I would say that I was extremely stressed. I feel like I was stressed out entirely too much.” Reflecting on the stress

caused by the conflict at work, P7 shared that it was the worst part of their work experience, stating:

It increased the stress. The stress of dealing with them and having to communicate with them just made for a very unhappy and stressful point in my life. And looking back, that definitely was the most miserable part of that entire year, when I was working there.

P2 also conveyed a sense of ongoing tension and psychological strain while in the workplace by sharing, “There was a whole lot more stress during that time. When I was there, it was like walking on a thin sheet of ice. I felt like I was going around eggshells with anything I did or said.” Some participants quantified their stress levels, with P4 stating, “My stress levels went up 100%, P9 expressing, “My stress levels were off the roof,” and P13 sharing, “On a scale of 1 to 10, they would get up to 10.”

Participants also reported that the conflicts created heightened stress where they felt the need to remain guarded and emotionally constrained while at work, resulting in ongoing anxiety that extended beyond the immediate work environment. P2 explained, “You ever had a pit in your stomach, like an anxiety pit in your stomach? I felt that driving to work every day.” P1 added, “I felt it constantly, where my heart would sink, and I would feel it in my throat at the same time, because I just didn't know if this person was going to go after me.” The feeling of helplessness in a situation caused some participants to experience an exacerbation of stress symptoms. P12 shared:

I was having a lot of anxiety, and I already suffer from some anxiety. So, it was to the point where it was spiraling. It was like a depressing feeling. It was like I was nauseous. It was anxiety. It was not a feeling I ever wanted to go through, and I would sit there and cry at home.

Additionally, P14 stated, “I did start having anxiety, and it really got out of control at that time.” Additionally, P8 shared, “So I would wake up on Monday mornings, and it would fill me with so much anxiety,” reporting that the anxiety was triggered by the anticipation of returning to the workplace. Further, P15 said, “Going into work and it just being 10 times harder and then the stress of having to go back tomorrow was enough for me to have a bad night after I got off work.” P4 summed up the feeling of anxiety as dread, stating, “I would just dread going back in (to work).”

Lastly, nine participants (45%) reported impacts on their physical health. As stress responses persisted, some participants reported symptoms that extended beyond emotional experiences and began to affect physical health. For instance, P1 explained, “I break out into eczema rashes when I get so stressed, and I was covered in them. Every time I knew I had to work with this person, I would stay up longer because I dreaded going to sleep.” Additionally, P9 shared:

I also started experiencing teeth grinding at night, which was very unusual, and I would always wake up with aching jaws. My dentist identified it as teeth grinding caused by stress, and that it happened when I was asleep. The pain also disrupted my sleep, and I began waking up at 3:00 or 4:00 AM. Sometimes I would just stay awake, thinking about how to manage work.

P12 stated, “I started getting more physically sick. I lost a lot of sleep. I was barely eating and barely getting any rest because I was just up all night trying to figure out how to move forward.”

Finally, P3 reflected on sleep disturbances and how impactful the conflict situation at work has been long-term by sharing:

Oftentimes, when I woke up, a little anxiety would hit me because I knew that I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. I couldn't lie there because it was too quiet, the ringing in [my] ears. It's getting better now, but I certainly have some PTSD from that whole experience.

Beyond immediate emotional and physiological reactions, participants' narratives reflected a sustained diminishment of emotional and cognitive resources. The progression from stress activation to resource depletion is summarized in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Theme 3: Resource Depletion and Emotional-Cognitive Exhaustion Mind Map



Theme 3: Resource Depletion and Emotional–Cognitive Exhaustion. As

psychological stress and physical health impacts persisted, participants described a growing sense of depletion that affected their emotional strength, self-confidence, and energy levels. When examining how conflict contributed to the perceived loss of resources, participants described a decline in emotional, cognitive, and physical resources. When asked to reflect on how the conflict affected their personal resources, 10 of the 20 participants (50%) expressed that it contributed to reduced emotional well-being, 12 participants (60%) reported low self-esteem or self-doubt, and 10 participants (50%) shared a reduction in energy levels. Participants described harm to their emotional well-being by consistently feeling emotionally drained, exhausted, and negatively affected over time. P5 stated that the experience was “very draining emotionally,” while P6 noted being “incredibly emotionally affected,” indicating the depth of emotional impact. P7 stated, “I was not very happy, and I wasn’t taking care of myself mentally, physically, and emotionally. I was very stressed out, and emotionally, I was just always exhausted and irritated,” and P9 shared, “It ate away at my emotional being, and I had no emotional strength at that point. Many times, I had to stop myself from crashing out.” Finally, P19 described a decline in well-being by sharing, “My well-being at this company was not in any way positive, and I continued to feel more of a depressive emotion.”

Low self-esteem or self-doubt was portrayed as participants reflected on the internalized effects of conflict, often questioning their own abilities or sense of professional competence. Participants reported that relationship conflict contributed to declines in self-esteem and confidence, with participants often internalizing the conflict as a sign of incompetence. P1 stated, “I felt like I just couldn't be good enough for this job ever,” while P8 shared, “It was me feeling like I wasn’t good enough for the role and I really needed to step back.” Similarly, P14 stated,

“Just feeling like I couldn’t do enough ever. I felt like I wasn’t a good worker at times because I was overly stressed.” P9 described a loss of confidence in their professional capacity by stating:

My confidence in my skills also took a downward spiral, and I started questioning if maybe I was overreacting. Maybe I was doing something wrong, so I started losing confidence in my skills, and I started wondering if I wasn't prepared for this job.

P17, who was still experiencing the conflict situation in their workplace, shared, “It is affecting me emotionally, and I have a lot of stress. I feel incomplete over it, and I feel like I’ve failed.”

P18 summarized their experience by stating, “I was more driven by self-doubt and low worth” during that time.

Others described the direct impacts on self-esteem and patterns of self-doubt. P2 stated, “That kind of thing hurt my self-esteem.” P6 revisited perceived errors by commenting:

All I could do was beat myself up. I should have done this, or I should have asked for help. Or, as you run back through all the decisions you could have made or should have made, I'm beating myself up for it.

Additionally, P12 stated, “I definitely had a loss of self-esteem. I'm just not the same as I was beforehand. Now I'm second-guessing my work.”

The reported reduction in energy levels represents the physical manifestation of resource depletion. The participant excerpts demonstrate that relationship conflict contributed to significant reductions in physical and emotional energy, which participants described as affecting both work-related and personal functioning. P1 reported a point of complete resource depletion, saying, “I was just tired. I tapped out of this job.” Others described an inability to engage socially or emotionally due to a lack of energy. P4 stated:

I had no energy. I had no energy to want to be nice to people or the customers. I had no energy to want to go home and be nice to people. I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to stay home and be in my bed.

Several participants attributed their low energy to the efforts they used to regulate their emotions and the stress they endured. P9 described energy being consumed by efforts to remain professional, sharing, “My energy was consistently low because so much of it was spent on emotional self-regulation, you know, trying to stay professional.” P12 shared that coworkers noticed visible behavior changes and said:

A lot of the closest people that worked with me noticed the change and would say, “Hey, you're not your normal self, you're not as peppy, you're not doing your normal things.”

And I would just tell them, “I don't really have the energy to do so.”

Other participants described reduced energy levels, specifically when interacting with the person with whom they were having the conflict. P13 stated, “I had no energy to deal with the person anymore,” and P16 shared, “My energy levels definitely went down whenever I'd have to work with them.” P20 stated, “The energy level just goes after the discussion and then adds to stress, and while you're working, it just lowers your energy level quite a bit.”

In addition to verbal descriptions of anger and frustration, field notes captured visible signs of emotional intensity during interviews. Observational field notes show that participants' nonverbal reactions were consistent across interview questions 1 through 4. When discussing emotional responses, stress, physical health impacts, and resource depletion, several participants were fidgeting, breathing heavier, and biting their lips. P6 verbally shared that their hands were shaking just talking about and reliving the situation. P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, and P16 became visibly emotional or showed signs of discomfort while recounting these experiences. In contrast, a few

participants, P2, P4, and P7, laughed or used humor while reflecting on how angry or frustrated they had become during that time. Specifically, P2 stated, “Having a mental breakdown, as fun as that sounds, was not something I really wanted to do,” making light of a serious potential consequence of the situation. Throughout interviews, participants kept direct eye contact when discussing their experiences and were animated, using hand gestures and pronounced facial expressions to effectively convey their points. These observable behaviors occurred regardless of the specific interview question, as the emotional and physiological responses associated with relationship conflict remained present throughout participants’ narratives. In addition to interview narratives and observational field notes, data provided further contextual information regarding participants’ experiences of relationship conflict.

Research Question 2:

How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

There were three interview questions that related to RQ2. These interview questions asked participants to describe how the conflict influenced their motivation, focus, and engagement at work. Additionally, they were asked to share how they coped with or managed the conflict, specifying any support systems or strategies that were most helpful to them. The interview questions related to RQ2 are presented in Table 5.

Table 5*Interview Questions for Research Question 2*

Research Question	Interview questions
How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?	5. How did the conflict influence your motivation and focus at work?
	6. How did you try to cope with or manage the conflict? Were there support systems or strategies that helped or failed?
	7. Can you describe how the conflict may have influenced your engagement with your work?

The themes identified for RQ2 were Theme 4: Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement, Theme 5: Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions, and Theme 6: Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support. The themes for RQ2 are presented in Table 6.

Table 6*Research Question 2 Themes*

Themes	Files	References
Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement	20	60
Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions	17	27
Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support	20	41

A mind map for each theme is depicted in Figures 5-7. Figure 5 summarizes the primary indicators of diminished motivation and cognitive disengagement identified in the data.

Figure 5

Theme 4: Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement Mind Map



Theme 4: Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement. When exploring how relationship conflict influenced participants' motivation and focus while in the workplace, all 20 participants (100%) expressed a significant reduction in motivation, a loss of focus while at work, or both. Some participants reported an almost complete loss of motivation. When specifying how much their motivation was reduced, P19 stated, "I'd probably say 99.99%. It was nearly impossible to continue to show up and have motivation, have the drive." P8 stated, "I just lost the motivation and the focus because there wasn't any need anymore. I just gave up. I lost all motivation." P10 directly related their motivation reduction to the stress related to the conflict at work, stating, "I was already stressed, and my motivation actually dropped. I wasn't motivated." Additionally, P2 and P16 linked their loss of motivation to the relational aspect of the conflict by stating, "I became a lot less motivated. I didn't feel very motivated by my boss, and I was not

going to bring 100% of myself,” and “My motivation went down because I was like, ‘why is she doing this,’” referring to the conflict and the person involved. Some participants reported that, as the conflict continued to remain unresolved, the loss of motivation led to minimal effort and cognitive engagement. P12 shared, “That last month before I left, I definitely was just kind of going through the motions.” Additionally, P17 stated, “I was very unmotivated at work, and my heart wasn’t in it anymore.” Lastly, P17 reflected a complete indifference towards some aspects of their job, sharing, “I don’t care about arriving on time anymore. I don’t care about that at all.”

