

DISSERTATION

REFLECTIONS ON TURNOVER AMIDST TURMOIL: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION
OF THE “GREAT RESIGNATION”

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ABSTRACT

REFLECTIONS ON TURNOVER AMIDST TURMOIL: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE “GREAT RESIGNATION”

After the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, workers faced drastic changes to their work environments, home environments, and health. In turn, record numbers of individuals voluntarily quit their jobs. Journalists, economists, and organizations have labeled this the “Great Resignation,” and many have attempted to understand this trend and the extent to which it was unique. However, the organizational sciences have yet to fully test existing theories of turnover as they apply to these resignations, and existing data collections (through large-scale surveys) have been limited in content and overwhelmingly quantitative (e.g., offer narrow options for why someone quit). Thus, the current study uses a qualitative, exploratory approach to examine the psychological experiences of 35 people who quit a job during the pandemic, and specifically, explores how (i.e., process) and why (i.e., values, identity, and meaning) people left jobs amidst a global crisis, as well as what they are thinking about work upon reflection. This study uses individual interviews and the phonetic iterative approach for qualitative analysis and interpretation. The results of this study indicate needs for more nuanced turnover theory, a broader understanding of why people quit jobs, and more consideration of human needs in the context of employee retention goals. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed, and potential future research directions are presented.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In 2021, an average of almost four million workers (roughly 2.7% of the US workforce) voluntarily quit their jobs each month, creating a record year for resignations (the next highest average number of monthly resignations was 3.5 million in 2019; Maurer, 2022). These high rates persisted, with about 50.5 million people quitting their jobs in 2022 (Iacurci, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic created turmoil in many individuals' work situations, including working from home, health and safety concerns, unexpected job responsibilities (e.g., policing the health-related behavior of others), and new conflict between work and family demands (e.g., Bateman & Ross, 2020; Jiskrova, 2022; Kniffin et al., 2021; Maese & Saad, 2021; Parker & Horowitz, 2022; Parker et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created these unique challenges, but it also exacerbated existing work-related challenges (e.g., wage stagnation, exploitation of frontline employees, lack of regard for employees with disabilities) and occurred simultaneously with other forms of social unrest, including a surge of attention focused on the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, and political action surrounding the 2020 presidential election. For simplicity, I will refer to the “pandemic” throughout this document, although I recognize the contextual role of these other events and issues in trends related to the “Great Resignation.”

These challenges related to the pandemic and other events jointly influenced the large number of people who voluntarily changed their work situation, but their experiences were likely also uniquely shaped by other contextual and individual factors. Importantly, the resignations that have occurred in the last two years have not been equally distributed across industries or demographic variables, with some of the highest rates occurring in accommodation and food

services, health care, and hospitality, with higher rates occurring among younger workers (Cook, 2021; Maurer, 2021). Further, people with lower education levels, lower income, and individuals who identified as Hispanic or Asian had higher rates of quitting compared to those with higher education, higher income, or who identified as White or Black (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Women were also more likely to resign than men, and many authors suggest this is due to caregiving responsibilities (i.e., childcare, eldercare) and the norm that those responsibilities fall more heavily on women (e.g., Corbett, 2022; Donegan, 2021; Sharpe, 2021). These statistics help to describe who has been leaving their jobs, but they do not necessarily help us understand how some of these contextual and individual variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, social identities) may have factored into their work experiences, decision-making, and turnover process. Specifically, because the resignation rates differ by education and income (e.g., Parker & Horowitz, 2022), and many of the factors noted by those who have resigned since the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., benefits, pay, availability of flexibility and remote work) also differ by job level (e.g., Kossek & Lautsch, 2018), it is important to consider how work experiences and the turnover decision-making process might vary across job levels.

Beyond the representation of different demographic groups among the resignation numbers, many journalists, economists, and organizations have also been trying to determine the extent to which these resignations are unique or different from existing turnover trends. For example, multiple popular press articles have reported on statistics from the Bureau of Labor, which demonstrate that the quantity of resignations during the pandemic follows an existing upward trend over the last decade (e.g., Fuller & Kerr, 2022; SHRM, 2022; Zagorsky, 2022). Additionally, some critics are quick to point out that data on resignations have only been collected for the past 20 years, so claims of “record” numbers may be misleading (Zagorsky,

2022). However, the rates are genuinely higher than any other time on record, there are some unique patterns with these resignations (e.g., relatively higher or lower rates in specific industries, more young people quitting; Zagorsky, 2022), and organizations are currently paying especially close attention to retention (e.g., Carhart, 2022; De Smet et al., 2021). Further, historically, turnover rates are highest when the economy is doing well (Zagorsky, 2022), so these high rates are unexpected given the social, political, and economic turmoil and uncertainty of this time period. In light of the ongoing resignations and the shift to a job seekers' market, it is important to identify how these resignations may be unique and therefore, call for different actions or policies from organizations to attract workers moving forward (Tessema et al., 2022).

To help understand this current trend, there is a large body of research and multiple theoretical frameworks about turnover in the organizational sciences literature, which may explain these resignations and provide organizations with ideas for recruitment and retention. First and foremost, theories of turnover help us to understand the phenomenon of voluntarily leaving one's job, including a process model that focuses on an evaluation of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Mobley, 1977) and the unfolding model of turnover, in which positive or negative events force individuals into decision-making rules to stay or leave (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Further, empirical research suggests some common factors that predict job satisfaction and intentions to leave an organization, such as organizational culture, leader-member relationship quality, compensation and benefits (e.g., development opportunities, paid time off), stressors, and meaningful work (Allan et al., 2018; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Podsakoff et al., 2007; O'Reilly et al., 1991). These are all factors that organizational leaders might look to in the context of the current resignations to make individuals more likely to join and stay in their organizations. Thus, the existing research about turnover may fully account for what has

occurred since March 2020, but it is also possible that something was unique about the process or content of the turnover decision-making during this time period.

The pandemic may have simply illuminated dissatisfaction with one's current job situation, similar to how any other event or "shock" might occur (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), but it may have also sparked a reimagining of the role of work in our lives and what work can and should provide. To fully understand this possibility, it is important to consider the idea of meaningful work as well as its roots in existentialism (i.e., the subjective experience of being human in relation to common concepts of death, freedom, isolation, and the meaning of life; Pyzczynski et al., 2004; Yalom, 1980). Existential psychology scholars have pointed out that, as a society, we have increasingly prioritized the meaningfulness of work over time (McMillan & Yue, 2012), such that individuals derive much of their identity, values, and life's meaning from the work they do (Doherty, 2009), and workers often sacrifice time with family or nonwork activities for work (Kossek et al., 2001). Values are defined as beliefs about desirable end states or behaviors that apply across situations, guide behavior, and can be ordered by relative importance (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), and identities are defined as the social groups or roles that a person associates with that shape their self-concept and behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Amidst the pandemic, people were forced to reckon with organizations that did not protect them, extreme work-family conflict, time in isolation, as well as widespread depression and anxiety (e.g., Christian, 2022; Giuntella et al., 2021; Vaziri et al., 2020; Wiles, 2022). The context was ripe for individuals to reflect on their values, spend their time and energy differently, and reevaluate the role that work plays in living a meaningful life (e.g., Kumar, 2021). This reevaluation aligns with an unanswered question in the literature regarding the interaction between meaningful work and a meaningful life (Bailey et al., 2019). Thus, the current study

aimed to understand how identities, values, and meaning played a role in the turnover decisions that happened during the pandemic.

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of people who voluntarily changed their career and/or employment situation (e.g., changed industry, type of firm, or nature of employment) since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Through individual interviews, I focused on the experiences of those located in the United States (to narrow the sample to those who have some common experience regarding the national response to the pandemic) and who were under the age of 40 (to capture people who were likely to remain in the workforce for at least another decade). The purpose of the proposed study was to examine the psychological experiences of those who quit jobs during the pandemic, and specifically, to explore how (i.e., process) and why (i.e., values, identity, and meaning) people left jobs amidst a global crisis, as well as how much the experience was shared across an important demographic characteristic (i.e., job level). My research questions were as follows, and I discuss each question further below.

Research Questions

1. What was the process through which people turned over from one work situation and transitioned to another work situation?
2. Have people changed how they think about (i.e., value, identify with, find meaning in) work in relation to broader life and nonwork?
3. What are the differences or similarities between the experiences of turnover for higher-level and lower-level job groups?

Theoretical Contributions

The proposed study makes a few important theoretical contributions to the literature. First, this study explored the extent to which existing theories of turnover (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Mobley, 1977) can frame our understanding of why people voluntarily left jobs since the beginning of COVID-19. Many news articles, and some surveys, have posited the reasons behind the large number of resignations (e.g., compensation and benefits, wanting more flexibility; Cook, 2021; Maurer, 2021), but the organizational sciences literature has yet to test existing theory regarding this current trend. Further, although many of these theories account for generally rational and practical decision-making, the proposed study will also examine the extent which the decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic was influenced by broader factors related to existentialism. Specifically, in the face of a deadly pandemic and time to reconsider priorities (e.g., family, health, leisure), the typically studied benefits of meaningful work (e.g., engagement, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, health, and turnover intentions; Allan et al., 2018) may not be so prominent. Although meaningful work is considered a relatively strong predictor of someone staying in a job (Allan et al., 2018), it may carry less weight in the face of a broad existential threat or crisis. Thus, the current study explored the applicability and limits of existing theory in this unique moment of crisis and change. As we move forward beyond the height of this pandemic, organizations and scholars need to know the extent to which our existing knowledge about phenomena such as turnover remains relevant and the extent to which it may need expansion or revision.

Second, the current study addresses multiple gaps in the meaningful work literature, which has been overwhelmingly quantitative and positivistic, and has only minimally explored the process through which people find or make meaning in their work (Bailey et al., 2019).

Quantitative approaches often rely on measures that assume one's work is meaningful or that meaningful work is desired (e.g., Steger et al., 2012), and a qualitative approach allows participants to describe the process through which they determine or find meaning in their work, as well as the extent to which meaningful work is a critical part of making and finding meaning in life more broadly. Further, despite calls for research linking meaningfulness to career behavior (e.g., Cullen, 2013), only one empirical study has examined this link directly (Bailey et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma, 2002). The current study examined the process of meaning making from the perspective of the individual and explored the extent to which meaningfulness (i.e., of work and of factors outside of work), or the lack thereof, influenced the process through which individuals changed their work situation or career path. Many organizations use meaningful work as a selling point in their recruitment and retention strategies, but the research in this area is limited by relying on quantitative methods and ignoring the processes related to finding work meaningful.

The current study also explored the nature of these resignations to determine whether they reflect a major, but primarily logistical shift in work roles or a more internal shift in how people think about work, its meaningfulness, and its role in life. Given that so many people have changed their work situations, and so many more are expected to (Segal, 2022), it is important for organizations to consider how these changes may affect recruitment, selection, and retention efforts in the future. In an attempt to capture current attitudes toward work, but also expectations for work and organizations in the future, the study focused on workers who are likely to remain in the workforce for at least another decade (i.e., under age 40). Although there is a body of literature that focuses on the "changing nature of work" in recent decades (e.g., Burke & Ng, 2006), this research generally examines how external factors (e.g., technology, globalization)

have changed the structure and content of work, rather than the ability of workers to reimagine and redefine work from the ground up. The current study provides insight into the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic changed how some people in the workforce relate work to themselves and their humanity, and whether those changes could be expected to persist and thus, possibly change the nature of work. Again, this information is relevant for organizations as they determine their recruitment and retention practices post-pandemic. At the individual level, people who are deliberating career changes and the importance of meaningful work could benefit from a detailed accounting of how others consider meaningful work in the scheme of their lives and how that has influenced their career decisions.

Lastly, this study attempted to examine any differences in these psychological experiences and perspectives between those who were in hourly, low-wage jobs and those who were in salaried, professional jobs before their career change. Low-wage workers have been over-represented in the large number of resignations (Cook, 2021; Maurer, 2021), and those decisions likely entailed a larger amount of risk compared to those who left higher wage jobs and may have had more financial resources or security. Thus, it is important to consider that the processes through which people left their work situations may differ across job levels.