Participants reported how the conflict affected their ability to focus on performing their duties. P15 stated, “I could not focus on performing job duties. It (the conflict) was the only thing I thought about,” connecting the inability to focus on executing job duties to the ongoing conflict at work. Similarly, P5 expressed that the conflict was a distraction from the job, stating, “The distraction, you know, we should be focusing on the projects we work on and where we’re going instead of this (the conflict).” P11 shared, “Having to focus on (the conflict) more took away from other things that I could be doing, so it deterred my focus.” P16 and P3 expressed how the ongoing conflict detracted from their ability to perform job duties by respectively sharing, “If I was responding (to the conflict), I wouldn’t be working as I should be” and “I was trying to calm situations all day long, and losing cycle time of some other things.” More significantly, P20 shared, “I find it hard to get my job done. I find it harder to focus on doing that. I think it’s hard to get back in there and continue that work. I feel like it’s slowing me down.” What began as emotional strain and cognitive detachment ultimately manifested in behavioral withdrawal. Figure 6 visually summarizes how participants reduced effort, limited collaboration, and intentionally disengaged from discretionary contributions.

Figure 6

Theme 5: Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions Mind Map



Theme 5: Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions. As participants became progressively less motivated and focused on work, they described reducing effort and withdrawing from work, signaling a shift from internal disengagement to observable behavioral withdrawal and reduced work contributions. When asked to describe how the conflict influenced their work engagement, participants described a change in their connection to their work, which led to behavioral changes, with 12 of the 20 participants (60%) indicating that they resorted to giving bare minimum effort or significantly reducing their efforts. P1 stated, “I just looked at whatever numbers were there yesterday, and I wrote them down minus whatever I sold that day.” Additionally, P8 and P9 shared, “performance became basic as a job can be,” and “I just showed up and just did my tasks and went home. I was going to do marginal work.” P18 thoroughly expressed how the situation at work led to reduced efforts, sharing:

I would feel discouraged from wanting to continue showing up as my best self because I wasn't being valued for the work that I put in or being seen for the effort that I was giving. So, that discouraged me from giving that extra effort and care to the role. I would

say I still got the job done, but not with 100% effort. I was just waiting for the time to get by. I'm just going to slow down, go at my pace, and get it done, and when the clock is up, I'm gone.

Some participants expressed that although they had done so before, they had stopped going above and beyond for their organization. P1 stated, "I wasn't doing anything to contribute to the health of the corporation, where before I would. It was no longer my problem." P19 shared:

It got to a point where I had to really sit back and think, is it worth me working over what I'm scheduled to work? It decreased my engagement because I was no longer the person who would get there 20 to 30 minutes early.

Lastly, P2 stated, "I wasn't going above and beyond, and I didn't have that same passion that I carried before." Conversely, some participants noted that they did not experience behavioral disengagement with their work but rather made significant efforts to disengage from collaborating or communicating with the source of the conflict. Specifically, P5 stated, "Previously, I would show that I'm supportive and I like building a community at work, but I wouldn't do that now." Additionally, P9 and P13 shared, "I stopped sharing my ideas," and "it disengaged me with that person."

Some participants reported that the withdrawal and reduced contributions were accompanied by a disconnection from their jobs due to the ongoing conflict. P16 shared, "I had to feel less connected to it that way, (the conflict) made me feel less connected to work." P2 added, "It kind of killed the passion for me in a sense," and P3 stated, "I felt that lost connection" to the job. P7 stated, "I didn't have that emotional attachment to it anymore. It just sucked the joy out of it." Additionally, P9 shared, "There were no emotions attached. I mean, it was just

work.” Finally, P14 expressed that the disconnection led to negative emotions and questioning their desire to remain in the job, sharing:

I just couldn’t get into it. Some days I would walk into work and just drag my feet, and I was by myself a lot of the time, so I’d slam the door behind me, and I was just like, Oh my God, why am I even [expletive] here? I don’t know. It just sucked.

In response to ongoing emotional strain and resource depletion, participants described various coping strategies aimed at protecting their remaining resources. Figure 7 summarizes the primary coping mechanisms identified in the data.

Figure 7

Theme 6: Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support Mind Map



Theme 6: Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support. When exploring resource protection and coping mechanisms used by participants experiencing relationship conflict at work, participants described active efforts in avoidance strategies as well as seeking and receiving help from social support systems. Of the 20 participants, 14 (70%) reported using avoidance measures to manage the situation, specifically by avoiding the individual who was the source of the conflict. P1 described seeking physical separation from the individual while at work, saying, “I would constantly go use the bathroom just so I could get a 10-minute break from this person.” Similarly, P13 shared that they avoided the individual by not using shared spaces such as the break room, explaining, “I wanted to have some peace. So, I started leaving and driving 5 or 10 minutes down the road to sit there in peace and then drive back just to get away.” Further, P7 shared:

My immediate (coping mechanism) was when I was on my breaks, or I was on my lunch, I'd go to my car, and the entire time I was on this break, I would be recording myself a voice message to my sisters or my best friends. It would just be yelling. I'd be so irritated. I was so tired of these people.

Lastly, P9 described avoiding interaction altogether, stating, “I would try to avoid any unnecessary communication. I was trying to avoid conversations. I abhorred every moment I had to meet or communicate with this person.” Some participants described attempts to minimize the effects by compartmentalizing the conflict, with P10 stating, “Work is work” and P11 sharing, “I would act normal and not let it bother me.” P16 further shared, “I was trying to keep my communication with them short. I would minimize it to cope because out of sight, out of mind. If I wasn't talking to them, then I wouldn't necessarily become emotional or get angered.”

Other participants expressed a desire to avoid drawing attention to themselves, with P12 stating, “I want to just kind of be as under the radar as possible,” and P1 adding, “I genuinely made sure I was on par, despite being miserable.” P18 shared that they would reduce associating with coworkers, saying, “I just get standoffish. Personally, I just get very shut down, dissociating from everyone at work.” P2 stated, “I just avoided them. I just tried to avoid talking to them, maintaining minimal contact as possible.” Additionally, P4 shared, “I started telling them to leave me alone and to stop bothering me and go away, 100% avoiding communicating with them.”

In addition to avoidance, participants described utilizing social and emotional support systems to cope with the work situation. Support from co-workers was identified as helpful by 8 of the 20 participants (40%), while 9 (45%) reported relying on close friends and family to cope. P15 and P18 noted that their coworkers were valuable sources of support due to shared experiences and an understanding of workplace dynamics, stating, “Talking about it to the other people that worked there that understood,” and “my co-workers, definitely relating to them.” Other participants described relying on external support networks, particularly family and close friends. P1 stated, “I had my family and friends.” P13 shared, “I would talk to my husband, my mom, and my kids to deal with it.” Unfortunately, only 2 participants (10%) reported utilizing organizational support. P5 and P13 shared that they were able to and felt comfortable discussing the conflict situation with their immediate supervisors. Overall, support from coworkers, family members, and friends played a critical role in helping participants cope with the emotional strain of workplace relationship conflict by providing understanding, validation, and a sense of relief during an otherwise stressful work experience.

Research Question 3:***What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?***

There were 3 interview questions that related to RQ3. These interview questions asked participants to describe the factors that led them to consider quitting their jobs, how their organizations would have been supportive during that time, and what they believed organizations could do to prevent work disengagement. The interview questions related to RQ3 are shown in Table 7.

Table 7*Interview Questions for Research Question 3*

Research question	Interview questions
What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?	<p>8. What were the signs (internal or external) that made you consider quitting your job?</p> <p>9. How could your organization have supported you during that time?</p> <p>10. How can the organization address ways to prevent work disengagement?</p>

Organizational leadership was a recurring theme when exploring the tipping points that led to disengagement and turnover decisions, as well as how participants could have felt more supported by their organizations. Additionally, it was discussed how organizations could prevent disengagement in the future. When asked what the most significant factor in their turnover decisions was, all 20 participants (100%) reported that the leadership within their organization played a role in their decisions. P11 stated, “Not feeling supported” by their leaders. P14 simply said, “The new management,” and P12 pointed to “my managers and supervisors” as the reason for quitting their jobs. The themes identified for RQ3 include Theme 7: Leadership Involvement and Engagement, Theme 8: Training and Developing Leaders in Effective Conflict Management, and Theme 9: Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future Outlook. Table 8 shows the themes for RQ3. Participants consistently identified leadership involvement as a pivotal factor influencing whether conflict escalated toward disengagement or was resolved constructively. Figure 8 illustrates the contrasting outcomes associated with supportive versus unsupportive leadership responses.

Table 8

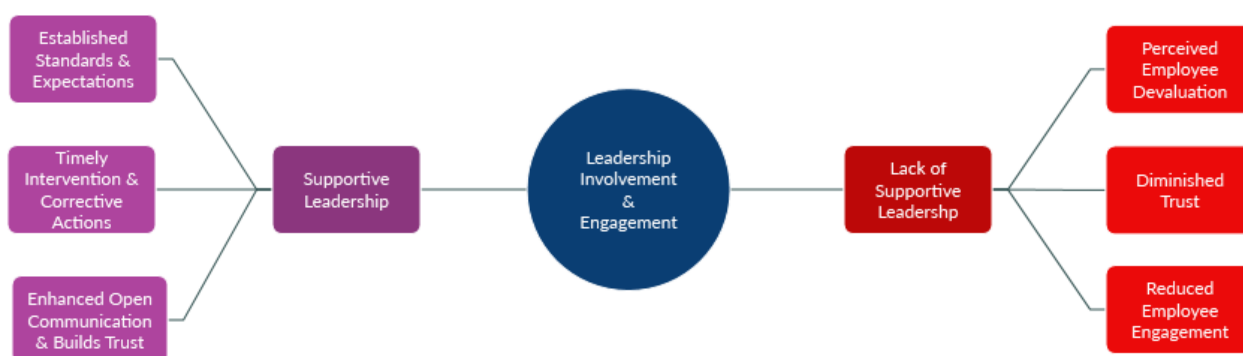
Research Question 3 Themes

Themes	Files	References
Leadership Involvement and Engagement	20	49
Training Leaders in Effective Conflict Management and Strengthening HR Processes	13	15
Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future Outlook	20	41

A mind map for each theme is depicted in Figures 8–10. The figure illustrates that supportive leadership involves established standards, timely and corrective actions to violations of those standards, and enhance communication and trust, whereas the absence of such leadership leads to employee devaluation, diminished trust, and reduced engagement..

Figure 8

Theme 7: Leadership Involvement and Engagement Mind Map



Theme 7: Leadership Involvement and Engagement. Many participants directly attributed the organization's lack of support to leadership when asked how it could have been more supportive. P12 stated, “I wish it had shown that they valued us, did care, and encouraged us more.” P14 added, “We needed support in general, and without the support, all of us were kind of miserable.” P17 shared that the lack of support from their organization's leaders caused some discomfort and mistrust by saying, “How can I be comfortable and secure in the fact that I'm telling you something is happening that is not acceptable and you're not going to take it out on me.” When asked about organizational support strategies that could have been helpful during the participants' difficult times at work, participants consistently emphasized the importance of an active leader's presence and responsiveness. Participants described the need for prompt

corrective actions, early intervention in conflict situations, and continual leadership visibility and accessibility within the workplace.

All 20 participants (100%) reported that leadership involvement and engagement during the time of conflict would have provided substantial support. Participants shared that setting standards, policies, and proactive and timely corrective measures would have made them feel more supported and secure. For instance, P16 stated that leadership should “set standards of what is acceptable,” and P19 added, “publish expectations and tell you if the expectation and standard are not met, then this is how we will resolve the issue.” Additionally, participants shared that early intervention and follow-through on corrective actions would have made them feel more supported by leadership. P11 stated, “I think it needs to be addressed head-on, and they're just allowing it to breeze over.” Additionally, P13 shared, “My boss knew we were having these issues, and she let them occur for a long time.”

All participants emphasized the importance of having accessible and involved leaders who could recognize, address, and manage relationship conflicts before they escalated. Participants shared that having leaders available could have provided opportunities for communication that would have improved the leaders' understanding of what was happening with employees. P15 shared:

Leaders being more involved in what's happening rather than having just one manager terrorize a whole store of employees. Open the window for your employees to come to you and confide about how it feels working there, or about anything else they need.

P2 added, “Having my boss's boss be accessible would have been a huge help, and just having someone I could go talk to about these things.” P8 felt that if the leadership was present, then they would be better able to ascertain the health and well-being of workers, stating it would

be beneficial to an organization, “Where the leaders come around to evaluate what's going on and want to know the well-being of the team and of the people that are working there.”

Participants consistently described that conflict became most damaging when organizational systems were absent or ineffective. Figure 9 illustrates the preventive infrastructure, leadership training, mediation processes, and accessible reporting systems, that may reduce escalation and preserve engagement.

Figure 9

Theme 8: Training Leaders in Effective Conflict Management and Strengthening HR Processes

Mind Map



Theme 8: Training Leaders in Effective Conflict Management and Strengthening HR Processes. Other strategies that participants identified as potentially supportive and helpful during their conflict included the need for effective conflict resolution processes and meaningful involvement of human resources. Participants described the importance of having trusted avenues for reporting conflict, opportunities for mediated conversations, and thorough responses to complaints. Of the 20 participants, 13 (65%) reported that leaders who are effective in managing conflict and having capable and reliable human resources (HR) processes for reporting and complaint handling would have helped them remain engaged with their work. P1 shared:

I genuinely feel that if our supervisor, his supervisor, had sat the three of us down and had a private meeting and asked, ‘spill, I got this complaint, I need to investigate it. Tell me what's going on,’ but not once did they ever come to our aid.

Additionally, P19 stated, “Creating the environment for both parties to be able to have someone mediate a conversation because a conversation should be had.” P2 shared, “Having somebody in the organization where I could go to with these things, and just trying to work out a resolution that seemed fair would have been ideal.” P7 suggested that leaders receive proper training for conflict situations, adding:

I believe that conflict management can improve the culture. I'm not a manager, so I'm not sure exactly what they train on, but I've been on the receiving end of their management, and an emphasis on conflict management would help. If they focused more on that in leadership training, I feel like it could definitely improve the culture, 1000%.

While some participants shared bad experiences using their HR department for complaints, with P8 stating, “I think actually going straight to the HR to report actually made the issue worse,” and P5 adding, “HR is so lackluster. I can give you numerous instances where I

have been underwhelmed by the lack of support, lack of insight, and lack of action by HR,” others shared that they had higher hopes and expectations of HR. Some participants expressed that having human resources (HR) offices or departments available and capable would have given them a trusted place to report certain situations. P2 stated, “Having an HR team” would have been helpful, and P8 added, “There should be an HR department that takes complaints” and conducts in-depth, not surface-level investigations.” Additionally, P2, P3, and P5 shared the same sentiment, stating, “Having an HR team,” “Having an outsourced HR,” and “I feel like HR should have stepped in” demonstrates how a present HR element could have made a significant positive difference in their experiences. In summary, these perspectives highlight the importance of having accessible and well-functioning organizational systems in place to address conflict before it escalates and contributes to disengagement or turnover. Participants indicated that their decision to leave was often tied to a diminished belief that conditions would improve. Figure 10 illustrates the workplace factors that may restore optimism, strengthen belonging, and prevent disengagement from progressing to turnover.

Figure 10

Theme 9: Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future

Outlook



Theme 9: Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future Outlook. When describing organizational conditions that could have reduced work disengagement, 100% of participants emphasized the importance of healthy work environments characterized by team building, open communication, and a sense of value. Participants expressed that organizations that demonstrate care for and value their workers can better prevent work disengagement. P15 stated that to prevent disengagement, “I think genuinely just caring,” and P18 added, “Value your employees, and they will want to bring more to the table. When you value an employee, you are constantly expressing gratitude.” Additionally, fostering open communication was identified as a factor in maintaining a satisfactory work environment. P20 suggested, “More listening and not getting into an argument. Having a more meaningful discussion, talk about the issue, and address how to make it better rather than just being mad about it.” Similarly, P6 recommended, “Have more open communication and want to resolve things versus just letting

things stew.” Further, P4 suggested regularly meeting for discussion, suggesting leaders consider “Meeting 30 minutes before work and do a gathering where you remind people of the culture that you're looking for.”

Participants also shared recommendations for team and relationship building as a method to strengthen their company and prevent disengagement. P6 stated that “having more opportunities for team building and engagement” would have strengthened their team, with P13 adding that “training, relationship building, and team building” would improve the work environment. Some participants discussed creating an environment that fosters connectivity and a positive outlook. For instance, P18 suggested:

Conduct workshops, meetings, or collaborations to bring the team together. If corporations and workforces collaborated and teamed together to build stronger skill sets of understanding each other so that people want to stay in the workplace, that would create more camaraderie and more trust.

In addition to describing supportive and healthy work conditions, participants reflected on how the absence of these conditions shaped their future outlook and decisions regarding whether to remain or leave. When asked to share the signs that made participants consider leaving or leaving their jobs, a poor future outlook was reported by 17 of the 20 participants (85%). P16 shared, “I couldn't really see anything happening to stop it because it did go on for quite a bit of time.” Additionally, P15 stated, “At that point, I was already over it. I was ready to go because of everything that had happened.” The ongoing effects of the conflict led many participants to leave their jobs. P2 attributed leaving to “The general weight of things going down on me,” P7 stated, “I felt like I was just tired of suffering,” and P8 shared, “I was really spiraling down really fast.” Although P5 did not quit their job, they shared, “If it continued with

no kind of solution, if I didn't see a solution on the horizon, I would absolutely start to look elsewhere,” indicating that if there was no positive outlook, they would consider leaving their job.

When participants described their experiences after leaving their jobs, many reported noticeable improvements in their emotional well-being. Participants expressed feelings of relief, reduced stress, and improved mental health following their decision to quit. P2 and P4 shared that they no longer felt stress after leaving, with P2 stating, “I wasn’t really stressed at all once I left,” and P4 adding, “I had no stress” after leaving. Other participants expressed feeling happier once leaving, with P8 sharing, “I was very happy,” and P15 saying, “When I left that place, I was the happiest I could be.” In describing their experience as a release from a toxic or overwhelming work environment, P1, P2, P4, and P7 shared that leaving was “freeing.” Finally, when participants described and reflected upon leaving their jobs, observational field notes showed that several participants physically demonstrated mannerisms that reflected relief and smiled for the first time, contrasting with the visible tension and distress observed when recounting the conflict.

The data revealed that participants reported experiencing emotional, physiological, and cognitive reactions when conflict arose in their relationships with coworkers or supervisors. Participants described subsequent reductions in motivation and focus, followed by behavioral withdrawal and reduced work contributions. Many participants reported that disengagement was accompanied by considering leaving or resigning, often linked to a poor future outlook in the organization. Participants also identified organizational strategies they believed could have reduced disengagement and turnover, including leadership engagement and responsiveness, effective conflict management and resolution processes (including HR involvement), and

cultivating healthy work environments that emphasized communication, team cohesion, and employees feeling valued. The following section evaluates these findings by interpreting the identified patterns and themes in relation to the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature.

Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

This study explored the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement through employees' lived experiences. The conceptual framework for this study was the conservation of resources (COR) theory. COR theory contends that individuals seek to acquire and maintain centrally valued personal resources such as resilience, self-esteem, and psychological strength (Wang, 2023; Snyder et al., 2020). When events occur that result in the loss of those resources, individuals exhibit stress responses aimed at protecting resources from further depletion (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2017; Snyder et al., 2020). In this study, participants shared their experiences of relationship conflict at work and the resulting intense emotional responses, stress development, and heightened anxiety that strained their available resources.

The conceptual framework showed that relationship conflict, as a stressful event, leads to emotional, social, and cognitive resource loss that causes emotional distress, reduced well-being, and decreased productivity (Mubarak et al., 2022; Zhou & Chen, 2021). These events create a resource loss spiral that leads to more stress and further resource loss resulting in withdrawal behaviors (Hobfoll et al., 2017; Somaraju et al., 2022). Findings showed that employees experienced reduced motivation, focus, and emotional attachment to their work followed by cognitive withdrawal and finally, behavioral disengagement. Once disengaged, participants shared that their decisions to consider leaving or quitting their job occurred once they perceived

that their current situations would not improve. Lastly, participants shared that their organizations could have provided better support and prevented work disengagement if leaders had been involved and engaged and were able to manage or resolve the conflict, along with trusted HR processes and healthy work environments. The findings of this study were consistent with existing literature on relationship conflict in the workplace, work disengagement and voluntary turnover. Participants' experiences of emotional strain depleted emotional and physiological resources that resulted in coping through cognitive and behavioral withdrawal and led to disengagement and voluntary turnover (Bruce et al., 2025; De Dru & Weingart, 2023; Khan & Azam, 2022; Li, 2023). The findings were also consistent with conservation of resources (COR) theory by showing that relationship conflict acts as a significant stressor that depletes employees' emotional resources, creating a loss spiral that leads to disengagement and turnover decisions as a way to protect further resource loss. The study's findings resulted in nine themes that aligned with both the conceptual framework and the existing literature that answered three research questions.

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked: How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?