Additionally, scholars have recognized that meaningful work is not necessarily available to everyone (Veltman, 2015), and “white collar” jobs are associated with more meaningful work (Lysova et al., 2019). Therefore, the extent to which meaningful work plays a role in career decisions, as well as the processes involved with making or finding meaning, may differ depending on job level. The current study examined similarities and differences between how individuals in the two job level categories made their decision to leave their work, how their

work-related values or identities have changed, and how meaningful work plays a role in their lives.

In the following sections, I review the turnover literature to provide the existing theoretical frameworks and empirical work that inform how organizations understand turnover. Then, I review the literature on meaningful work and the unique role of nonwork as they both relate to turnover.

Turnover

Although people have been leaving jobs since jobs have existed, research on the topic of turnover only began in the early 20th century (Hom et al., 2017). Early research described patterns of turnover and attempted to identify practical explanations for such turnover (e.g., demographics, job satisfaction; Hom et al., 2017). Since then, scholars have developed models and theories to explain turnover in organizations, and most recently, research has accumulated into reviews and meta-analyses about turnover. In the following section, I present this research and these frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of leaving one's job.

Turnover's Bad Rap

In the organizational sciences literature, turnover is generally considered a negative event. Organizations look to fields such as industrial-organizational psychology to determine how to prevent it, primarily to avoid the large costs associated with turnover. There are many studies examining the costs of turnover in specific industries (e.g., teachers, healthcare, hospitality; Hayes et al., 2006, Hinkin & Tracey, 2000, Waldman et al., 2010, Watlington et al., 2010), and general estimates of turnover cost range from one-third to two times the employee's annual pay (e.g., Agovino, 2019), with Gallup claiming that voluntary turnover costs businesses in the United States \$1 trillion every year (McFeely & Wigert, 2019). Turnover involves the loss

of important organizational knowledge and can affect team and organizational morale and trust (e.g., Dess & Shaw, 2001; Droege & Hoobler, 2003; Eckardt et al., 2014; Shaw, 2011). Further, turnover brings about many administrative burdens, including completing paperwork, restructuring teams, adjusting schedules, and reassigning tasks, often adding workload to those who remain in the organization and team (Staw, 1980). Perhaps most challenging are the costs associated with recruiting, selecting, and training someone to fill the open position (Shaw, 2011). All of these factors can slow down productivity, and studies have demonstrated that turnover rates do negatively relate to unit- and organizational-level performance (e.g., Kacmar et al., 2006; Park & Shaw, 2013; Shaw, 2011). Specifically, meta-analytic studies demonstrate the negative effects of turnover on measures of firm performance such as customer satisfaction, profit margin, production efficiency, counterproductivity, and safety (e.g., Hancock et al., 2013; Heavey et al., 2013). Further, turnover can be “contagious,” such that employee turnover can often precipitate the turnover of coworkers (Oh & Chhinzer, 2021; Porter & Rigby, 2021), compounding these challenges and costs. In summary, organizations rightfully want to prevent turnover from occurring.

Despite the clear costs of turnover for organizations, scholars and organizations have also acknowledged functional turnover, recognizing that some turnover is beneficial if it reduces unnecessary or low-quality labor (e.g., Dalton et al., 1982). Involuntary turnover (i.e., the organization initiating the departure of the individual), although costly, is often considered beneficial for organizations by removing low performers who may be costing more than they are producing. On the other hand, voluntary turnover (i.e., the individual initiating their own departure) has generally been considered harmful (Dalton et al., 1982; Shaw et al., 1998). However, organizations can also benefit from voluntary turnover if the person leaving did not

want to be at the organization or was not doing the best work by allowing the opportunity to hire someone who is more aligned with the job and the organization (Dalton et al., 1982). Staw (1980) makes the argument for many potential positive consequences of turnover, including enhanced performance, reduction of conflict, increased morale, and innovation and adaptation. Thus, turnover is still broadly considered a negative event for organizations, despite the recognition that it can be functional to the organization.

In comparison to the effects of turnover on the organization left behind, the organizational sciences literature has historically been less focused on the impacts of turnover on the individual leaving the job or organization (Hom et al., 2017). At the individual level, turnover can be considered both a negative and positive event. Despite the lack of research on this topic, it is reasonable to assume that the turnover process can be a stressor that leads to strain (e.g., mental or physical exhaustion, anxiety, muscle tension). Leading up to the decision to leave a job or organization, the individual may struggle with making the decision, dealing with doubt, fear, guilt, and other negative emotions. Even after making the decision, those negative feelings can remain, with an added layer of determining logistics, such as when and how to tell people, closing out the work tasks, looking for a new job, and scheduling and attending interviews. However, on the positive side, the process can feel exciting and empowering. Importantly, voluntary turnover allows an individual to move into a new position, organization, career, or life direction that more closely aligns with their goals and values (e.g., Christian, 2022; Muja & Appelbaum, 2012; Wiles, 2022). Thus, these turnover processes and events can simultaneously create positive emotions in addition to the stressful and negative ones. Given the myriad and consequential outcomes of turnover, it has been critically important to understand turnover as an organizational phenomenon.

Turnover Theory

Scholars have developed theory to explain why and how individuals go through the turnover process, and to aid organizations in managing turnover. There are a few key theoretical perspectives on turnover that have largely informed research and practice since turnover research began and that can help to frame our understanding of the phenomena of mass job changes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal events. These theories generally build upon one another as opposed to conflicting with each other, using similar ideas throughout. I present the most prominent and influential perspectives below.

Model of Organizational Equilibrium. The earliest perspectives on turnover came from the literature on work motivation and suggested that job dissatisfaction is the primary reason why people voluntarily leave jobs (Hom, 2011; Hom et al., 2017). March and Simon (1958) were the first scholars to explicitly theorize about turnover with their model of organizational equilibrium, which adds the factor of “ease of movement” to the job dissatisfaction factor (i.e., desirability of movement), and suggests that the combination of both is what determines whether someone will leave a job. Ease of movement can account for specific individual opportunities as well as the broader labor market and employment rates (Hom, 2011). According to this model, the many COVID-19-related resignations would simply indicate that many people were dissatisfied with their jobs and saw opportunities for a new work situation. Although this may be an accurate explanation in some cases, a recent survey indicated that roughly two-thirds of workers who had recently quit their jobs did so without another job lined up (Hansen, 2022). Particularly in the face of a crisis, rational decision-making models may not hold up or fully explain human behavior.

Mobley and Price Models. Mobley's (1977) model of turnover builds upon the model of organizational equilibrium and presents a mostly linear sequence through which an individual would turn job dissatisfaction into the action of actually leaving a job. The linear process was proposed as follows: dissatisfaction, thoughts of quitting, evaluation of subjective expected utility of job search and costs of quitting, search intentions, evaluation of alternatives, comparison of alternatives and present job, quit intentions, quit. This original model did not account for the content that individuals may consider when evaluating the current job or alternative jobs.

To address this gap, around the same time, Price (1977; 2001; Price & Mueller, 1981, 1986) identified environmental factors (as opposed to attitudinal ones) that might lead to turnover. Job satisfaction was still modeled to act as a mediator between the environmental factors and turnover, but this work primarily focused on identifying the external content that might influence turnover decisions (Hom et al., 2017). In 1979, Mobley and colleagues expanded upon the 1977 model to also focus on the content (i.e., why) of these decisions and to further distinguish between satisfaction (i.e., focus on the present) and the attraction or expected utility of the current and potential jobs (i.e., focus on the future), thus blending their work with the work of Price and colleagues (Hom et al., 2017). Importantly, in their consideration of content factors, Mobley and colleagues (1979) introduced the idea that nonwork values and nonwork consequences should be considered as well. The research on the relationship between nonwork and turnover is discussed in further detail below.

According to Mobley's (1977) model, the many people who resigned related to COVID-19 followed this process to arrive at the decision to quit. However, the sequence outlined by Mobley has generally not been empirically supported (Hom et al., 2017), and in the context of a

crisis, individuals may be even less likely to follow such a narrow and logic-based process. Further, the decision-making factors reviewed by Mobley and colleagues (1979; e.g., age, employability, organizational commitment, attitude toward job content) as well as the external factors identified by Price and colleagues (e.g., pay, autonomy, stress, social support, alternative opportunities, and responsibility to family) would be expected to account for the determination of satisfaction and the utility of staying or leaving. The factors outlined by these theories likely hold up in the current context, particularly given the survey results indicating reasons for leaving a job over during the “Great Resignation” (e.g., pay, flexibility, opportunities for advancement, family needs; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). However, these lists of content areas for the decision to turnover do not necessarily provide theory around how people weigh, negotiate, or rationalize these factors.

The Unfolding Model of Turnover. The unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) identified four different paths that an individual might take to decide to leave their job. Three of the paths involve a shock (i.e., a negative or positive event that might occur within the work context or outside of it) and consider the presence of existing plans or decision-making rules when those shocks occur. One type of shock triggers a pre-existing plan (e.g., getting accepted to pursue higher education), the second type of shock includes events that violate the person’s values or goals (e.g., being asked to complete a task perceived as unethical), and the third type of shock involves unexpected job offers, which trigger the path of evaluating the opportunity against one’s current position. In the fourth path, no shock occurs, and the individual has natural affective responses related to job dissatisfaction, which lead to them reassess their commitment to the organization, similar to what is described in Mobley’s (1977) model.

There is some qualitative support (Lee et al., 1996, 1999) and quantitative support (Rubenstein et al., 2017) for these four paths to turnover, but the theory generally ignores the content of the decision-making points. A shock could be nearly anything, and Lee and Mitchell (1994) do not attempt to delineate the various shocks or decision-making factors. According to the unfolding model, the many COVID-19-related resignations could have followed any of these four paths, with the pandemic itself being a shock or with some of its effects being a shock (e.g., abruptly working from home, death of a family member, work content changing). Of the aforementioned theories, the unfolding theory is the most detailed and the most likely to account for the largest number of resignation decisions since spring of 2020. Taken altogether, these theories of turnover have built upon one another to gradually account for more nuance (e.g., multiple paths to turnover) and contextual variables (e.g., job characteristics, family, life events). In the context of a global crisis that drastically changed people's work situations, it is worthwhile to test the extent to which these theories continue to explain turnover behavior.

Empirical Support for Predictors of Turnover

In line with the theories mentioned above, there are some well-established predictors of turnover intentions and turnover. Because the primary theories focused on job satisfaction for so long, there is a large body of research that links job satisfaction to turnover (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Atchison & Lefferts, 1972; Wright & Bonett, 2007), with meta-analytic estimates ranging from -.16 to -.58, depending on the study and whether they examined turnover intentions or turnover (e.g., Griffeth et al., 2000; Harter et al., 2002; Rubenstein et al., 2017; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Similarly, organizational commitment is often linked to turnover (e.g., Vandenberghe & Tremblay, 2008; Williams & Hazer, 1986), such that those who are more committed to their organization or job due to affective reasons. Other factors that are known to

predict turnover include person-organization fit, role stress, compensation, job content, relationship with one's supervisor, and organizational culture (e.g., Chang et al., 2013; Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom, 2011; Mossholder et al., 2005; Rubenstein et al., 2017). Related to all these predictors, research demonstrates that having realistic expectations for the job can help to prevent turnover (Earnest et al., 2011). For example, the Organizational Culture Profile measures dimensions of culture for individuals and the organization, and mismatch on those dimensions predicts turnover (O'Reilly et al., 1991).

Based on this existing research, there are some common approaches to reducing or preventing turnover that are cited in both research literature and popular press articles. Providing resources, benefits, and compensation is one way to improve job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and in turn, keep employees around longer (e.g., Allen, 2008; Allen et al., 2010; Bryant & Allen, 2013; Castrillon, 2021; Half, 2021; Kamalaveni et al., 2019; Kumar, 2022). Resources may include professional development opportunities, informal social support from coworkers and supervisors, or physical resources, such as a desirable office space or access to certain equipment. Benefits may involve work-family support, healthcare, flexibility, and paid time off for vacation or parental leave. Additionally, research demonstrates that people are less likely to turnover when they receive mentoring, and this is particularly helpful for retaining women and minorities (Eby, 2011). Given these strategies, organizations are fairly well-informed about how to prevent turnover.