Research Question 1 sought to examine how employees experienced relationship conflict in the workplace. The three themes that emerged from the data were: Emotional Intensity During Conflict, Stress Activation and Physiological Strain Responses, and Resource Depletion and Emotional-Cognitive Exhaustion. Existing literature found that relationship conflict causes workplace stress and has negative effects on employee emotions, mental and physical health, and overall well-being (Ahmad, 2022; Bruce et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024). The data aligned with the literature, as participants shared that they experienced relationship conflict as emotionally

intense and progressively draining, resulting in responses characterized by anger and frustration that led to heightened stress, and anxiety, and reduced overall well-being. The culmination of prolonged stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being of participants was associated with significant resource depletion and emotional exhaustion reported as rapidly declining emotional well-being, self-esteem, and energy levels. Participants' narratives showed that as the conflict continued unresolved, stress levels were exacerbated and deep emotional exhaustion led to diminished self-confidence and mental or physical energy. These findings align with existing literature that concluded that relationship conflict has a profound negative impact on individual well-being due to strain from the depletion of physical, psychological, and emotional resources (Prince et al., 2024; Somaraju et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024).

Participants in this study described ongoing emotional and physiological strain that accumulated over time, reflecting the resource loss spirals discussed in the literature. These findings align with COR theory and the conceptual framework that showed that individuals seek to conserve personal resources and that resource loss results in stress (Somaraju et al., 2022). Further, when resources are strained, individuals may resort to protective measures to protect their remaining resources, resulting in continued stress causing a loss spiral further depleting resources (Hobfoll et al., 2017). As relationship conflict persisted without resolution and resource depletion continued, participants reported an unabated increase in stress, emotional exhaustion, and declining overall well-being.

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked: How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

Research Question 2 explored the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement from the participants' perspectives. The three themes that emerged for RQ2 from participant responses included: Diminished Motivation and Cognitive Disengagement, Behavioral Withdrawal and Reduced Work Contributions, and Coping Through Resource Protection and Social Support. Participants described disengagement as a gradual process characterized by reduced motivation, emotional detachment, reduced work efforts, cognitive withdrawal, and behavioral disengagement. These findings were consistent with existing literature that showed that negative relationships within the workplace can lead to withdrawal, reduced dedication, and cynicism towards co-workers or the organization (Abugre & Acquaaah, 2022). The literature also emphasized that relationship conflict undermines motivation and focus, which directly contributes to disengagement and withdrawal behaviors. Specifically, Bansal and Garg (2024) found that the emotional drain of workplace conflict made consistent task focus difficult for employees, causing employees to use withdrawal coping behaviors resulting in minimal efforts given to their job.

COR theory also provides a useful lens for interpreting this progression. As participants experienced ongoing emotional strain and stress, disengagement appeared to function as a resource protection strategy. This aligned with existing literature that shows that individuals may react to ongoing conflict through reduced commitment and motivation, decreased output, or complete work stoppage (Wogwu et al., 2023). Afrahi et al. (2022) suggested that although a disengaged employee may continue to work, they distance themselves cognitively and emotionally from the work. Participants' descriptions of "going through the motions" and "my heart wasn't in it" is an example of the disconnection from and giving minimal effort to work to limit further resource loss. The findings also aligned with literature suggesting that

disengagement often precedes turnover intentions. In this study, participants described disengagement as an intermediate stage that occurred before actively considering leaving or actually leaving the organization. Existing literature found that work disengagement was a coping method for work stressors and resulted in low job commitment and eventual turnover (Afrahi et al., 2022; Fulmore et al., 2023). As participants shared that their efforts to cope through personal support systems, withdrawal behaviors, and full disengagement from work did not provide relief, many reported that their only viable option was to leave the organization.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked: What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?

Research Question 3 sought to discover what organizations could do to reduce work disengagement and prevent employee turnover in these situations. The three themes that emerged for RQ3 from participant responses included: Leadership Involvement and Engagement, Training Leaders in Effective Conflict Management and Strengthening HR Processes, and Creating Healthy Work Environments That Support Employee Well-being and Future Outlook. Existing literature contends that a lack of leadership presence creates barriers to conflict resolution and that, in fact, effective leadership plays a central role in managing employee conflict, shaping organizational culture, and enhancing employee engagement (Avian et al., 2025; Castellini et al., 2022; Hidayat et al., 2024). Participants expressed that during their time of conflict, when they were experiencing withdrawal, having an involved and engaged leader available to them would have been helpful. This finding aligns with existing literature that found that leadership involvement plays a crucial role in creating a resilient organizational culture that promotes employee motivation and engagement (Pougajendy et al., 2024).

This study's findings also highlight the importance of conflict resolution strategies among organizational leaders. Participants shared that they would have preferred having someone who could have helped manage and resolve the conflict. This finding is supported by current literature that suggests that relationship conflict can be best managed through mediation methods (Munduate et al., 2022). Additionally, the literature found that conflict resolution training provides skills that help employees navigate conflict more constructively (Chaudhary & Arora, 2023). Participants shared that having a trusted HR department to use in reporting their experience of conflict would have been ideal. Current literature adds that the focus of HR is critical to reducing employee withdrawal by providing a work environment that is positive and promotes employee engagement (Alhajaj & Ahmad, 2024; Elufioye et al., 2024; Sonar & Pandey, 2023).

Lastly, participants shared that organizations could prevent employee disengagement and turnover by providing healthy work environments that improve their well-being. Participants shared a desire to feel valued for their contributions and that having their concerns taken seriously would have made them feel like a part of the team and more important to the organization. Existing literature states that organizations that show an appreciation of contributions and concern for the well-being of employees significantly reduce turnover intentions (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). This finding aligned with existing literature showing that healthy work cultures create a sense of belonging and are essential to engagement, commitment, and employee performance (Ezeadim & Ananomo, 2025). Additionally, employees who work in organizations that prioritize employee well-being are more engaged, contribute more, and are less likely to leave (Özçınar et al., 2024). Participants' narratives reflect the literature findings by sharing that their decision to consider leaving or actually leaving their jobs resulted from a poor

future outlook, specifically that the current conflict situation would continue to harm their well-being.

Summary

The findings presented in this chapter were derived from data collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of participants who met the study's criteria. The chapter includes a discussion of trustworthiness of the data through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability methods. The results were presented by providing participant demographics and self-reported outcomes to relationship conflict in the workplace in tables to provide contextual background. Additionally, tables showing interview questions associated with each research question were presented to show alignment between the data collection instrument and the study's research questions. The findings were organized by research question and presented through themes, supported by participant quotations and observational field notes to illustrate employees' lived experiences. Overall, the findings revealed nine themes describing employees' experiences of the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement and turnover consideration.

Participants experienced relationship conflict as emotionally intense, stress activating, and resource depleting, which progressed into reduced motivation and cognitive withdrawal. Participants tried to protect resources from further depletion but eventually experienced complete behavioral withdrawal and disengagement. Participants reported that as the conflict persisted, they perceived no practical path for improvement within the organization and expressed that leaving the organization was the only remaining option. Finally, participants shared that their organizations could have better supported them and prevented work disengagement through leadership involvement and engagement, conflict management training, effective HR practices,

and creating a healthy work environment that offered a better future outlook. Together, these findings provide a comprehensive depiction of the participants' lived experiences and alignment with the conceptual framework, conservation of resources (COR) theory, and existing literature. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the study's results, recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem to be addressed in this study was how relationship conflict in the workplace leads to work disengagement which results in voluntary employee turnover (Li, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employees' lived experiences as they progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement with the aim of identifying factors that may help decrease employee turnover within organizations. Using conservation of resources (COR) theory as the conceptual framework, the findings are discussed below in relation to each research question, the study problem and purpose, and the literature. The key findings revealed consistent progression across participants' narratives. Participants described relationship conflict as emotionally intense, stressful, and resource draining. As conflict persisted, participants experienced reduced motivation, cognitive disengagement, and behavioral withdrawal, eventually considering leaving or left the organization when they believed that there would be no improvement. Participants also identified organizational conditions that could have been more supportive and able to mitigate disengagement and turnover. Specifically, leadership involvement and engagement, effective conflict management and HR processes, and work environments were expressed as critical factors in participants' decision-making during this time.

Several factors could have influenced the study's results. First, the findings were based on participants' retrospective self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by memory, the meaning participants assigned to their experiences, and the amount of time that has passed since the event. Second, the voluntary nature of participation may have resulted in self-selection bias, as individuals with particularly notable or unresolved conflict experiences may have been more inclined to participate. Third, the study relied mostly on employee perspectives and did not include organizational or leadership viewpoints, limiting the ability to assess conflict dynamics

from multiple organizational levels. Finally, the interview format may have influenced disclosure, as participants may be less forthcoming in face-to-face virtual interviews versus other anonymous formats. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted within the context of the participants' lived experiences rather than generalized as universal outcomes. This chapter will discuss implications of the findings, specifically, how the findings address the study's problem and purpose, relate to the conceptual framework, and contribute to existing literature. Finally, recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the study will conclude the chapter.

Discussion

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand how employees experience workplace relationship conflict and how these experiences contribute to work disengagement and voluntary turnover. The outcome of the findings aligned with conservation of resources (COR) theory, as participants explained how relationship conflict created stress and anxiety that initiated resource loss, leading to emotional strain and escalating stress (a loss spiral), followed by cognitive withdrawal, behavioral disengagement, and ultimately turnover considerations or voluntary exit as a means of preserving remaining resources. The findings of this study will aid in the fields of business administration and organizational leadership by informing on human capital management, organizational behavior related to conflict, the significance of engaged leaders, and the importance of workplace culture. Business professionals can use the findings of this study to better understand how unresolved relationship conflict affects employees and recognize early signs of disengagement. Understanding that cognitive and behavioral disengagement are responses to emotional exhaustion can help create conflict responsive leadership practices and supportive organizational cultures. Further, this information

can be used to strengthen human resources (HR) policies that create trustworthy channels for reporting conflict so that prompt mediation and resolution is possible to prevent potential turnover. A discussion of the three research questions can be viewed in the sections below.

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked: How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?

Findings suggested that employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace as an emotionally intense and destabilizing phenomenon that extended beyond simple disagreements. Existing literature supports this implication by showing that relationship conflicts with supervisors or peers result in emotional distress, depleted emotional energy, and reduced overall well-being (Dahiya et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2025; Sartika et al., 2025). In this study, 95% of participants shared that their emotional reactions to the conflict included profound anger and frustration. These reactions created persistent stress and anxiety that disrupted their emotional stability, often extending outside of the workplace and into their personal lives. Existing literature supports this interpretation by showing that relationship conflict in the workplace is closely associated with physical health impacts, reporting symptoms such as headaches, digestive issues, and eczema, with some employees resorting to using sick leave (Bruce et al., 2025). Participants shared that they experienced disrupted sleep patterns, nausea, skin reactions, hair loss, weight gain, and degraded overall mental and physical well-being during the ongoing workplace conflicts. This progression represented a shift in participants' feelings about their work environment, evolving from a place for professional contributions to an emotionally threatening space. The manifestation of physical ailments suggested that the severity of resource loss reached the point of physiological overload, where participants' mental and emotional processes were affected enough to affect physical health. This implication is supported by

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory that the body is connected to consciousness and that individuals experience the world with both body and mind (Larsen, 2023; Larsen & Adu, 2021).

Findings suggested that relationship conflict is a threat to core personal resources, including emotional stability, self-esteem, and perceived belonging within the organization. Literature supports this finding by citing that relationship conflict in the workplace was directly related to emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and a lost sense of belonging among employees (Choi et al., 2024; Kuriakose & Sreejesh, 2023b; Pathan, 2022). Participants shared how their experiences with conflict damaged their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities and caused them to mentally detach due to feeling devalued. Participants described distinct but related experiences of feeling devalued and a loss sense of belonging during ongoing relationship conflict. P1 described feeling reduced to "just a number" and P14 stated, "I felt like I didn't matter," reflecting a diminished sense of significance within the workplace. In addition to feeling undervalued, P18 shared that they felt significant self-doubt and low worth. Other participants described the erosion of confidence in their professional competence and abilities, with P9 reporting that they internalized the conflict as a reflection of their adequacy as a professional, stating, "My confidence in my skills took a downward spiral and I started questioning if I was competent enough" for the position. Additionally, P12 described the loss of self-esteem made them feel "in a shell," signaling feelings of dissociation and withdrawal. Although participants varied in whether they experienced diminished confidence in their abilities, lowered self-esteem, or feelings of being devalued, each described mentally detaching from the work environment as a protective response. Conservation of resources (COR) theory supports this assertion by asserting that employees need social connections within the workplace and when they lose them, emotional resources are lost and leads to emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2023).

Viewed through the lens of conservation of resources (COR) theory, participants' reactions to the conflict reflected the initial phase of resource loss, where interpersonal strain activated emotional depletion. Participants described exhaustion due to spending significant emotional energy trying to manage their emotions, anticipate or avoid interactions, and navigate the stress-heightening work environment or relationship. This description aligned with the assertion that individuals facing resource threats must invest added resources to prevent further loss, often intensifying rather than alleviating their stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Participants described not only experiencing stress from the conflict itself but also expending additional emotional and cognitive energy trying to manage or endure the situation. Several participants reported replaying conversations or revisiting the conflict to make sense of what had occurred. P5 described the continued emotional drain associated with not having closure, saying, "I still don't understand it. If someone could explain it to me in a way that I understood, which I still don't. I'm a person who needs closure but there has been none." P6 further explained how replaying the situation intensified internal strain, stating "As you run back through all the decisions you could have made or should have made and, I'm beating myself up for it. It's already happened, so you can't change it." This reflection suggests that the reflective mental revisiting extended the emotional impact of the conflict beyond the initial event.

Other participants described consciously regulating their emotions to remain professional despite experiencing ongoing strain. P2 explained attempting to appear unaffected by the conflict because "having a mental breakdown was not something they wanted to do." Similarly, P19 shared:

My innate energy was consistently low because so much of it was spent on emotional self-regulation, you know, trying to stay professional. There were certain times when I

would almost lose it and I just had to take a break and just go into the bathroom and dab some water on my face to stop myself from crashing out.

These narratives show that participants were not only reacting to conflict but also investing additional emotional and cognitive effort to manage its impact. Rather than alleviating stress, these efforts appeared to slow down the intensity of their emotional strain at the time while prolonging or increasing the stress and exhaustion over time. Specifically, P2 shared that the emotional exhaustion from continually regulating their emotions led to more stress by stating, “I just kept all the things internalized and eventually that just leads to more and more stress.” As stress intensified, participants shared how they progressed from relationship conflict and its impacts towards withdrawal and disengagement from their work.

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked: How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

The findings suggested that employees experience the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement through a gradual process and snowballing effect of resource depletion rather than as a sudden reaction to a single incident. Participants did not describe disengagement as an immediate response to conflict, but rather an emerging phenomenon following endured emotional strain, unresolved interpersonal tension, and repeated perceptions of organizational inaction or indifference. As conflict persisted, participants described reduced motivation, diminished concentration, and a growing sense of detachment from their work, coining it as “just going through the motions.” P1 explained their feeling during that time saying, “I’m tired. I need to do something before I go crazy. I mentally tapped out of my job,” illustrating a shift from strain to psychological detachment. Similarly, P8 questioned the purpose

of continued effort, stating, “What’s the motivation to keep working? Nothing. I just lost motivation. I just gave up on everything.” This sense of resignation reflects not only emotional fatigue but also diminished engagement. Other participants described their motivation declining as relational strain persisted. P7 stated, “I was very unmotivated. My heart wasn’t in it anymore,” as P10 shared, “I wasn’t happy. So, every time I came to work, I wasn’t doing my best at work. Emotionally I was gone,” directly linking emotional detachment to reduced performance. P14 similarly expressed, “I can’t handle this. I can’t get into it,” suggesting difficulty sustaining cognitive and emotional investment. Collectively, these narratives show a progression from sustained stress to diminished motivation, cognitive disengagement, and ultimately behavioral withdrawal from work responsibilities. These reflections from participants represent a significant shift in their relationship with their work, suggesting that while employees were physically present, they were psychologically and emotionally absent, disengaging as a protective mechanism.

The study’s results highlighted that the prolonged exposure to relationship conflict consumed emotional and cognitive resources, leaving employees increasingly fatigued, distracted, and emotionally guarded. Literature supports the finding by citing that the psychological toll of unresolved conflicts in the workplace causes elevated stress for employees, leading to reduced motivation and a high propensity for work disengagement that results in diminished performance (Irwan, 2024). This pattern of disengagement may reflect as the coping response to ongoing strain as emotional exhaustion intensified, with employees intentionally limiting their efforts, withdrawing from discretionary behaviors, and reducing emotional investment as a means of self-preservation. This implication aligns with literature showing that work disengagement serves as a coping mechanism for stress, as disengaged employees limit

efforts, commitment, or attachment to their work (Afrahi et al., 2022). From a conservation of resources (COR) perspective, disengagement functioned as a resource conservation strategy, allowing employees to protect remaining emotional and cognitive reserves in an environment perceived as unsupportive or harmful.

As disengagement persisted, findings suggested that employees reached a point where continued employment was no longer perceived as viable or psychologically sustainable. Final decisions to leave were made after exhausting all available coping mechanisms and support options without any positive gains or resolution. Interpretively, this is the moment when employees determine that the harmful work experience outweighs any benefits of remaining in their job. The findings suggested that turnover is not merely a job change, but an escape from a toxic work environment. Aligning with the conceptual framework, this reflects a final-stage resource preservation response, wherein employees chose to exit the organization to prevent further depletion and to restore depleted emotional and psychological reserves. Literature supports this assertion by stating that when individuals experience resource loss they attempt to prevent further loss, but when unable to do so, will result to defensive measures and relief through withdrawal and turnover (Bon & Shire, 2022; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2023; Hobfoll et al., 2017).

Participants often described turnover as the only remaining option for regaining control, emotional stability, and well-being once disengagement and exhaustion reached critical levels. P8 cited their experience before quitting their job as “a downward spiral,” while P7 was “tired of suffering.” The findings suggested that turnover decisions among disengaged employees are best understood as the rational, resource-conserving outcomes of sustained emotional and relational strain in the workplace. Finally, unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace creates toxic

environments that cause emotional harm and mental distress, increasing the likelihood of voluntary employee turnover (Qiu et al., 2025; Sartika et al., 2025). When participants shared their recollection of leaving their jobs, they reflected on the sense of relief that they felt at the time and showed visible signs that signified how emotionally impactful their experience had been and how leaving immediately improved their well-being. The emotional relief that resonated with many during the interview showed that the relationship conflict was still significant long after the event occurred.

The findings of this study underscored that the instant improvement in participants' well-being after leaving showed that, in addition to the conflict, the workplace had become a stressor and that turnover served as a pathway to resource recovery for 65% of participants. Many participants shared that the "general weight of things," the "downward spiral of anxiety," and feeling like they were "going crazy" while at work as the precipitator of leaving. Participants were clear in explaining this when asked what the turning point to leaving their job with P7 sharing, "It was getting to a point where I felt like I was just tired of suffering. Like, you shouldn't be so down every single time you go to work." Similarly, P8 stated, "I knew that coming to the same place that started all the problems would only make me more mentally frustrated and that the anxiety would get worse. So, I knew I had to leave." Workplace toxicity was cited by multiple participants, with P9 stating, "I had to leave the environment because it was very toxic, draining, and making me hate life." Ultimately, by attempting to navigate the conflict, participants were expending more resources and experiencing a worsening of stress and anxiety, creating the realization that further resource investment would not result in a positive outcome, signifying the transition from 'struggling to stay' to 'preparing to leave.' While the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement was resource depleting and drove

turnover decisions, participants openly shared how organizational interventions could have prevented disengagement and turnover.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked: What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?

The findings suggested that strategies aimed at reducing turnover among disengaged employees must focus on interrupting resource loss cycles and restoring emotional, relational, and organizational support. Literature supports this finding by stating that participative and supportive approaches create healthier work environments (Maniendaran et al., 2025). Further, studies showed that supportive organizational cultures encouraged employee engagement and improved work commitment (Hidayat et al., 2024). Participants consistently shared that meaningful organizational support and assistance with their conflict situation could have validated their experiences and reduced the emotional and interpersonal strain. The findings underscored the importance of healthy work environments that make employees feel valued for their efforts, with P1 stating, “It’s not that people don’t want to work anymore, it’s that people don’t want to suffer at work anymore.” This reflection suggested that employees do not accept that suffering at work just comes with the territory and is an expected byproduct of employment.

Participants shared that organizations should encourage open communication between employees and the leaders within the company, emphasizing the importance of accessible, responsive leadership and effective human resource processes as critical mechanisms for preventing disengagement from resulting in turnover. From an interpretive view, these strategies could have functioned as resource replenishment pathways, offering employees psychological safety, procedural justice, and organizational support. In alignment with conservation of

resources (COR) theory, access to supportive resources could have impeded resource loss spirals, as 100% of participants shared that prompt intervention and open communication could have preserved their engagement. Participants named several concrete organizational strategies that they believed could have prevented disengagement from progressing to turnover. First, participants emphasized the need for involved and accessible leaders to provide more support during difficult situations. P2 shared that “having my boss accessible would have been a huge help in having someone I could go talk to.” Additionally, P4 stressed that, “having someone to go to about my concerns” would have been helpful during that time. P7 recommended organizational leaders “do more frequent check-ins when it comes to the [work] environment.”

Several participants suggested early intervention when conflict occurs. P15 suggested that organizational leaders “be more involved in what's happening,” with P13 stating, “My boss knew we were having these issues and let them occur for a long time” and suggested the most effective way to intervene would have been “bringing the parties together sooner and addressing it head on rather than waiting.” P1 suggested that had their leaders “sat down and had a private meeting and investigated it” that would have built trust and confidence in leadership and future outcomes. These suggestions were shared by P10 and P11 respectively stating that conflict in the workplace needs to be “quickly resolved” and that leaders should “address it head on.”

Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of conflict management and resolution training that promotes open communication and mediation as preventative strategies. P7 believes that “conflict management training can improve culture and if they focus more on that, I feel like it could definitely improve the culture.” These findings showed that participants believed that the presence of leaders capable of and willing to manage and mitigate conflict would have provided better support and helped prevent disengagement and turnover.

Many participants described the absence of a safe, structured space to resolve the conflict as a turning point in their disengagement. P2 shared that “having an HR team to work out a resolution that seemed fair would have been ideal” but there was none available in the specific workplace. P15 recommended organizations “have HR frequently available to see how everything was working, open the window for your employees to come to you and confide about how it is working there or about anything that they need.” Interestingly, P16 shared that their company provided employees with an HR video to watch with no further information or actions after watching. To make it more impactful, P16 suggested that follow-up training or conversation would have been better at signifying the seriousness of the information contained in the video and the repercussion if employees violate certain standards and expectations. They said that “having that set line would probably be helpful in deterring stuff like this from happening.”

The findings of this study indicate that employees view relationship conflict as manageable and can be resolved with effective organizational processes. Contrarily, when such systems were absent or ineffective, participants perceived disengagement and eventual exit as the only practical means of resource protection. Literature supports this implication by showing that employees who withdraw or disengage from their work will also try to distance themselves from the source of the resource loss, potentially determining that leaving the organization as the best path forward (Agarwal et al., 2024). Findings also suggested that strategies to reduce turnover must include proactive involvement and engagement of organizational leaders. Literature supports this finding by suggesting that strong leadership is critical to managing conflict in the workplace, specifically in promoting positive cultures and supportive environments (Maniendaran et al., 2025; Tran, 2025a). Additionally, it is critical to establish communication and conflict management strategies that align with an organizational culture that values

employees (Maniendaran et al., 2025). Participants described the early stages of disengagement as a point where intervention was still possible. However, once emotional exhaustion and detachment reached a critical threshold, turnover was perceived as inevitable. This interpretation underscored the importance of early identification of disengagement and prompt organizational response to conflict-related stressors.

A notable finding from the study indicated that all participants (100%) reported the absence of a formal support system within their organizations. Some participants shared that they did communicate the conflict situation to their supervisors or leaders, but no corrective actions were taken. This finding suggests that when an organization does not provide support to employees experiencing harmful situations, it is perceived as a betrayal. For instance, when P4 was asked to reflect on the turning point for quitting, they cited that organizational leadership was “not doing anything” about the situation that was becoming increasingly harmful. Implementing supportive management and leadership practices can help organizations create a climate of trust and psychological safety for employees experiencing relationship conflict in the workplace.

Another unexpected revelation included those who did not immediately quit their jobs despite experiencing emotional strain due to relationship conflict. Although participants reported disengagement, some remained at their jobs for lengthy periods before quitting. Of the participants who left their organizations, only one described an immediate resignation. Four remained employed for an additional two to three months, two stayed approximately nine months, and one remained for nearly one year before leaving. The reasons for remaining in their jobs while disengaged due to the work circumstances included financial necessity and perceived lack of alternative employment. Some participants who ultimately resigned did not specify the

precise duration between the onset of disengagement and their departure. This variation further illustrates that turnover decisions were typically preceded by an extended period of disengagement rather than occurring as a sudden reaction to a single event.

Additionally, due to strong professional identity or tenured employment, a small subset of participants described remaining engaged and committed to their job roles, but deciding to disengage from communicating or collaborating with the individual(s) involved in the conflict. Most surprisingly, P13 described their experience as “turmoil over the span of 17 years,” proving that various factors can shape individual coping methods, disengagement, and turnover decisions. These divergent results suggest that some individuals may tolerate continued resource depletion when external factors are prioritized over emotional well-being. Reasons cited by participants who remained engaged in their work during the conflict situation included P3 and P13 expressing a strong professional identity and a love for their job, while P6 and P16 stayed because the individual with whom the conflict was with had left the company. This finding underscored the importance of understanding that although employees may remain in their job under stressful or emotionally draining circumstances, it does not signify well-being, resilience, or engagement, but may indicate that external constraints are forcing them to endure internal breakdown.

The findings addressed the study’s problem by demonstrating that workplace relationship conflict is a psychological and physically destabilizing experience that results in resource loss and initiates the progression toward work disengagement. The problem in this study is highlighted through participants’ accounts of emotional distress, physiological strain, and reduced well-being. Participants described these impacts as profound and described that the untenable conditions eventually led them to withdraw cognitively, then behaviorally disengage

before considering turnover. The findings also fulfilled the purpose of the study by capturing employees' lived experiences of relationship conflict as a deeply impactful phenomenon rather than as an isolated workplace issue. By documenting how participants' emotional reactions extend beyond the workplace into their personal lives, this study offers phenomenological insight into how unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace affects employees' emotional and physiological health. These experiential accounts clarify the human impact of conflict and explain why employees may show progressive cognitive withdrawal long before total behavioral disengagement and leaving the organization.

The findings aligned with the conceptual framework through participant descriptions of relationship conflict as an emotionally exhausting and stressful event resulting in initial resource loss that led to emotional distress and reduced well-being. Participants attempted to regulate emotions or avoid stressful interactions as an attempt to cope to preserve resources, but as the conflict persisted, stress levels became elevated and resource loss continued unabated, opening the pathway to work disengagement. Lastly, these findings contribute to existing research by offering an experiential account of how conflict is subjectively lived and interpreted by employees. While prior studies have established links between relationship conflict, emotional distress, and physical health symptoms, this study extends the literature by explaining how the emotional and physiological reactions function as early indicators of disengagement trajectories (Bruce et al., 2025; Dahiya et al., 2025; Sartika et al., 2025). By framing conflict as a threat to valued personal resources rather than merely a workplace stressor, this study adds a person-centered understanding of how emotional strain initiates the progression from conflict to withdrawal and turnover.

The findings of this study have significant implications by advancing awareness of workplace relationship conflict as a legitimate mental and physiological health concern. Participants' experiences of emotional strain, anxiety, and other physical symptoms show that unmanaged interpersonal conflict extends beyond organizational inconvenience and contributes to broader mental and physical health challenges. Understanding that work disengagement and voluntary turnover are rational, resource-preserving responses to stress rather than indicators of individual weakness or lack of resilience, this study contributes to the destigmatization of employee withdrawal behaviors. Additionally, the findings promote the development of healthier workplace norms by emphasizing the importance of psychological safety, early conflict reporting and intervention, and supportive leadership that normalizes positive workplace cultures that prioritize employee well-being. The findings also suggest potential negative outcomes associated with increased organizational attention to workplace relationship conflict. For instance, as organizations implement more accessible conflict-reporting mechanisms and encourage early intervention, a short-term impact may include stress on HR processes due to the increase in reported conflict.

As organizations prioritize conflict management, employee expectations may rise regarding responsiveness and leadership, resulting in dissatisfaction and distrust when expectations are not met. These unintended consequences underscore the importance of adequately preparing conflict-management systems and aligning organizational capacity with rising employee expectations to prevent counterproductive effects. Together, the findings of this study show that unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace initiates a progressive cycle of resource depletion leading to disengagement and turnover. This underscores the need for

organizational practices focused on early intervention, leadership engagement, conflict management capabilities, and organizational processes that promote healthy work environments.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on participants' lived experiences and the findings of this study, the following recommendations for practice highlight strategies for organizations to address relationship conflict early, preserve employee well-being, and prevent work disengagement that leads to voluntary turnover. The participants for this study consistently reported that unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace elevated emotional strain and anxiety. Enduring prolonged interpersonal tension was commonly cited before withdrawing emotionally and cognitively from their work roles. Conservation of resources (COR) theory suggests that early stressors initiate resource loss spirals that worsen over time if not interrupted (Hobfoll et al., 2017). Prior research emphasized that unresolved relationship conflict depletes emotional resources and predicts work disengagement (Li, 2023; Somaraju et al., 2022).

Timely Conflict Identification and Intervention

The first recommendation for practice is for organizations to establish methods to identify conflict early, such as providing mechanisms for confidential reporting, routine anonymous climate surveys, and structured supervisory check-ins to recognize potential emerging conflicts. Training leaders to look for signs of withdrawal such as a lack of focus or commitment to job duties, often described by participants. Early intervention can interrupt resource loss cycles, preserve emotional well-being, and reduce the likelihood of disengagement, as supported by literature showing that timely conflict management buffers stress and protects employee well-being (Irwan, 2024; Kusum & Yadav, 2024; Teratai & Iskandar, 2024). Further, studies showed that proactiveness in confronting and resolving conflict in the workplace is a sign of effective

leadership and a positive organizational culture (Akram, 2023). Participants often describe leadership inaction or ineffective responses to conflicts as a pivotal factor in their progression toward disengagement and turnover. P9 shared that “they could have acknowledged the strain” and P16 sharing that “being quicker in the response” to the conflict would have made them feel more supported during that time. Several participants perceived supervisors as dismissive, unresponsive, or ill-equipped to address relational tensions. P6 shared that their supervisor “could have managed it better,” while P4 stated that her leader “did not take anything I said seriously.” Participants commonly shared that leaders addressing the conflict early and effectively would have made them feel more supported. P13 noted that their organizations approach to address conflict in a broader sense instead of directly played a significant role in their frustrations and recommended “bringing the parties together sooner and addressing it head on rather than waiting” would have been a more effective approach.

Leadership Training in Conflict Management

Prior research contended that leadership approaches impact conflict experiences and the resulting emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Esbati & Korunka, 2021; Irwan, 2024). Thus, the second recommendation for practice is that organizations should provide leadership training in conflict management and resolution strategies that can be effective in minimizing the impacts of relationship conflict. Research found that when organizations invest in providing leaders with the skills and strategies needed to promptly resolve relationship conflicts, work environments improve (Chaudhary & Arora, 2023). Specifically, P6 shared that their leader “could have managed it better” with P7 and P8 recommending “leadership training” so that managers and leaders within the organization understand interpersonal relationship and how to recognize and handle conflicts. Based on participant experiences, organizations could use a

three-step approach to training and preparing leaders in conflict management and resolution. The first step should focus on foundational knowledge of conflict in the workplace, building awareness of the propensity for conflict, and an understanding of how unresolved conflict harms individuals and the organization. Next, leadership development should focus on conflict intervention and timely responsiveness by identifying the early signs of withdrawal, such as reduced motivation, emotional detachment, or avoidance behaviors. Intervention training should focus on developing active listening skills, de-escalation practices, and supportive engagement such as regular check-ins. The third step should focus on advancing conflict management towards resolution. Developing leaders who are effective in facilitating dialogue through structured conversations provides a support mechanism that can reduce the burden on employees experiencing the conflict and refocus their energy towards problem-solving and resolution.