Organizations are certainly motivated to prevent and reduce turnover as much as possible, and as we move forward and “out” of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be important to understand what happened for these individuals who did decide to leave their jobs. Although we have existing empirical research and theory to help us understand the factors that might have

been considered and the sequences of cognitive processes people might have followed, there are notable ways in which these theories may not account for the resignations that have occurred. Qualitative research allows us to broadly test the applicability of these theories to the current context, understand the extent to which peoples' experiences align with existing theory, and potentially build new theory about this process.

Research Question 1: Beginning in March 2020, what was the process through which people turned over from one work situation and transitioned to another work situation?

Despite scholars and organizations focusing on prevention, turnover can never be fully prevented, and as mentioned above, there are some positive outcomes of turnover at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. Although much of the organizational sciences literature directly or indirectly suggests ways to reduce turnover (e.g., Dalton et al., 1982; Staw, 1980), other fields of research may take a different approach to understanding turnover and career change. For example, in vocational psychology, the end goal is to understand individual career choices and to help individuals make better, well-informed career choices (Blustein et al., 2019). Most relevant to this study, existential psychology may also offer a broader perspective relevant for turnover behavior, specifically in such a global crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, I discuss the relationship between turnover and meaningful work as an element of existentialism.

Turnover and Meaningful Work

The topic of meaningful work is derived from the field of existentialism (MacMillan et al., 2012; Ünal & Turgut, 2017), which examines the fundamental elements of human existence. Existentialism is based around the idea that there are universal dilemmas or concerns associated with being human (i.e., death, isolation, freedom, and meaning), with one core tenet being that

we inherently seek and make meaning from life (Koole et al., 2006). This meaning can be found or created in many ways and from many areas of life, and scholars in the organizational sciences have focused on finding meaning in one's occupation and labor.

Meaningful work has been conceptualized a few different ways, with one definition being “a person's general sense that their work matters, makes sense, is significant, and is worth engaging in at a deep, personal level” (Steger & Dik, 2009, p. 132). Further, measures of meaningful work include the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI), which is comprised of three components or factors: positive meaning, meaning making through work, and greater good motivations (Steger et al., 2012). Alternatively, the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS) is comprised of four components or factors: developing the inner self, unity with others, serving others, and expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Meaningful work is generally considered a positive resource (Michaelson et al., 2014; Steger & Dik, 2009), and a meta-analysis found strong relationships with work engagement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction; moderate relationships with life satisfaction, life meaning, general health, and turnover intentions; and small to moderate relationships with organizational citizenship behaviors, performance, and negative affect (Allan et al., 2018). Another meta-analysis found strong relationships with motivation, burnout, and stress, in addition to many of the other variables tested in the previously mentioned meta-analysis (Hu & Hirsh, 2017).

Importantly, meaningful work is one important predictor of turnover, such that those who do not find their work meaningful are more likely to leave their jobs (e.g., Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016; Scroggins, 2008; Vermooten et al., 2019). Meaningful work has also been tested as a mechanism through which other work characteristics influence turnover. For example, meaningful work mediates the relationship between adverse work conditions (e.g., lack of

resources, lack of personal development, organizational changes) and turnover intentions (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016), the relationship between leader-member exchange quality and turnover (Ozdevecioglu et al., 2015), the relationship between organizational social mission and shared vision and turnover intentions (Sun et al., 2018), and the relationship between job crafting and intent to leave (Oprea et al., 2022). Considering these fairly extensive research findings, meaningful work does benefit employees and ward off motivations to leave a job or organization.

However, there are some assumptions made in the meaningful work literature that make it difficult for us to fully understand how meaningful work operates in the larger scheme of someone's life. For example, some of the most common measures of meaningful work are written such that they assume that any work is inherently meaningful to all individuals, and they capture the extent to which someone realizes that meaning, not accounting for the possibility of someone doing work that is not meaningful (e.g., Steger et al., 2012). This suggests that meaning can be found in any work that someone does. Although this may be true to some extent because people can both connect small tasks to larger missions and can find joy or purpose in seemingly menial tasks, there are legitimate questions about whether it is possible for everyone to have access to meaningful work (Veltman, 2015). Specifically, in any society, there is work that needs to be done that is not necessary fulfilling in and of itself (e.g., monotonous, repetitive, demeaning) or that is more difficult to attach to a greater purpose or benefit to others (e.g., production or sales of a product perceived as useless). Further, previous research demonstrates that lower-level workers do experience lower levels of meaning in their work (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2022). Thus, although it is likely possible that someone could find any kind of work meaningful, it is likely impossible for all people to find their work meaningful.

Taking a step further than promoting the inherent meaning in work, Yeoman (2014) argues that meaningful work is a basic human need, and others suggest that meaningful work is “critical” to having a good life (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2014). Although finding meaning in one’s work certainly has its benefits, as described above, it can also have drawbacks. Although the research on meaningful work has been overwhelmingly positive, there is a growing body of research on the dark or detrimental side of meaningful work. Meaningful work can, in some cases, be taken too far and have consequences such as overworking, demonstrating workaholism (i.e., compulsion to work incessantly; Ng et al., 2007), or accepting and enduring difficult working conditions (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Oelberger, 2019). Other research suggests that meaningful work may be associated with higher negative affect and physiological dysregulation (e.g., hypertension, high blood sugar or cholesterol) (Allan et al., 2018; Dich et al., 2019). Thus, perhaps, trying to find or increase meaning in one’s work is not only highly unlikely in some situations, but it can also be harmful.

Organizations have realized that “meaningful work” generally keeps people engaged and motivated and working longer hours, so they often advertise their work as meaningful in the recruitment process, and scholars encourage organizations to foster meaningful work given its benefits (Lysova et al., 2019; Michaelson et al., 2014). This has two potential negative effects: 1) it builds the assumption that all work should be meaningful and 2) it takes advantage of the inherent human need for meaning and suggests that that meaning should be specifically found in work, as opposed to anywhere else. Scholars have raised concerns that organizations’ efforts to manage the meaningfulness of work can actually be manipulative and unethical, to the extent that it brings about the aforementioned consequences and allows organizations to exploit workers through longer work hours, lower wages or inadequate benefits, fewer safety and health

protections, and strain on mental and physical health (Bailey et al., 2017; Bailey et al., 2019; Gross, 2010; Michaelson et al., 2014). Thus, organizations may in some cases be exploiting the human need for meaning and suggesting that work can always and should always provide such meaning.

The application of meaningfulness to work has perhaps been too narrow, allowing organizational science scholars and practitioners to consider the meaningfulness of work in a vacuum and ignore how work fits into broader meaning and existentialism. For example, in the literature, there are a couple of papers that mention the importance of meaningfulness outside of work in addition to meaningful work (e.g., Steger & Dik, 2009) but none that actually examine both. Bailey and colleagues (2019) state that the following question is yet to be addressed by researchers: “What is the interactive relationship between meaningful work and a meaningful life and how do individuals compensate for the absence of meaningfulness across domains?” (p. 489). In the wake of a crisis that involved mass death, isolation and fear, time- and resource-related challenges for families, it is worth considering that the meaningfulness of life played a larger role in the turnover decision-making process that it might have otherwise.

The Role of Nonwork in Meaning Making and Turnover

The meaningfulness of life is heavily influenced by one’s nonwork roles and activities, and for many people, family is one important element of nonwork life that was dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The interference of work with life outside of work, and vice versa, is a unique stressor, and work-nonwork conflict generally has a negative relationship with turnover intentions, such that people who experience more conflict between their roles are more likely to intend to turnover and to turnover (e.g., Abbott et al., 1998; Aboobaker & Edward, 2020; Boyar et al., 2003; Harr, 2004; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014; Watanabe & Falci, 2016).

Importantly, in one study, for those for whom work was more central to their lives, work-family conflict was less likely to lead to voluntary withdrawal within the next 12 months, compared to those for whom work was less central (Carr et al., 2008). Thus, values regarding life priorities as well as strongly held identities (e.g., related to profession, such as lawyer, or related to life roles, such as father) can influence the extent to which the work-nonwork conflict stressor affects the desire to leave one's job. Many of these values and identities were challenged or strengthened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and likely played a critical role in the turnover decision-making process.

Beyond work-nonwork conflict specifically, both Mobley's (1979) work and the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) recognized that factors outside of work would affect someone's desire to leave their current job or organization. Family dynamics themselves often create reasons to leave a job even though they may not be classified as work-family conflict. In one qualitative study, reported reasons for turnover included family demands, relocation, and life changes (Maertz, Jr. & Kmitta, 2012). For example, if childcare costs more than one parent's income, dual-earner families will often make the decision to have that parent stay home rather than allocating an entire salary to pay for childcare. In popular press articles, childcare was frequently cited as a reason for people leaving their jobs during the pandemic (e.g., Parker & Horowitz, 2022; Vagner, 2021), particularly for women. In attempting to understand the processes through which so many people have decided to change their work situation since the COVID-19 pandemic began, it is critical to consider the role of family and other important nonwork roles and priorities.

Research Question 2: Have people changed how they think about (i.e., value, identify with, find meaning in) work in relation to broader life and nonwork?

In attempting to understand the how and why of individuals leaving jobs and changing careers amidst a pandemic, it is important to consider that these experiences may differ by demographic variables. As noted above, the rates of resignations have not been equal across industries, age groups, or races/ethnicities (e.g., Cook, 2021; Maurer, 2021; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Importantly, there were also discrepant rates of resignations based on income level and education level, such that less educated and lower income individuals were more likely to turnover. Meaningful work is generally associated with higher level jobs (Lysova et al., 2019), and lower-level employees may have been more likely to face worse adverse working conditions during the pandemic compared to higher-level employees (e.g., exposure to health and safety risks as frontline employees in retail and hospitality, job insecurity, financial insecurity, inability to work from home). Taken together, the psychological and logistical experiences of these two groups may have differed such that the process, rationale, and outcomes of leaving would also differ. Further, research in the organizational sciences often overlooks workers in lower job levels or assumes that work-related phenomena occur similarly across job levels (Bergman & Jean, 2016), so this study aimed to explicitly consider potential differences in the experiences of people in different job levels. The current study examined how individuals in two job level groups (i.e., hourly, low-wage and professional, salaried) made their decision to leave their prior work situation, how their work-related identities and values played a role, and how meaningfulness factors into their decision-making around work.

Research Question 3: What are the differences or similarities between the experiences of turnover for higher-level and lower-level job groups?

CHAPTER 2 – METHOD

Participants

The current study sampled individuals who voluntarily quit a full-time job since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This includes people who are no longer employed, and people who changed industries (e.g., healthcare to tech), type of firm (e.g., large corporation to small business or nonprofit), or nature of employment (e.g., traditional employer-employee situation to self-employed, contract or gig work). The sample generally did not include people who moved between similar jobs in similar organizations (e.g., chef at one-midsized restaurant to chef at another mid-sized restaurant). The sample was limited to people between the ages of 18-40 and located in the United States between when the pandemic began and when they quit their job. The age range was intended to limit the sample to those who will continue to be “working age” for at least ten years and thus, will continue to make up the active workforce. The sample was limited to individuals living in the United States given the wide variety in national (governmental and cultural) responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across countries, which created potentially vastly different experiences for individuals. Additionally, I aimed to split the sample evenly between hourly low-wage workers and salaried professional workers, using stratified purposeful sampling (Leavy, 2017; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

The final sample consisted of 35 individuals with ages ranging from 20 to 40 years old ($M = 31.67$, $SD = 5.60$). Fifteen participants identified as women, 16 identified as men, three identified as non-binary, and one participant preferred not to indicate their gender. Twenty-seven participants identified as White, three identified as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, three identified as Black or African-American, three identified as Asian, one identified as Middle

Eastern, and one preferred not to answer (racial categories were not mutually exclusive). At the time of the interviews, participants lived in 13 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Sixteen participants indicated that they had completed, or were in the process of completing, some type of graduate study (e.g., master's, doctorate), 15 had completed college or technical school, three had attended but not completed college or technical school, and one had not completed high school. Twelve participants were not currently partnered, 20 were living with a partner or spouse, and 3 were partnered or married, but not living with their partner or spouse. Regarding caregiving, the majority of participants did not have any children ($n = 25$), and only one participant had eldercare responsibilities. See Appendix E for a comparison of the study sample and the “Great Resignation” population.