Strengthening HR Conflict Response

Participants also emphasized the importance of having trusted human resources (HR) processes for reporting conflict and seeking organizational support. Several participants reported that ineffective HR responses or lack of follow-through reinforced feelings of organizational indifference, which intensified emotional strain and disengagement. These findings were consistent with prior research that implied that HR processes are critical to reducing employee withdrawal and suggested that thriving organizations employ HR strategies that make employee well-being central to the organizations (Alhajaj & Ahmad, 2024; Elufioye et al., 2024). P9 recommended a “structured process” for resolving conflict with P8 stating that “HR is supposed to be a safe space,” recommending organizations provide “an HR department that takes complaints” and conducts “in depth investigations.” Therefore, the third recommendation for practice is that organizations should strengthen HR processes by providing transparent

complaint-handling procedures, timely responses, and consistent follow-through. Prior studies showed that HR is crucial to conflict resolution and that supportive HR practices help mitigate job difficulties and promote feedback, improving employee well-being and increasing work engagement (Mengwei et al., 2024; Sonar & Pandey, 2023). HR departments should establish formal and easily accessible reporting mechanisms for employees to report conflict without fear of retribution. When asked about HR availability and reporting, P17 stated that they would only formally report if they were “comfortable and secure in that I’m telling you something and you’re not going to take it out on me.” Thus, reporting processes should be transparent, detailing how the complaint will be documented, what steps will be taken by HR, an expected response timeline, and any additional available resources. For follow-through, HR should conduct post-report check-ins and feedback on the process. This would allow individual insight into the reporting process, knowledge on what steps were taken, and the ability to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the process or potential for improvement.

Protecting and Restoring Employee Well-Being

Lastly, participants consistently described emotional exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and diminished well-being as central to their disengagement experiences. Many reported that prolonged emotional strain impaired motivation and focus. These findings directly support conservation of resources (COR) theory, which frames well-being as a centrally valued resource that is threatened under chronic workplace stress (Hayat & Afshari, 2021; Hobfoll et al., 2017). The final recommendation for practice is that organizations should implement well-being initiatives such as access to counseling services, stress management programs, and mental health resources. Participants expressed that when coping with the conflict, their only support systems available were co-workers or friends and family. Only one participant shared that their employer

provided counseling services for mental health. Providing a confidential, internal mechanism for employees to find support during difficult times could signify organizational commitment to well-being and improve employee commitment levels and retention.

Studies showed that employees who perceived their work environments as positive and supportive demonstrated high levels of work engagement (Ezeadim & Ananomo, 2025). Many participants shared that feeling valued was important to them, with P9 sharing that “treating people as family and not just staff would go a long way for organizations.” Further, P19 stated that “Value your employees and they’ll bring more to the table.” Additionally, participants expressed a desire to work in positive work climates. P7 stated, “I wish for a peaceful work environment where I can focus on my job” and P8 added “I want to be at a job where I felt valued.” Further, P12 shared that “a more encouraging” work environment would provide “more flourishing and growth,” adding, “if you genuinely love what you’re doing, it’s not work.” Thus, fostering positive work climates can help organizations restore employees’ future outlook, as 85% of participants shared that their decision to leave was due to the belief that the unresolved conflict would continue and cause increasingly negative impacts on their well-being. In addition to these recommendations for practice, further research is necessary to deepen the understanding of how relationship conflict evolves into work disengagement and voluntary turnover.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative phenomenological study explored employees’ lived experiences as they progressed from relationship conflict to work disengagement and voluntary turnover through the lens of conservation of resources (COR) theory. The findings revealed that relationship conflict initiated a gradual, resource-driven process marked by emotional strain, reduced well-being, disengagement, and eventual turnover. While the study contributes meaningful insights into this

progression, several opportunities exist for future researchers to build upon and extend these findings. Future researchers should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how relationship conflict, resource loss, and disengagement evolve over time. Participants in this study described disengagement as a gradual, cumulative process rather than a sudden decision, suggesting that cross-sectional or retrospective approaches may not fully capture the temporal dynamics of resource loss spirals. Longitudinal designs allow observation of participants multiple times over a prolonged period, enhancing study validity (So et al., 2025). Longitudinal research would allow scholars to observe changes in emotional strain, well-being, engagement, and turnover intentions as conflict unfolds, providing stronger causal inferences and deeper insight into when intervention points are most effective.

While this study included participants from multiple business settings, future research should intentionally examine specific industries, job roles and leadership levels, and cultures. Relationship conflict can manifest differently across sectors such as healthcare, education, manufacturing, or remote work context, and cultural norms may shape how conflict is perceived, expressed, and managed. Job demands may change how employees react to stress while remote work introduces reduced physical proximity that could reduce the impact of conflict. Regarding cultural differences, prior studies found that many societies may differ in communication styles between employees, managers, or organizational leaders, with some practicing low power distance, while others value strong hierarchy and respect for authority, suggesting opposing methods of dealing with internal conflict at the workplace (Tran, 2025b). Thus, by broadening diversity, future researchers can assess the generalizability of these findings and determine whether the progression from relationship conflict to disengagement follows similar resource-driven patterns across varied organizational cultures and workforce demographics.

Participants often identified leadership inaction, lack of emotional support, and ineffective conflict management as a driver of disengagement. Future researchers should examine leadership behaviors and organizational support systems as moderating variables that influence the strength and direction of the relationship between conflict and disengagement. Investigating leadership styles such as empowering, ethical, or transformational leadership may clarify how supportive leadership buffers emotional strain and interrupts resource loss spirals. Studies showed that transformational leaders inspire, motivate, and support individuals resulting in increased work engagement from employees (Avian et al., 2025). Further, empowering leadership provides employees the support and motivation that positively influences their emotional stability, giving them the tools to better manage conflict (Wang, 2023). These studies showed how organizational culture and leadership behaviors influence employee responses to conflict and engagement decisions.

Future researchers should incorporate multi-perspective designs that include leaders, supervisors, and HR professionals alongside employees. This study focused exclusively on employees' lived experiences, offering only one vantage point of the conflict process. Exploring relationship conflict within the workplace from various organizational stakeholders may provide deeper understanding of how the conflict is perceived from varying viewpoints. This would provide researchers an opportunity to compare perceptions of conflict severity, response effectiveness, and organizational support. This triangulation would enhance trustworthiness, reduce single-source bias, and deepen insight into the barriers to resolving conflict and preserving employee work engagement.

Lastly, while most participants in this study reported progression toward disengagement and turnover, a small number of participants did not completely disengage from their work or

consider quitting despite experiencing significant impacts from the relationship conflict. Future research could purposefully examine these negative cases to understand what protective factors, coping strategies, or organizational support prevented disengagement. For instance, comparative case studies would allow researchers to contrast employees who disengaged and left the job, disengaged but remained, and those who did not disengage. This type of investigation into contrasting reactions under similar stress conditions could refine COR theory applications and help identify what resources buffered emotional strain and prevented disengagement or turnover.

The next logical step in this line of research is to transition from phenomenological description to longitudinal, explanatory, and intervention-based testing of the COR-based progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement and turnover. Since disengagement develops progressively as resources diminish, upcoming studies ought to explore how this pattern evolves and pinpoint organizational or leadership factors that might disrupt the cycle of resource depletion. Additionally, researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of targeted conflict resolution and employee well-being interventions in preventing disengagement and turnover. This progression advances the field from understanding how employees experience conflict to finding when and how disengagement can be prevented, thereby extending conservation of resources theory into actionable organizational practice.

Study Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of employees as they progressed from relationship conflict to work disengagement and voluntary turnover. Perspectives were captured through in-depth interviews that asked participants to reflect on their experiences with relationship conflict in their workplace, the impacts of the conflict, and the resulting behaviors and decision-making. The study was guided by conservation of resources

(COR) theory and addressed the problem of how relationship conflict, characterized by personality clashes, poor communication, and unresolved strain, initiated a loss of emotional and physiological resources that led to prolonged strain and gradual withdrawal. The problem examined in this study was significant because voluntary turnover is still one of the most costly and disruptive challenges for organizations. While turnover is often measured through exit rates and financial cost, less is understood about the lived psychological and emotional experiences of employees who experience disengagement before reaching the point of departure. This study aimed to fill that gap by providing employee voice when exploring their perspectives on relationship conflict within the workplace, how it progressed towards disengagement, and the factors that led to turnover decisions.

The findings revealed that relationship conflict initiated a gradual process rather than a sudden decision to leave. Participants consistently described relationship conflict at work as emotionally intense, psychologically draining, and disruptive to their overall well-being. Over time, as the conflict remained unresolved, stress and anxiety became central to the participants' relationship to the work environment. Emotional strength and cognitive abilities began to decline which intensified stress and anxiety leading to diminished motivation and focus followed by withdrawal behaviors, culminating in turnover when further resource loss seemed unsustainable. The most significant finding regarding relationship conflict impacts was that employees did not simply disengage from their work due to an isolated incident but rather progressed toward disengagement as an adaptive response to ongoing emotional exhaustion and the belief that the situation surrounding the conflict would not improve. From the lens of COR theory, participants' experiences reflected the resource loss spiral principle, in which early stressors triggered progressive depletion of emotional strength, physiological well-being, self-esteem, and resilience

(Islam & Chaudhary, 2024; Jiang et al., 2023). This spiral made it impossible for participants to regain the personal resources they needed to function in their job, thereby making the work experienced increasingly unmanageable.

Participants expressed during this time of conflict in the workplace that they experienced significant emotional strain and psychological distress that produced internal feelings of anger and frustration that further exacerbated their stress and anxiety while at work. As stress and anxiety persisted, the progression toward disengagement began to evolve. Participants revealed that they gradually withdraw emotionally, cognitively, then behaviorally due to sustained emotional strain and resource depletion. Due to drained emotional energy, participants experienced an inability to concentrate on their job duties and felt more demotivated to do their jobs over time. Employees described efforts to physically distance themselves from the physical workplace and co-workers, emotionally detach from their chosen profession, and cognitively withdraw themselves by purposefully reducing performance and dedicated efforts as conflict persisted. Participants revealed that while they had a passion for their job in the beginning, once conflict became the central factor in their well-being, they no longer felt connected to the job and viewed it as a 'chore' or a 'means to an end' until they could find a solution or escape. These withdrawal behaviors were often used as an adaptive coping mechanism to maintain emotional regulation and professionalism rather than a lack of work ethic or commitment.

A significant finding of this study was that, in addition to the conflict situation causing distress, the participants' workplace conditions and climate strongly accelerated the progression towards total disengagement. Participants commonly cited leadership inaction or ineffective responses to conflict as pivotal factors in their decision to withdraw and disengage. Several participants perceived supervisors as dismissive, unresponsive, or incapable of addressing

relational tensions, which led to reduced trust and sense of belonging in the organization. Similarly, ineffective or absent HR support contributed to emotional strain and reduced belief that the situation could be improved. Therefore, without leadership engagement, participants did not perceive there to be any help available due to there being no HR department in place or a lack of faith in the existing HR department's willingness or ability to address their needs effectively. Thus, when employees believed the conflict would continue unresolved or continue to worsen, disengagement became a resource-preservation strategy and the only path that felt viable in improving their overall well-being.