I planned to iteratively balance the higher-wage and lower-wage samples as I completed interviews. However, as I conducted the study, I found it was more difficult to recruit low-wage workers, which is not unusual for organizational science studies (e.g., Bergman & Jean, 2015). I indicated in later recruitment messaging that I was particularly seeking lower-income participants and I directly contacted individuals who work in the service-industry in an attempt to balance the two groups. However, even after recruitment, multiple potential low-wage participants (i.e., completed the screening survey) also did not respond to communications to schedule their interview. There are varying definitions of “low-wage” earners, but by the commonly used definition of earning two-thirds of the median earnings for a full-time, full-year, male worker (\$40,945 annually in 2020), 12 of the 35 participants quit low-wage jobs.

Participants had been working in the role that they quit for two months to 13 years ($M = 3.81$ years, $SD = 2.98$ years). Twenty participants were paid by salary at the job they quit, and 15

were paid hourly. Annual compensation at the jobs they quit ranged from \$24,000 to \$160,000 ($M = \$59,718$, $SD = \$34,029.75$). Participants left a variety of industries, including automotive, education, healthcare, hospitality and food service, human resources, retail, and sales/marketing (see Appendix E for all industries of the jobs that participants quit). Twenty-nine participants reported that they were currently employed.

Procedure

Question Development

Interview questions were semi-structured, such that I had an interview protocol with standard questions organized around the primary research questions (see Appendix D), but as the interviewer, I also had flexibility to ask follow-up probing questions based on participant responses (King, 2004). Additionally, question development was iterative, such that participant reactions or knowledge gained in each interview influenced and altered future interviews (Levitt et al., 2017). For example, after the first few interviews, I changed the question “How would you describe what you value most in life? For example, what do you think makes a life ‘good’?” to “How would you describe your most closely-held values?” with the follow-up question, “What do you think makes a person or an organization ‘good’?” In line with best practices, I aimed to make the questions sound conversational, using common language that is straightforward and simple. The questions were organized such that we covered one topic at a time, in a logical order. The first questions were intended to serve as introductory questions to build rapport and make participants feel comfortable, and the last questions were intended to allow the participant to share any remaining thoughts related to the topics and wrap up the conversation (de Souza et al., 2016).

Interview questions were reviewed by other industrial-organizational psychology graduate students and subject matter experts (i.e., two pilot interviews with individuals representative of my intended sample) and revised for clarity and relevancy (de Souza et al., 2016). Because my past experiences and biases could influence the qualitative process (e.g., question development, steering the conversation, coding and analysis), three undergraduate research assistants assisted throughout the project (de Souza et al., 2016; King, 2004). After questions were finalized, IRB approval was obtained prior to recruiting participants or conducting any interviews.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited primarily through online sources (e.g., social media such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, or LinkedIn), although I also utilized snowball sampling from existing participants and convenience sampling from the research team members' networks (see Appendix A for recruitment communication). Due to the sampling strategy, there were six participants who had known me prior to the study (e.g., classmates at our undergraduate university), however, I intentionally did not interview anyone with whom I have a close relationship. To encourage participation, I offered compensation of \$20 per one-hour interview. Potential participants completed a screening survey hosted through Qualtrics to ensure eligibility (see Appendix C for survey), and 58 eligible individuals were contacted by email to schedule their interview (23 individuals did not schedule their interview or respond to follow-up communication).

Interviews

I conducted and recorded each individual interview via Zoom, which has been recommended for qualitative research due to the ability to securely record sessions and to expand

the potential recruitment pool (e.g., Archibald et al., 2019; Oliffe et al., 2021). Given the potential sensitive nature of these topics (e.g., work-family, values, existentialism, health), virtual interviews can make participants feel more comfortable when answering personal questions (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). I only required participants to keep their video on for the beginning portion of the session (i.e., introductions, information about the session, and consent) in case some preferred to have their video off for the main portion of the interview, but all participants kept their video on throughout the interview, unless we were experiencing connection issues. Individual interviews can also help to protect participant confidentiality and allow participants to share their experiences and thoughts openly, as opposed to focus groups, which can involve unbalanced speaking time, hesitation to share personal experiences, and comparison or acquiescence between participants (Sim, 1998). Participants received information about what to expect prior to their interview via email, and I asked for verbal consent at the beginning of the interview session after reading the consent form and answering any questions (see Appendix C). Participants were informed that the goal of the research was to gain more knowledge on the experience of leaving one's job amidst the pandemic.

I conducted interviews until I reached perceived saturation (i.e., when no new themes emerged from each additional interview; e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Krueger & Casey, 2014), and then I conducted five additional interviews to ensure saturation. Recommendations for number of interviews vary, with some suggesting a minimum of 15 interviews (Bertaux, 1981) and others finding that the vast majority of themes can be identified within 6-12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006) or 9-17 interviews (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). In a review of 560 qualitative studies, Mason (2010) suggests that studies hardly ever warrant more than 50-60 interviews. However, Guest and colleagues (2006) also argue that more homogenous samples usually

require fewer interviews. Given that the population of interest for the current study could be fairly variable despite inclusion criteria (i.e., due to differences in jobs or industries, regional approaches to the pandemic, family situations, etc.) and I would be interviewing two samples for comparison, I anticipated reaching saturation within about 40-50 interviews, and I reached saturation within 35 interviews. Interviews lasted as average of 40 minutes ($SD = 13$ minutes, range = 20-70 minutes), and no repeat interviews were conducted.

Transcription and Coding

Following each interview, I recorded field notes of anything notable that occurred during the interview, and interview recordings were transcribed using an online transcription service (Otter.ai). An undergraduate research assistant and I both reviewed each transcript for accuracy and clarity (e.g., corrected errors, added punctuation, removed words spoken twice without clear intention or reason, redacted identifying information). Reviewing the transcripts also allowed the research team to become familiar with the data. Transcripts were not returned to participants for comment or correction.

The transcripts were imported into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Dedoose, which is a useful tool for creating, organizing, and applying a codebook. Although CAQDAS offers features that can be used to analyze qualitative data (e.g., by generating a codebook based on key words), scholars recommend avoiding these features and using CAQDAS to aid researchers in organizing and using a codebook (Ritchie et al., 2014). Thus, Dedoose was used only to store the codebook and apply codes to the text.

Validity Procedures

Throughout the development and execution of this project, I relied on a few key resources to understand and establish validity. First, I paid close attention to Tracy's (2010)

“Big-Tent” criteria for quality in qualitative research, including 1) a worthy topic, 2) rich rigor, 3) sincerity, 4) credibility, 5) resonance, 6) significant contribution, 7) ethics, and 8) meaningful coherence. I also used the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007), and this can be found in Appendix G.

Analytic Strategy

Coding and Interpretation

For coding and analyzing data, I used the phronetic iterative approach (Tracy, 2018). This approach balances the inductive approach of grounded theory (i.e., starting with observations of a group or phenomenon; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the purely deductive approach (i.e., starting with a theory-based research question). The iterative approach follows these three questions: 1) What are the data telling me? 2) What is it I want to know? and 3) What is the relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know? (Tracy, 2018). Thus, the phronetic iterative approach allows the researcher to alternate between “bottom-up” analysis, using the data to guide interpretation, and “top-down” analysis, using theory and previous research to guide interpretation. The current study aimed to build, from the data, an understanding of the process through which people made their turnover decisions and have since adjusted to those decisions, as well as the relationships between meaningful work, nonwork, and turnover. However, because I am relying on, and to some extent, testing existing theory, this study does not take a grounded theory approach.

Using best practice recommendations, I read through all the interview transcripts to identify codes and a coding scheme (MacQueen et al., 2008). Three undergraduate research assistants also read through a subset of the transcripts to help identify codes, but as the primary investigator, I was responsible for the final codebook. First, each person engaged in descriptive

primary cycle coding, or open-coding, of the same three transcripts (Tracy, 2018). In line with the phronetic iterative approach, I taught the research assistants how to generally code transcripts (i.e., identify segments of text and label that segment with the essence or meaning of it), but I did not give them any themes or theory to guide their codes. Each person developed their own list of codes (ranged from 131-275 codes, $M = 183.75$, $SD = 66.21$), we discussed those codes, and I consolidated the four lists into a preliminary codebook (Saldaña, 2016). At this stage, I began to pay attention to code recurrence (i.e., multiple occurrences of the same meaning being conveyed), repetition (i.e., multiple uses of the same words or phrases), and forcefulness (i.e., the importance to the speaker, conveyed through different types of emphasis) in order to identify the most critical codes (Owen, 1984). Codes were organized into categories thematically and hierarchically (Tracy, 2013), and for subsequent application of the codebook, higher-order codes were automatically applied with their associated lower-order codes. In the codebook, I also included specific codes based on relevant theory (e.g., the four turnover paths in the unfolding model of turnover; Lee & Mitchell, 1994), and I familiarized research assistants with the theory and the codes.

Next, research assistants and I individually unitized two transcripts (i.e., identified small chunks of text to code) and applied the codebook. We discussed coding decisions and further refined the codebook. Revisions included inserting codes, redefining codes, and reclassifying lower-order codes into different high-order codes (King, 2004). In the next stage, each research assistant coded two transcripts after I had identified the excerpts. We followed the approach suggested by Campbell and colleagues (2013), in which the primary researcher unitizes the text in order to focus on agreement regarding code application as opposed to agreement regarding unitization when determining interrater reliability. Cohen's kappa is the preferred indicator for

interrater reliability because it accounts for the possibility that coders may have agreed by chance (MacPhail et al., 2016; McHugh, 2012). I aimed for interrater reliability of .80 or higher (Landis & Koch, 1977; McHugh, 2012), and kappa was acceptable between myself and each of the three research assistants (.80, .84, .86). We discussed and revised the codebook again, and the final codebook can be found in Appendix E (very few codes were added or revised after this point).

Each remaining transcript was coded by one research assistant and me (Hruschka et al., 2004), and we re-coded the five transcripts that were used to develop the codebook. I continued to evaluate interrater reliability across all remaining transcripts, and Cohen's kappa was acceptable for all three research assistants (.80, .86, .92). However, we also discussed any discrepant coding decisions and disagreement regarding unitization decisions, all of which were resolved by discussion until consensus was reached. Thus, one set of final codes was applied to each transcript.

Following coding, I began the process of interpretation by creating an analytic outline, resulting in a loose list of themes (Tracy, 2018). As a first step, I reviewed any memos or notes that the research team had written during the research process thus far. Next, I examined the frequency and distribution of codes to understand recurring ideas, identify themes to be examined, and examine how different codes emerged together (King, 2004). It should be noted that the present study was not designed to quantify the qualitative data or to be generalized to a broad population, but rather to provide a rich description of the experiences of the study sample. Thus, the frequencies of codes were only used as one of many tools to identify potentially meaningful ideas. Following the phronetic-iterative approach, I focused on codes that were related to past research and theory, relevant for answering each of the research questions, or that emerged from the data. I also paid close attention to codes that indicated contradiction or

disagreement within and between participants (e.g., most participants indicated that work became less of a priority, but some indicated that it became more of a priority). Throughout the process, I balanced the top-down, theory driven approach with a bottom-up, data-driven approach.

Positionality Statement

As the principal investigator in this qualitative study, it is important that I reflect upon and transparently acknowledge my background and experiences as well as my motivation for conducting this study to establish sincerity, which is a criterion for validity (Tracy, 2010). My identity and background have certainly shaped my worldview and my approach to this research, and readers should have this lens when reading this study. I am a 27-year-old Chinese and white woman, I am a doctoral student in an industrial-organizational psychology program, and I do not self-identify with the target population. Specifically, I did not quit a job during the “Great Resignation,” and have never actually quit a job, because every job I have held has had a natural end point. I have also never worked a full-time job for more than three months (i.e., summer internships). Given that I do not share this critical work experience with the participants, I cannot fully understand their unique experiences, and I understand my own experiences have influenced the questions I chose to ask and the interpretations I have drawn.

Likely more impactful than my demographic characteristics and specific work history, my positionality regarding this project is largely affected by my anti-capitalist and anti-work perspectives. Although I believe strongly in the value of effort, creation, and service, I think that the way work is central to livelihood and identity has allowed organizations to exploit working people to the detriment of our health, families, and lives outside of work. This study is partially motivated by those views and a curiosity to understand how others are currently thinking about work after a global crisis. However, given my values in conjunction with my limited work

experience, it is difficult for me to relate to feelings of loyalty or obligation to an organization, which I acknowledge presents a potential bias in research about turnover. Although I cannot change my identities, past experiences, or worldview, I have made every effort to most accurately reflect participants' experiences, and I provide ample direct quotes in the results section for readers to interpret independent of my lens of analysis.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge my research training and expertise. I have historically focused my research on occupational health psychology topics, with a particular emphasis on work-nonwork issues. Thus, the topic of this study is a notable departure from my past work. Additionally, despite my involvement with other research projects, this is my first experience leading a qualitative study. I have spent a substantial amount of time learning about qualitative methods in order to conduct this study. Further, in acknowledgement of my limitations and potential biases, the study protocol has been reviewed by multiple researchers from different disciplines, and I recruited three undergraduate research assistants to assist me throughout the research process. Although qualitative research is unavoidably subjective, I believe I have done my due diligence to limit my biases and to state upfront those that might influence this report.

CHAPTER 3 – RESULTS

In the following, I present the results based on 35 individual interviews. I focus on themes directly related to the three primary research questions and to prior research and theory. Throughout, I also present bottom-up, emergent themes that are relevant for understanding the experiences of those who quit a job during the “Great Resignation” and that either were discussed in multiple interviews, a participant mentioned multiple times, or were presented with emphasis and priority by the interviewee.

What was the process through which people turned over from one work situation and transitioned to another work situation?

Participants described the process of leaving their prior job through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors before, during, and after making the decision to quit. I present those results below, focusing on why people quit, the nuances of the timing and complexity of the decision-making process, the role of emotions, and participants’ evaluations of the decision. Based on the entire interview transcripts, we also coded each interview with a path from the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), which I present first.

Shocks and Turnover Paths

The turnover process for each participant could generally be categorized into one of the four turnover paths of the unfolding model of turnover. Paths 1-3 involve a shock (i.e., a negative or positive event), and the shock either 1) triggers a pre-existing plan, 2) violates the person’s values or goals, or 3) is an unexpected job offer. In the fourth path, no shock occurs, and the individual has natural affective responses related to job dissatisfaction. It was difficult to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic itself constituted a shock or some other

phenomenon. If truly a “shock” in the way that it has been theoretically conceptualized, every person’s process would follow paths 1-3. Thus, unless the participant specifically identified COVID-19 as an event that directly influenced their decision to quit, the pandemic was considered context for the decision, but not a shock itself. Rather, we considered shocks to be specific incidents, including some related to COVID-19 health and safety, but also work tasks that challenged the participant’s personal values and negative interpersonal incidents, among others. We identified nine individuals who seemed to follow path 1 (i.e., a shock that triggers a preexisting plan). One example of this path was when an interviewee experienced an abrupt decrease in pay that made it impossible to pay rent (shock), which triggered the pre-existing plan to leave the food industry for a job in the arts. Eleven individuals seemed to follow path 2 (i.e., a shock that violates the person’s values or goals), with examples of shocks including not receiving expected promotions or development opportunities, or acute instances of health and safety concern. Only one individual seemed to follow path 3 (i.e., an unexpected job offer as the shock). Most people ($n = 14$) followed path 4, which does not involve a shock, but rather, job dissatisfaction that leads to evaluating alternative options. Although path 4 interviewees did not describe a specific shock, they did describe multiple factors and events that played a role in their dissatisfaction and their decisions to quit.

Context and Reasons for Quitting

For interviewees’ explanations of leaving their jobs, it was difficult to determine which statements were provided as context for the situation versus which were actual decision-making factors for quitting. Thus, context for leaving and reasons for leaving will be discussed together, primarily focused on the negative aspects of the jobs that participants quit, although participants did also occasionally mention positive aspects of their prior jobs.

Some of the factors for quitting were idiosyncratic to this unique time period. Participants mentioned COVID-specific health and safety concerns, changes to the job environment (e.g., transitioning to working from home), changes to job tasks or duties, or changes to their personal life, which could be related to the pandemic (e.g., at-home schooling required for children) or unrelated (e.g., romantic relationship breakups). Some participants also acknowledged other societal crises, including wildfires or other natural disasters, economic inequality, and the Black Lives Matter movement, among other political and social unrest. All of these new factors or changed situations were more often mentioned as context for the decision to quit than as reasons for quitting, with the exception of pay reductions due to the pandemic. For example, one participant relied heavily on tips to earn their full pay, and with fewer customers coming into the coffee shop, their pay was significantly reduced such that they could no longer pay their bills.

In contrast, participants also described factors that were not specific to the COVID time period and that were likely present prior to the pandemic, but that the interviewee gained new perspective on amidst the pandemic. These included high workload and demands, feeling stagnant in one's work development, a lack of organizational support or resources, and poor leadership or management. Many of these factors generally suggested poor treatment by supervisors, coworkers, or the organization more broadly. In some cases, these factors were exacerbated by the pandemic (e.g., poor management in general turned into poor management of COVID-19). In other cases, it was a combination of these negative job factors with personal factors and with other contextual factors that led to the decision to quit.

Notably, there was a major theme of low, inadequate, or inequitable pay as one reason that people quit their jobs. Many of the participants expressed feelings of inequity based on their previous experience and the quality and quantity of work being done. For example, one

participant stated, “I was being vastly underpaid for my position and my experience” (34, man, former laboratory manager, #26). In general, interviewees indicated that they were unsatisfied with the pay in their prior jobs, and they were looking for a situation that would compensate them fairly. In contrast, there were also a couple of participants who took a pay cut when they quit their job or who stopped working entirely, resulting in a reduced household income. In these cases, the decision to quit was influenced by more of a crisis of meaning or a conflict in values, as opposed to a lack of tangible, financial resources. For example, the participant who said the following specifically discussed needing to change careers to do work that aligned with their values, despite a pay reduction:

There was definitely like a final straw, I think in the summer of 2021, where the clients that I was being given really didn't align with my personal like morals. I guess they were like defense contractors and like weapons manufacturers. And I think that was when I really started to ramp up my job search. And I just didn't have like the leverage or the heart to say, like, “No, I'm not going to do the work”... I took a big pay cut to shift to where I am now, which is like a refugee resettlement agency. It was almost like half of what I was making. And so, at the time, I thought, oh, you know, let's get back to like, budgeting how I was when I first started out in the working world. And there are definitely some hard truths. And some days were like, “Oh, my God, why? Why did I do that?” Like I was so comfortable and cushy, and now, I'm like, paycheck to paycheck. So there were just some regrets. But, um, overall, I think it was still the right decision. (26, man, former account manager, #5)

Similarly, one participant quit their job partially to take on the care responsibilities for their child with special needs and to support the mental health of their spouse, saying:

[Frustration with work] tied into situations at home where my daughter was--she's special needs--and my wife was suffering from postpartum depression, and was beginning to get very overwhelmed to the point where I was concerned for her safety, for her mental health and safety and just not knowing how I could possibly do any more to take care of her when I also was at the whim of this job. So that really put the pressure on me to come up with something else. (33, man, former hairstylist, #33)

Then, upon reflection of that decision and how they feel about it, the interviewee stated, “[I feel] wonderful. We’ve struggled financially a lot since then, but it’s 100% worth it” (33, man, former hairstylist, #33). Thus, at least for some individuals, although pay is important to be able to survive and exist in society, needing higher pay was not a factor driving their decision to leave their existing job. Rather, the driving factors were related to value alignment.

I discuss values and identities in more detail below, but regarding reasons one might leave a job, it is worth noting that perceiving conflict between one’s values and the work one does for their organization played an important role in people’s decisions to quit their jobs. For example, one participant indicated:

I would really just say, like, personal values, were one of the biggest things. But like, you know, I didn't have a partner that was like, trying to move somewhere. I didn't have you know--I wasn't like, trying to pursue some other goal necessarily at the time. It was, yeah, it was primarily just like, the work and my personal values conflicting with what I was trying to do. (27, man, former data engineer, #23)

In reference to the Black Lives Matter movement and other diversity, equity, and inclusion topics, one participant said:

And it wasn't until essentially, the period of years where all of this stuff was coming to the surface, and it forced companies to address it and say, "We value this," that it was like, "Oh, gosh, this doesn't feel authentic to me. And I'm in a role where I could be the face of this." And so there's certainly a question for me of what am I doing? And is it authentic? And am I supporting a company that aligns with my values? Because it's starting to feel like actions don't match words. (35, woman, former organizational development manager, #4)

In addition to value conflict, participants' identity conflict (i.e., feeling that part of their identity was at odds with the work environment) also influenced their decisions to quit their prior jobs. For example, one participant discussed differences in political identities between themselves and their supervisors, which was also tied to how they had different opinions about how to manage the health and safety concerns related to COVID-19. Two other participants discussed their neurodivergent identities and the need to be stimulated and motivated to work, which they both were lacking in their previous positions. Thus, in addition to the many other varied contextual factors and reasons for quitting jobs, value conflict and identity conflict were identified as influential to the turnover process.

Variations in Timing and the Decision-Making Process

Although all cases could be categorized into the four paths of the unfolding model of turnover, there were certain nuanced elements of the process relayed by participants that are not captured by these paths and seemed notable for understanding their turnover process.

Specifically, the starting points of each path (shocks) are identified by the theory, but what occurs before the shock and what occurs between the shock and actually leaving are unclear. In the following section, I highlight participant narratives suggesting that the decision to quit was

generally not made lightly or quickly, even amidst the “Great Resignation,” when it may have seemed easy and/or common to do so. Specifically, I identify the theme of “negotiations” that occur in the process of deciding to quit, including internal negotiations with oneself regarding what each person is willing to withstand in order to maintain employment, and external negotiations with others, in which one must proclaim and sometimes defend their choice to quit their job.

First, one interesting piece of the turnover process that is not captured in current theory is the variation in the timing of decision-making. Although some participants seemed to make the decision fairly quickly, many participants had considered quitting for quite a while prior to actually making the decision or notifying their employer, with some people specifically mentioning thinking about quitting since early in their tenure of that position or with that organization. For example, one participant said, “Yeah, almost like as soon as I started working there. I very quickly realized that it wasn't what I wanted to do, like with the rest of my life, basically” (27, man, data engineer, #23). In these cases, there were ongoing internal negotiations (i.e., weighing of pros and cons) that consistently led the person to stay in the role over time, but it was not a question of whether the person would quit, but rather a question of timing and the relative weight of different factors.

Thinking about quitting early or for a long time often coincided with a “tipping point,” which was when the interviewee mentioned that there were multiple factors involved in the decision to quit, but the COVID-19 pandemic (or something that occurred within that time period) was an inflection point or a “last straw” in deciding to quit. Thus, although the internal negotiation had been occurring for some time, one of two things happened: either new information or new factors arose to be considered, or enough time had passed that they felt like

they owed it to themselves to make a different choice. These tipping points did not always constitute a shock, but rather a gradual tipping of the scale toward quitting. For example, one participant stated:

[Burnout] was kind of the impetus, I think, was--again, it's really hard to identify one defining moment, but there was kind of a series of inflection points that that led me to say, you know, it's time, and this is something I need to do now. (40, woman, former company vice president, #9)

For many participants, although they had considered quitting or had wanted to quit for a considerable length of time, they did not feel justified in making that decision until the situation was considerably bad (in this case, primarily due to the effects of COVID-19) or there was another reason to leave. For some participants, this turned what looked like a path 4 process (i.e., job dissatisfaction) into one of the other paths that include a shock. For example, one interviewee stated:

Oh, yeah, I mean, just like, seeing the world descend into chaos was very disheartening. And it really added... So, it was like, basically, before the pandemic, part of the reason that I hadn't done anything about quitting my job is there was this part of me that was like, oh, you know, everything else in life is going okay. You know, I feel really good about where I'm at. So, I might as well just, like, stick it out in this job for a while until I find something. And then I can switch gears. And watching the world descend into madness, and everything is just like thrown to the wind. You know, like, a bunch of my friends moved out of town, my long-term partner broke up with me. And so, it was just like, this big maelstrom of chaos. (27, man, former data engineer, #23)

The statements regarding how long interviewees had considered quitting often indicated a dependence on the job or a perceived expectation to remain committed to the organization. This was also evident in the theme of gratitude. Participants indicated feeling grateful to have a job amidst the turmoil of the pandemic when others were being laid off. For example, one participant stated:

I think with COVID, though, it has made me, how do I say this, like, maybe appreciate having a job more, because there's a lot of people, even now, that, you know, we're going into another recession, people are losing their jobs again. It's kind of a wake up call. That's one thing that kept me hanging on when the company did layoffs, and even though I got a pay decrease, I was, like I said, I was just so grateful to have a job that it kind of got me through. And I'm feeling like that now too. So I definitely think it's not that I ever took it for granted, but I really don't now, after witnessing, you know, what some people have experienced the last few years. (31, woman, analytics team lead, #8)

Watching others lose the resource of employment affected the way people felt about their own employment and likely encouraged them to stay where they were due to the security. The hesitation to quit is not unique to the “Great Resignation,” but what was perhaps different in this time period was some of the specific factors that caused the tipping point to overcome that hesitation (e.g., health and safety concerns), as well as the concentrated or heightened experience of reflection and re-evaluation. Thus, despite the gratitude for job security, the chaos and uncertainty, perhaps counterintuitively, signaled to some people that it was time to take a risk. Multiple participants also used the exact phrase “perfect storm,” indicating that multiple push and pull factors seemed to align in a way that created the “right” conditions to leave. For example, two participants stated:

And the amount of recruiters that were contacting me also increased too. So, it was kind of that perfect storm of like, the push and pull. So, the push with the workload--I didn't feel like my pay was in line with the amount of work I was doing, and then the pull of better opportunities, more opportunities, actual solicitation of opportunities, that was that interaction that was happening at that time. (31, woman, former senior compensation analyst, #9)

So, it was kind of just like a perfect storm. COVID, you know, the issues with my boss, the physical problems, and already having a goal of leaving anyway, so there was a lot of layers. (35, woman, former massage therapist, #25)

Up until the tipping point or the perfect storm, the combination of thinking about quitting for a while but not actually quitting is indicative of the extent to which individuals have internal doubt or uncertainty leading up to the decision to quit. This uncertainty can also be seen in the way that they talked with their employer about quitting. Some individuals initiated a closed conversation with their employer (i.e., told them they were quitting), indicating that they were ready to quit and certain of their decision. Rather than having a longer discussion, the negotiation of the decision had occurred almost entirely prior to communicating with someone higher up in the organization. In contrast, other individuals entered an open and ongoing conversation (generally with someone higher up in their organization) about their intent to leave, but they were open to staying and giving their employer an opportunity to negotiate with them to stay. In some cases, the open conversation reflected a positive relationship with the organization and a desire to maintain that relationship and fulfill work obligations. For example, one participant stated:

And so, I came back from that vacation and set up a meeting with our HR--she was the chief people officer, and then our CEO, my boss--and I told them that I wanted to leave

and why. And they wanted to know what my next step was, and I said, I have no idea, and so they suggested that I start meeting with a coach, named [coach's name], and figure out what my next step was going to be. And so they said, to just hang on for a little bit, they would do whatever they could to keep me. (38, woman, former director of restaurant operations, #6)

In other cases, the open conversation occurred because the organization continuously made promises or indicated that issues would be resolved, thus encouraging the individual to stay under false pretenses. Eventually, the unfulfilled expectations of change contributed to the interviewees' feelings of disappointment and desire to leave.

Emotions

Emotions pose another reason that people may have stayed in positions for a long time despite knowing that they wanted to quit. Emotions are generally not considered in theories of turnover, however they were acknowledged and regarded as having an important role in the process by participants experiencing this particular context. I included codes to label specific emotion words that interviewees used in reference to their previous job, the process of quitting, or their future or current work. Negative emotions related to their previous jobs included “frustrated,” “stressed,” “overwhelmed,” “anxious,” and “scared,” and there were no positive emotion words used in reference to their previous jobs. In reference to the process of quitting, negative emotions mentioned included “terrifying,” “scared,” “fear,” “anxious,” “sadness,” “guilt,” and “shame.” Positive emotions mentioned included “relieved,” “excited,” and “happy.” In reference to future or current work situations, emotions mentioned included “scary” and “fear.” Positive emotions mentioned primarily included “excited” and “happy.” For all reference points, the primary negative emotions revolved around fear, whether that was a fear of failing,

fear of the unknown, or fear of others' reactions or perceptions. Interestingly, whether the decision was to stay (prior to quitting) or to quit, and regardless of the four turnover paths, fear was the most mentioned emotion. In the end, other emotions (e.g., anger, excitement), other fears (e.g., of being stuck, of financial hardship), or other considerations (e.g., family needs, value conflict) eventually overrode the existing level of fear of quitting a job.

Abundance and Agency

Similar to emotions, participants also highlighted the experiences of recognizing the abundance of options available to them as well as their agency to make choices for themselves. Specifically, participants indicated that the pandemic and the “Great Resignation” reminded them that they have the ability to change their work situation, and in turn, change their life situation. These realizations helped them to overcome some of the fear and anxiety and to bring about a tipping point to decide to quit. Some of these comments were more logistical and focused on the job market being strong in favor of job seekers. For example:

I guess, like in the most healthy way possible, I see that the power pendulum has swung back maybe into the employees side of the equation, and it might fall back down in the middle a bit more. But I think, historically, it's been much more on the employer side of things, and that's created, you know, traditions, habits, culture over years and years and years, that I think people finally realized, like, weren't good for them. And so the fact that employees have had more power--I think it's helped to kind of reset some of the norms and expectations, and just general workplace culture where there is no norm anymore, it is really being, you know, like, redefined in a variety of ways. (31, man, former account manager, #11)

For many participants, this theme of abundance and agency went beyond the strength of the job market and seemed more existential, describing the realization that there is something more out there that could lead to a better life and that they have the power to make that change. For example, two participants stated:

But also, I think, going through all of these experiences and seeing, you know, the way that it impacts so many of us, I realized too, that there's a level of, I guess, courage that you kind of have to have to like, make a decision for yourself. And I think there's always that underlying fear of making such a big change in your life. So there's always stories you can tell yourself or reasons you can tell yourself like, oh, well, I can't do that right now because of this, because of that. And again, like seeing us kind of like coming through, you know, everything. I just realized that I needed to stop making excuses. And if this was something that I really believed I needed to do, and if it was financially possible, then it was time. (40, woman, former company vice president, #9)

So I think that was healthy cognitively, of realizing that maybe there's a better fit for me out there, and that I can kind of choose, choose my destiny, so to say, like, I'm not stuck here--if I want something to change, I can have the power to change it, to find a better balance for me and my family. (31, woman, former senior compensation analyst, #9)

Aftermath of Quitting

Most theories of turnover do not address the aftermath of quitting and what occurs for the individual who quit the job. In this study, I asked participants how they felt (upon reflection) about the decision to leave their job. All participants indicated that the decision was positive, and many indicated that they had “no regrets.” Some participants regretted parts of the process and how they went about leaving the prior job (e.g., giving too much or too little notice), and a few

seemed uncertain about the job or work situation they ended up in. However, overall, participants indicated relief and pride around their decision to quit their previous job, as indicated in this excerpt:

It is the best thing that I've done for myself probably in the last decade. I have read a bunch of articles talking about how, "Oh, the great resignation is turning into the great regret where people are feeling bad about leaving their job because the grass isn't actually greener." And I saw that, and I was like, this is something that's been written by someone who is trying to guilt people into not leaving their jobs. Because it feels so much better. Even the moment when we decided last summer, yes, our budget can handle this, yes, just go ahead and quit. I felt 100 pounds lighter. I can sleep at night. I don't have any of-- well, I don't have nearly anything close to the mental health difficulties that I was having then. Even during the time after that when my partner's health was still a big concern for me. Yeah, I'm glad I left. There's no looking back. (31, nonbinary individual, former associate director in higher education, #18)

Specifically, in reflecting upon whether the decision to quit was "right" or not, participants identified a few factors that have improved since then. The most frequently mentioned were having better work-life balance, better health, benefits to their career development, and higher pay. Thus, although most people mentioned multiple factors that contributed to them leaving, their responses to these later questions indicated that they were not necessarily evaluating their decision to quit based on improvement for all those factors, but rather, there were a few key indicators for whether or not the decision was "good" in the end.

Overall, participants' process of quitting followed the four different paths according to the unfolding model of turnover, and factors that influenced quitting included changes directly

related to the pandemic but also factors that were long-standing that gained new weight amidst the pandemic. Emotions such as fear were often present throughout the process, but the desire to find work that aligns with the rest of life outside of work eventually pushed the interviewees to quit. In the aftermath, participants were generally pleased with the decision to quit their prior job.

Have people changed how they think about (value, identify with, find meaning in) work in relation to broader life and nonwork?

According to the participants of this study, their perspectives on both who they are in relation to work as well as what work is in relation to the rest of their lives have shifted since the beginning of the pandemic. Throughout the interviews, participants identified personally important values, identities, and elements of life outside of work. They also explained the ways in which their values, identities, and life outside of work were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the extent to which they influenced participants' decisions to quit their jobs and their thoughts about work.

Meaningful Work and Meaningful Lives

The idea of meaningful work showed up throughout the interviews, with a general theme that discerning meaning from work is important, but finding meaning outside work takes precedence. As mentioned above, a couple of participants mentioned a lack of meaningful work as one of the contextual factors or reasons for quitting. In both cases, the participants used the word "fulfilled" to indicate personal meaning. One participant said:

Um, I think socially, it was difficult because I wouldn't really want to talk about my job or I would just sort of talk about it in a negative light, like, oh, I just do this, you know, like, this bad thing, or not this bad thing, but just like this not so--maybe I was projecting

onto people that it wasn't fulfilling. And then I realized that that was just coming from myself. (26, man, former account manager, #5)

The second participant stated, "I talked with my partner and we kind of figured like, 'No matter what, I need to leave my position, because I'm not being supported. And I don't feel fulfilled'" (31, nonbinary individual, former associate director in higher education, #18).

Participants also mentioned meaningful work as a consideration or desired factor for a future work situation. Sometimes, they did this explicitly. For example, when asked the extent to which meaningfulness is important to their ideal job, one participant responded:

Huge. It really it needs to be cornerstone for me. Otherwise, I just--like I mean, yes, money benefits are great. Don't get me wrong, but the thought of just being stuck in a job because I make a lot of money and not because I like it terrifies me, or not because I find it interesting or meaningful or I'm making an impact is honestly one of my worst fears. So, the meaningfulness of what I'm doing, loving what I do, and, like, seeing an impact, as much as possible with this line of work is really huge for me. (28, woman, former communication and education coordinator, #19)

In other cases, the desire for meaningful work was implied through other descriptions. For instance, people mentioned wanting to do good, help society or other people, and/or have an impact, wanting to grow and advance, or wanting to more readily use their skills, all of which can be considered elements of meaningful work. Lastly, the desire for social connection through work (either with coworkers or with clients and customers) is also a form of desire for meaningful work. A few participants had specific realizations that, if one must work to survive, it is ideal for that work to be meaningful. Thus, although not necessarily stating that work became

a higher priority, finding meaningful work became a higher priority in the scheme of decisions about work. This can be seen in the following comment:

So, finding that purpose on a professional level that, you know, that isn't just, "Hey, I work this job that pays me well enough", you know, finding something that gives me a feeling of satisfaction, a feeling of accomplishment, a feeling of pride when I talk about it rather than, "Oh yeah, this is what I do." And I think finding that, finding out whatever that is, is one of the most important things now in my life. (29, man, former human resources generalist, #1)

A handful of participants also made notable distinctions between what exactly makes work meaningful and which parts of meaningful work are important to them. Specifically, two people provided clarification that meaningful work does not need to involve a greater good purpose, but rather, meaningfulness is very personal and is derived from what the individual can gain (primarily experientially, not materially) by doing that work. One person indicated:

Meaningfulness in a personal sense, like, I can find some sort of joy or utility in what I'm doing--that's fairly important. Meaningfulness in like the wider social sense would be great. I mean, if I had two equal options, and one of them also provided more social, practical meaning, then I would probably prefer that one. But I would also see that as kind of auxiliary. And like, I could do a job without much wider sense of meaning, as long as it had something that provided for my personal desires, my personal sense of meaning. (33, non-binary, former hairstylist, #33)

The second interviewee similarly noted that personal meaning is more important than greater good meaning, specifically in the context of marketing. For this person, the marketing client's business and organizational mission are less critical than the personal meaning that one derives

from the work that they do, including the work being interesting, interpersonally rewarding, and developmentally beneficial. This person stated:

Um, I would say it's, like, somewhat important to me, I think it's like, it's hard because with marketing, like, it's so transferable. So what I'm doing on a technical level is really fulfilling and meaningful to me. And I don't know if meaningful--it's like very capitalistic, of course, but it's fulfilling like, I like what I do. But I did have this problem, like in my last job that is actually one of my biggest fears going into this job is like, I didn't care about what my clients were selling. So they were doing like hunting stuff and like fishing boats. It's like, I don't have any emotional relation to any of these things, but I still wrote really great content for them, you know? And so coming into this tech space, like, do I really, really care about apps? And like, the technology behind apps? No, but I think like, it's gonna be outweighed by like, all of the other perks of this job. And like, I think I'll still feel fulfilled by the fact that I'm learning so much more and like, have a big team and like, you know, I think there's like a lot more than like, the meaningfulness of the actual work that goes into my job. (27, woman, former marketing coordinator, #35)

When asked whether quitting their job allowed them to find or create more meaning in their life, most participants responded yes, and they primarily specified that the new or additional meaning in their life came from an ability to be more present and engaged in their life outside of work. This included being able to spend more time with friends and family, to carry less work-related stress, and to redirect energy toward other activities and ways to spend one's time. In most cases, the participants were able to rebalance the distribution of their time and energy away from work, and that allowed them to live more meaningfully outside of work. Thus, while their

decisions to quit did revolve around considerations of meaning, they were considering meaning more broadly, rather than just the meaningfulness of their work. Two participants stated:

Um, I don't know that it helps me find or create it. I think it gave me more time to engage with it. And it gave me a higher emotional capacity that I wasn't quite having before.

Definitely being so stressed out and so tired put a bit of a strain on my relationship.

Nothing big, but when one person is kind of out of it, you can't connect as well. (20, man, former teacher/tutor, #3)

It allowed me to... be a better and happier daughter, sister, friend, that could actually be supportive, be there for life events, and not show up to things, not with a chip on my shoulder, but carrying a weight. I don't feel like I carry that weight anymore. I feel like I can actually be present as a person just beyond whatever, like, weight I was carrying from work, or worrying about what people were thinking, or things like that. (28, woman, former communications and education coordinator, #19)

Values and Identities

I explored whether the values or identities mentioned by participants were specific to work or more general, whether those values or identities have changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether those values or identities influenced their decision to quit their prior job. Interestingly, multiple participants indicated that the questions asking them to identify their values or their identities were difficult to answer. For example, participants stated, “This is a really tough question” (27, woman, former marketing coordinator, #35); “Man, I was not prepared for this” (29, man, former human resources generalist, #1); and “That’s a tricky one” (35, woman, former organizational development manager, #4). Participants may have found these questions difficult to answer because, in the context of how the study was presented (i.e.,

about the “Great Resignation” and leaving a job), they did not expect to talk about those topics. However, the surprise at hearing these questions might also suggest that people do not often explicitly consider their values or identities when thinking or talking about work and thus, would not expect to cover such topics in a discussion about work. That said, participants did account for their identities and values in their decisions to quit their jobs, although perhaps this was not done consciously.

Most participants identified 1-4 values, and they were primarily not work-specific. Work-specific values included “balance,” “boundaries,” and “teamwork.” Non-work-specific values could be categorized into connection values (e.g., “family,” “community,” “communication”), interpersonal treatment of others (e.g., “integrity,” “being ethical,” “honesty,” and “respect”), meeting basic needs (e.g., “health and wellness,” “nature”), and values for the broader world (e.g., “humanism,” “human rights”). Many participants indicated that their values had changed since the beginning of the pandemic, with some indicating that the pandemic itself caused the change, and others indicating that their values changed, but not necessarily as a result of the pandemic or anything related to it. For most people who said that the pandemic had affected their values, their values had become stronger or more solidified. Participants also indicated that their values influenced their decision to quit their prior job. Excerpts related to this include:

And so, it was like, okay, I really need to pursue those values and continue to cultivate them. And so yeah, I think I had always you know, at a more abstract level held those values, but it didn't really feel like they were truly guiding principles until everything happened. It was like, okay, these are real, these are necessary, I have to do this. (27, man, former data engineer, #23)

I felt that the same respect, the same commitment [values identified previously] that I had put towards the university was not being given back to me. I felt as if I was a means of production. That I was just a worker a cog in a machine, and they were trying to wring as much out of me as they could. And they were doing the bare minimum to keep people from departing. (31, nonbinary individual, former associate director in higher education, #18)

Participants generally identified 1-3 identities, most of which were not work-specific. Work-specific identities included “teacher,” “therapist,” “entrepreneur,” and “leader.” Non-work-specific identities included demographic groups (e.g., race, gender, religion, disability status), relationship identities (e.g., “sister,” “friend,” “father”), hobby- or activity-related identities (e.g., “gamer,” “runner,”), and cause-related identities that invoke one’s value systems (e.g., “environmentalist,” “liberal”). Multiple participants indicated that their identities had changed since the beginning of the pandemic, with some indicating that the pandemic and its effects had caused the change, but most indicated that their identities changed in that time period but not necessarily as a result of the pandemic or anything related to it. For example, one participant described how their racial identity influenced them to stay in their role until they reconsidered what that identity means to them:

I would say, the biggest thing that I noticed was, again, this idea of selling out, like this idea that you have to work nonprofit, as a therapist, or the idea that you have to work in the trenches as a therapist. And by the trenches, I mean, like working with the highest risk, the highest needs, as a person that's still trying to push on their own personal life. Like, I felt like if I left that, pre COVID, during COVID, that I was not--you know, I was a sellout? That I was buying into this, you know--I don't know, it's really odd. Like, I felt

like if I left that I would be buying into this white collar white ideology of what it meant to be successful. Versus being in the trenches was like, you're Brown, therefore, you got to work your way up. I don't know, and I'm not sure if you're understanding where I'm coming from. But it was really weird identity creation. So being able to chip away from that and say, you know, what, I'm doing this for me, myself, whatever social constructs have been created, I'm not going to abide by that. That was extremely powerful. For me, it was a growth moment, in more ways than one. (32, man, former clinical therapist, #2)

Deprioritizing Work

One major theme was the reduced prioritization or importance of work to participants. Participants indicated that the pandemic (or other factors that occurred during that time period) made them realize that work could not or should not be as central to life. Sometimes, this coincided with realizations about life outside of work being more meaningful or more important, and multiple people stated something similar to, “I hadn't really thought about it until that point, that the work-life balance is real. And I just thought like life is work to an extent, but I'm not that person. I work to live, not the other way around” (32, non-binary, former barista, #21). Sometimes, this decentralization of work was a reaction to realizing that work was not what they previously thought it was (e.g., not as meaningful), or that capitalism and related work structures required that any organization would always consider employees dispensable and exploitable, and thus, would not respect their full humanity. For example, two participants stated the following:

I think I just see--especially in the new job, because I'm constantly finding people jobs-- of just seeing that, like, a company, and I think it's a major shift in generations, like a company is not a be all end all. A job is a job. And, like, it took me a long time to realize

that because our parents' generations and our grandparents' generations, like you got a job at 18, and you just worked there forever, until you, you know, got your gold watch and hung it up. Whereas now like, there's so little loyalty to employees. And everything is about the bottom line of making more money for the company that like, they have no loyalty to us. So, there's no reason to have loyalty to a company. And I think that is going to be one of like the major reckonings of the next like five to 10 years of, workers getting rights back and saying no, I'm not doing that. (36, man, former sales supervisor, #10)

I don't like work as a concept. I wish we didn't have to do it. I don't like trading my life for the right to live. you know, I don't know, that probably sounds dramatic, or like, too heavily anticapitalist or something. But it's true. You know, I mean, we give a lot of time and energy to our positions, regardless of what they are. The expectations of employers are often high, regardless. And there very much is this sense "Well, if you don't work, you can't afford to live." So it's not like it's an option not to. And so then it becomes a matter of "Well, I'm going to work in the way that most benefits me", which I don't think is something I thought as intensely about before. I will say that. Burnout is one thing. I had it, but it wasn't like, you know, I just never analyzed it. I was like you work. That's what you do. But now it's just sort of like, why? Why do we do that? You know, why have we built up this whole situation where you can't not do this thing that you're--you have to work to live, but you can't live because you work? (31, woman, former student affairs professional, #14)

Life Outside of Work

Throughout the interviews, coinciding with the de-prioritization of work, there was a major theme that the perceived purpose of work is to enable one to live out their humanity.

Doing so can look many different ways, depending on the person. For example, sometimes that can occur through work, if one can find meaning or purpose in the work they do, such as through helping others, being stimulated, building social connections, and having routine or structure. However, the primary purpose of work noted by participants was to make money in order to survive, and further, to live a life outside of work. Multiple codes and themes arose regarding the relationship between work and life outside of work.

First, it is important to note that many participants mentioned life outside of work as a factor in quitting their previous job. Some responses specifically discussed work-nonwork conflict or balance, and others mentioned nonwork factors, such as physical or mental health, or other changes to one's personal life (e.g., breakup or divorce, loss of community, partner or family health changes, marriage, children) as context and reasons for quitting. The following excerpt demonstrates an explicit mention of work-nonwork balance:

I think my work-life balance was just off whack. I was working a lot more than I was mentally and physically at home, and I was having a really hard time setting those boundaries for myself. Even though I felt support to be able to set those boundaries, I was just having a hard time doing that, because there was just so much work to do. So that was definitely a big struggle. (38, woman, director of restaurant operations, #6)

For others, their stories implied that work was making it difficult to meet the demands of their home and family life, or that work prevented them from participating in roles and activities outside of work. Interestingly, no participants mentioned family-to-work conflict (when describing their past job or their current job). Two examples of implied work-nonwork conflict are:

So yeah, there were definitely some personal aspects to it. And just the thought that I'm bringing home all this additional stress, and it's not good for my home dynamic. (29, man, former human resources generalist, #1)

It would be largely family, being concerned about my wife and my daughter wanting to be a bigger part of that. I was suffering from some pretty bad social anxiety after an accident that I had in 2019. And I had just kind of adapted to it and tried to function. But it was all weighing on me. And I had--there was a situation with a family that came in. It was like a dad and two or three daughters. Yeah, three daughters. And there was this just heartbreaking story that one of the little girls told about how her dad was at work one day, and he'd usually call mom during lunch break and talk to her. And when he was calling her that day, she didn't answer. And two of the daughters were in school, and she was home with one of the other daughters. And when she wouldn't answer, he told his boss he was worried, and ran home and found her dead, with the young daughter trying to wake her crying. And you know, I broke down and cried for about 20 minutes in the office after we were done with their haircuts. And I couldn't--every time, I would just be sitting with my thoughts and thinking like, that could be us, like, that could be me. I could come home one day and find that, and I just couldn't take it. That just wanting to be present, with my family to be able to live life for something more than earning some rich guy a lot more money than he deserves, while not getting what I deserve. And my family missing out because of that. (33, nonbinary individual, former hairstylist, #33)

Work-nonwork balance was also mentioned frequently as a consideration for future work situations or for an ideal job. Again, some participants discussed this explicitly, and the focus was both on having personal work-nonwork balance at the individual level, but also on having a

culture and leaders that promote and role model work-nonwork balance as well. Work-nonwork balance was implied through desires of wanting a shorter commute, an alternative work schedule or schedule flexibility, or a specific location-based work arrangement (i.e., remote, in-person, or hybrid).

Caregivers. There were no apparent differences in codes or themes between caregivers and non-caregivers. However, a couple of caregivers did particularly point out the burden of caregiving and the need for attention to the challenges of being a working caregiver. For example, one participant stated:

I think just the main thing, and I'm hoping that it is something that your study shows, is just the impact on mothers. I mean, I think caregivers overall, but women tend to take on that weight more. And just how unstable our parent system is of like, you don't realize how much you depend on a daycare or, you know, maybe if it's a grandparent that's watching the kids or it's--when one piece falls down, the whole thing comes down, and how the corporate structure doesn't really put that into consideration at all. And how workforces and employers that don't pay attention to that, I think are going to be unsuccessful moving forward, because now that workers see that, and parents see that, that's what they need moving forward is flexibility, and they want to be good employees.

(31, woman, former senior compensation analyst, #7)

Ideals for Future Work

Regarding considerations for future work and ideal work situations, participants mentioned a variety of desirable factors of a job. For instance, some factors focused on interpersonal elements of work, including a positive evaluation of coworkers or leadership, social connection with others, and a positive work culture. Others focused on resources, including

benefits, pay, or growth and advancement opportunities. The two most common themes were wanting to do work that is meaningful, in that it helps people or society and makes an impact, and wanting work-nonwork balance and autonomy over where and when work gets done, which also included hybrid work and alternative work schedules. That being said, some participants indicated they would prefer a fully remote role, and some participants indicated they would prefer an in-person role. Participants highlighted the benefits and challenges of varying levels of remote work, and the consistent theme was that their preferences had often changed as a result of the pandemic. For example, one participant indicated, “So, I think 100% remote, which if you asked me pre pandemic, I would never have even wanted. Like I literally would never have wanted this but 100% remote was like top of my list” (27, woman, former digital marketing specialist, #35).

Beside the factors of jobs that were desirable to the individual, I also asked participants to discuss what would make work better for people in the U.S. more broadly. The majority of participants made suggestions that seemed intended to make life better more broadly (i.e., to improve well-being, autonomy, etc.), as opposed to specifically making work better (i.e., making the experience of working more pleasant, engaging, etc.). For work focused ideas, some participants did suggest less hierarchy in organizations, more compassion and empathy at work, better access to mentoring, listening to employees and taking action based on their feedback, and addressing toxic work cultures. These generally reflect a desire to make work better while one is engaged in work or physically at work. It was interesting, though, that in response to a question framed around making work better, many people provided answers that seemed focused on improving life more broadly, including health care (i.e., universal, not tied to employment), comprehensive childcare, and generally meeting the basic needs of people within a society (e.g.,

access to food, housing). The most common responses fell somewhere in the middle, in that they might improve work itself, but they seemed intended to improve life outside of work. These included higher pay, more time off (i.e., paid time off, parental leave, medical leave), and flexibility regarding when and where to work. Further, the suggestions covered all four basic needs (i.e., existence, autonomy, relatedness, competence/growth), but the most frequently coded was autonomy needs (i.e., having ownership over own's behavior), suggesting that people might feel overly confined or controlled by work and the way it is structured in our society.

Highlighting this, two interviewees stated:

I think, if you ask it in a more broad sense away from the individual, “why do people work?” I think because there's a coercive nature to existence in our society, which is that everything is so hyper commodified on every level, that you are almost forced into a perspective of you need to always be working in order to get a paycheck. (38, man, former automotive damage estimator, #31)

I really, really do not like the idea of having to go back to any kind of job where you have such a strict pyramid of power, with, you know, the oversight, telling everybody underneath exactly what and how to do and how to be and how to dress and how to act. I can't stand that kind of mechanical, just heartless system anymore. (33, nonbinary individual, former hairstylist, #33)

What are the differences or similarities between the experiences of turnover for higher-level and lower-level job groups?

There were some group differences regarding the processes of quitting and leaving between those quitting higher-level jobs and those quitting lower-level jobs. Participants who were paid hourly were slightly more likely to have quit without a job lined up compared to those

were salaried, and individuals in the \$23,000-63,000 pay range were the most likely to quit without another job lined up compared to higher levels of pay. Of the individuals who had a potential job opportunity but who had not accepted an offer, 60% were paid hourly and 60% were earning between \$24,000-43,000. Participants who were salaried indicated that their organization or supervisor was supportive of them making the decision to quit more often than those who were paid hourly, and only salaried participants reported taking time to mentally and emotionally prepare to leave. Thus, perhaps having more financial resources and support from one's organization gives people time and space to consider their options more fully and line up a new job, as opposed to making a more rushed decision. For example, one salaried participant stated:

And in part because I was feeling a little burned out--but again, I didn't want to make a decision based on that. So I was feeling this at the end of 21, but I made myself not do anything with it until mid-April of 22. So I made myself kind of sit with those feelings and really make sure that I was not making a decision just based on like, yeah, like an inclination or like an emotion of the moment, right. But this was like, no, this really feels right and I'm at peace with this. (40, woman, former company vice president, #9)

Further, regarding reflections, participants who were salaried were more likely to express gratitude about having a job during the pandemic, and lower income participants were more likely to have realizations related to the abundance of opportunities and their own agency to find or create a better work situation for themselves.

Thus, there were some differences by job level, however they were less pronounced than expected. There did not appear to be many differences in emotions across the two groups, and there were not notable differences in the reasons and context for quitting, ideal job

considerations, or general reflections and thoughts regarding values, identities, and meaningful work. Rather, the experiences of all participants were notably more similar than different across job levels.

CHAPTER 4 – DISCUSSION

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of people who quit a job during what was called the “Great Resignation,” which started in 2020 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aims of this study included exploring the extent to which existing theories of turnover help to frame our understanding of why and how people quit their jobs during this time period, addressing gaps in the meaningful work literature, understanding the extent to which people’s mindset around work may have shifted, and examining the differences in experiences between those who quit lower-level or lower-wage jobs and those who quit higher-level or higher-wage jobs.

The first research question focused on the process through which people quit a job and turned over to another work situation. All cases could be categorized into the four paths of the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), suggesting that this theory is still relevant for the experiences of people who were part of the “Great Resignation.” However, I also identified additional pieces of the process that have not typically been considered in turnover theory, including the negotiations with oneself and others, the timing of decision-making, the role of fear-based emotions, tipping points that are not shocks, and the psychological aftermath of quitting. Further, I examined the contexts of or reasons for quitting, many of which align with previous research (e.g., compensation, work-nonwork conflict, stress, person-organization fit, one’s relationship with their supervisor, and organizational culture; e.g., Chang et al., 2013; Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom, 2011; Mossholder et al., 2005; Rubenstein et al., 2017). I did not necessarily identify reasons that people quit that were new in this time period, but rather, the weighing of these factors occurred differently amidst the pandemic. For example, someone’s

work situation might not have changed very much, but the time away from work to reflect and the context of a global crisis created a new lens through which to view the work situation.

The second research question focused on the ways in which interviewees think about work, including how their work relates to their values, their identities, and the pursuit of meaning in their lives. The pandemic (and other factors that coincided with it) seemed to strengthen and clarify values and identities, as well as highlight the ways in which organizations and industries did not align with personal values, which, in turn, contributed to people quitting their jobs.

Further, work-specific values or identities were not particularly salient to interviewees.

Participants generally claimed the importance of doing work that is meaningful in some way, but there was also overwhelming consensus that the pandemic time period allowed people to step back and reframe their priorities, such that work is not central to one's life, decisions can be based on one's own needs as opposed to organizational needs, and there are many other avenues to obtain, find, or create meaning in life. Lastly, participants demonstrated the realization of their own agency and the desire for recognition of their humanity through better, more human-focused treatment at work and specifically, more autonomy to choose how work and life interact.

The third research question pertained to differences in the experiences between those who quit lower-level jobs and those who quit higher-level jobs. I found minimal notable differences in the experiences of individuals in these two groups, which suggests a common human experience of searching for meaning, feeling emotions of fear related to change, and seeking better working and living conditions. However, there were some minor differences in the process of quitting (e.g., more resources and support for those quitting a salaried job), and lower income interviewees benefitted from realizations during the pandemic that better work situations are possible, and they have the power to find them.

Theoretical Implications

Turnover Theory

In general, this study provided support for the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Every case could be categorized into the four paths included in the theory. However, the very broadness that provides coverage to include nearly all cases of turnover also limits the usefulness of the theory. Within the four paths, there was a considerable amount of variability in the specific events, timing, and psychological processes (e.g., emotions, perceptions, and decision-making) that people went through. For example, the experiences of two people on path 2 (i.e., a shock that violates one's values or goals) could be extremely different from one another, and the theory does not account for what occurs between the shock and the quitting to account for those differences. Particularly important to consider are the emotional experiences that occur at different stages of the process and how those emotions influence one's decisions and one's reflection upon the process. Specifically, the unfolding model and other theories of turnover could be strengthened by an understanding of the role of fear during decision-making, as well as the conditions under which fear has different effects. Thus, more specific theory of turnover decision-making processes would be useful for understanding how and why people arrive at the decision to quit a job.

Theory about turnover should also be expanded to consider what happens after the decision to quit a job, including what occurs between making the decision and actually quitting, as well as the aftermath of leaving the organization. Depending on what happens in this time period (e.g., emotions of relief or guilt, support from the organization), there are implications for one's identity formation, self-efficacy, and future decision-making that are important to capture in order to understand how people might reflect upon the process and how they might approach a

future work situation. The unfolding model of turnover ends at the decision to quit, and most theories and studies consider the organizational exit as the end of the turnover process. Only a couple of studies have taken the approach of considering employees' post-exit timeframe (e.g., Laulié & Morgeson, 2021; Shipp et al., 2014), and turnover theory can be expanded to include these aftereffects. One study extended the unfolding model of turnover to consider boomerang employees (i.e., former employees that return to work at their former organization), finding that people who quit but came back as boomerang employees had different pre-quitting experiences than those who quit and did not go back to work for their former employer (Shipp et al., 2014). Boomerang employees were more likely to have experienced a negative personal shock (e.g., family member becomes ill and needs caretaking) and more likely to have received an alternate job offer, while people who did not boomerang were more likely to have been on path 4 (i.e., experienced job dissatisfaction which led them to evaluate alternative options but did not experience a shock) with higher dissatisfaction predicting not returning. Organizations and media outlets claimed that a large number of the people who quit during the "Great Resignation" were becoming boomerang employees after realizing that other work options were not necessarily better (e.g., Bremen, 2023; Klotz et al., 2023; Wells, 2022). This study sampled a small number of people, but within this sample, none of them regretted leaving their prior position, and