When exploring how work disengagement influenced the decision to leave their organization, participants indicated that leaving was not impulsive. They explained that the decision to leave was due to the culmination of prolonged conflict, the negative impacts to their emotional and physiological well-being, and the resulting disconnection from their work. As disengagement persisted, employees reported a reduced desire to contribute to their work, detachment from organizational goals, and a growing sense of hopelessness about their future in the workplace. Participants described quitting their jobs as the final step and the only practical means of escaping the continued emotional harm and restoring their psychological well-being. This revelation was often supported by participants sharing and visually demonstrating the immediate feeling after quitting their jobs as relief, feeling free, and emotional recovery. These narratives demonstrate that turnover functioned as the ultimate resource-protection decision when recovery seemed unattainable within the organization. These findings emphasized that turnover due to disengagement caused by unresolved relationship conflict is an individual decision shaped by prolonged emotional strain and physiological stress that depleted significant personal resources needed for employees to function effectively.

The results of this study expanded on the lived experience of which relationship conflict evolves into disengagement and turnover. Consistent with earlier studies linking relationship conflict to emotional exhaustion, reduced engagement, and turnover intentions, this study supported conservation of resources (COR) theory's resource loss spiral principle by showing how emotional strain compounded over time and influenced employee withdrawal behaviors and ultimately turnover decisions. Additionally, this study contributed to practice by identifying actionable strategies that can interrupt resource depletion and prevent disengagement.

Organizational leadership's ability to recognize early signs of resource loss, respond promptly to relationship conflict, implement effective HR processes that foster trust and accountability, and cultivate work environments that promote open communication and team building are critical to supporting employee well-being. These practical implications are significant contributions for organizations, as the findings reflect that unresolved interpersonal conflict is a significant organizational risk factor that erodes employee well-being, impedes work engagement, and drives voluntary turnover. Voluntary turnover accounts for nearly 25% of a company's annual expenses, and replacing a single employee may cost an organization up to 200% of the lost employee's annual salary (Ahmad, 2022; Climek et al., 2024). Thus, by understanding the processes that lead employees to voluntarily leave, organizations can design proactive strategies that reduce turnover and support long-term retention.

The central conclusion of this study is that unresolved relationship conflict in the workplace functions as a severe emotional and physiological stressor that triggers a gradual, resource-driven disengagement process. As interpersonal tensions persist without resolution, employees experience a progressive depletion of emotional and cognitive resources. Ongoing conflict heightens stress and anxiety and erodes employees' ability to remain motivated, focused,

and emotionally invested in their work. Over time, participants responded by withdrawing emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally as a coping mechanism to manage continued resource loss and the negative impacts on their well-being. Employees do not disengage impulsively or leave their organizations without warning signs. Rather, turnover serves as the employee's final act, resulting from sustained emotional strain, progressive withdrawal, and the belief that organizational support and conflict resolution are absent or ineffective.

Ultimately, this study underscores that relationship conflict is not simply an interpersonal challenge but a critical organizational stressor that depletes employee resources, undermines engagement, and results in costly and preventable voluntary turnover. By recognizing disengagement as a resource-protection response, organizations can move beyond reactive approaches to turnover and address relationship conflict before it progresses into deeper withdrawal. Organizations can reduce avoidable turnover by training leaders to understand relationship conflict, recognize early signs of disengagement, intervene promptly and remain involved until conflict is effectively resolved. Organizations can supplement and support leadership efforts by implementing transparent and trustworthy human resources practices and mechanisms for employees to report or seek support during difficult situations. Finally, fostering organizational climates that encourage open communication, prioritize team building, and support employee well-being can reduce the impacts of relationship conflict at work and help organizations sustain employee engagement and prevent costly turnover.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

9388 Lightwave Ave.
San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption

August 21, 2025

To: Danica Spriggs

Project Title: Examining the Path from Relationship Conflict to Work Disengagement: A Phenomenological Study of Employee Perspectives

NU IRB Number: IRB-FY25-26-76

Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of August 21, 2025

Dear Danica Spriggs:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Joseph M. Marron in black ink.

Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair

Handwritten signature of Brianne Mongeon in black ink.

Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB

Handwritten signature of Jenessa Eberhardt in black ink.

Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographics

Age

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer not to answer

Please specify the industry in which you are employed. _____

What is your job title? _____

Workplace Conflict Experience

Have you experienced relationship conflict in the workplace (e.g., personal disagreements, tension, hostility, or friction with coworkers or supervisors) within the past 5 years?

- Yes
- No

Did this conflict contribute to any of the following? (Check ALL that apply):

- Increased stress
- Feeling emotionally strained
- Reduced productivity

- Disengagement from your work
- Considered quitting
- Resigned

Would you be willing to participate in a confidential one-on-one virtual or in-person interview (30–60 minutes) to share your experience?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

If you are willing to be contacted, please provide your email address:

Appendix C

Interview Protocol Script

A. Introduction and Rapport Building (5–10 minutes)

Hello, _____. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Danica Spriggs, and I'm a doctoral student at National University conducting research on how employees experience workplace conflict, how it affects their engagement at work, and what factors may lead to leaving an organization. This interview is not intended to judge any employer or your reactions or responses to conflicts that you have experienced in the workplace. I am seeking a deeper understanding of the impact of conflict on employees and how the conflict progresses to disengagement from your perspective.

This is a confidential, voluntary interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. I'll be asking you open-ended questions about your personal experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, only your perspective.

This study aims to explore employees' lived experiences of relationship conflict in the workplace and how these experiences contribute to work disengagement. Work disengagement is a precursor to voluntary turnover, so this study can be helpful to organizations in developing strategies for conflict management or mitigation.

Consent Form Confirmation:

1. Did you receive the consent form I emailed?
2. Did you have time to review the consent form?
3. Do you have any questions about the research or the consent form?
4. Do you consent to participate in this research?

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study or the informed consent form?"
[Pause for questions]

Informed Consent Script (Before Recording):

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. Before we begin, I'd like to remind you that your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. With your permission, I will record this session to ensure accuracy. Your identity and responses will remain confidential and be anonymized in any report. The information in this interview will only be used for research purposes. Do I have your consent to continue with the interview and record this session?

****Confirm verbal consent to record.****

B. Warm-Up Questions (Establish Context)

1. Can you tell me about your previous job and what your role involved?
2. How long were you with the organization, and what initially drew you to the position?

C. Core Interview Questions (Lived Experience Exploration)

Now I'd like to talk about a specific time when you experienced relationship conflict in the workplace.

1. Can you describe a specific time when you experienced relationship conflict in your workplace?
2. What emotions or thoughts did you experience during or after the conflict?
3. How did the conflict affect your emotional well-being and stress levels during that time?
4. Can you describe what personal resources you feel were depleted during this experience (e.g., energy, self-esteem, emotional strength)?
5. How did the conflict influence your motivation and focus at work?
6. How did you try to cope with or manage the conflict? Were there any support systems or strategies that helped or failed?
7. Can you describe how the conflict may have influenced your engagement with your work?
8. If you considered quitting or did quit your job, what made you consider those options?
9. How could your organization have supported you during that time?
10. How can the organization address ways to prevent work disengagement?

D. Wrap-Up and Final Reflections

1. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with conflict, disengagement, or leaving your job?

E. Conclusion

Thank you for sharing your experiences so openly and honestly. Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research and will help build a better understanding of how workplace conflict affects employee well-being and engagement. If you have any questions about the study later, feel free to contact me.

I will complete a transcript of this interview and provide it to you for cross-check, to ensure I captured your responses correctly. Once this study is completed in its entirety, would you like to receive a summary of the findings?

As a reminder, your identity will remain confidential, and you're welcome to review the findings if you wish.

Appendix D
Interview Questions

RQ1: How do employees experience relationship conflict in the workplace?

1. Can you describe a specific time when you experienced relationship conflict in your workplace? (RQ1)
2. What emotions or thoughts did you experience during or after the conflict? (RQ1)
3. How did the conflict affect your emotional well-being and stress levels during that time? (RQ1)
4. Can you describe what personal resources you feel were depleted during this experience (e.g., energy, self-esteem, emotional strength)? (RQ1)

RQ2: How do employees progress from relationship conflict to work disengagement?

5. How did the conflict influence your motivation and focus at work? (RQ2)
6. How did you try to cope with or manage the conflict? Were there any support systems or strategies that helped or failed? (RQ2)
7. Can you describe how the conflict may have influenced your engagement with your work? (RQ2)

RQ3: What strategies can organizations implement to reduce turnover for employees experiencing work disengagement?

8. If you considered quitting or did quit your job, what made you consider those options? (RQ3)
9. How could your organization have supported you during that time? (RQ3)
10. How can the organization address ways to prevent work disengagement? (RQ3)

Appendix E

Recruitment Letter

Hello!

My name is Danica Spriggs, and I'm a doctoral candidate at National University. I'm conducting a research study on the progression from relationship conflict to work disengagement.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. You are 18 years old or older.
2. You have experience working in a for-profit business.
3. Within the last 5 years, you have experienced interpersonal or relationship conflict with a coworker, a supervisor, or a team member.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Complete an online demographic questionnaire for up to 10 minutes
2. Participate in an online interview via MS Teams for up to 60 minutes
3. Review the interview summary via email for 10-15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your experience with interpersonal or relationship conflict at work.
- The impact the conflict had on your personal resources and your physical or emotional well-being.
- The coping strategies that you used to deal with the impacts of the conflict related to work engagement.
- Your recommendations for how organizations can better support employees dealing with conflict at work.

Participants in this study will receive a \$100 eGift card from Mastercard via email after the interview.

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Danica Spriggs

Appendix F

IRB Consent Form

My name is Danica Spriggs, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about the progression of relationship conflict to work disengagement. The name of this research study is "Examining the Path from Relationship Conflict to Work Disengagement: A Phenomenological Study of Employee Perspectives."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. You are 18 years old or older.
2. You have experience working in a for-profit business.
3. Within the last 5 years, you have experienced interpersonal or relationship conflict with a coworker, a supervisor, or a team member.

I hope to include 15-20 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Complete an online demographic questionnaire for up to 10 minutes
2. Participate in an online interview via MS Teams for up to 60 minutes
3. Review the interview summary via email for 10-15 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your experience with interpersonal or relationship conflict at work.
- The impact the conflict had on your personal resources and your physical or emotional well-being.
- The coping strategies that you used to deal with the impacts of the conflict related to work engagement.
- Your recommendations for how organizations can better support employees dealing with conflict at work.

Risks: Because the study involves discussing potentially distressing workplace conflict experiences, there is a risk that participants may experience emotional discomfort or psychological distress. To mitigate this, you can skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this study.

Recording: I would like to audio/video record your responses with MS Teams during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Compensation: After you complete the interview, you will receive a \$100 eGift card from Mastercard via email.

Confidentiality: I will keep records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu.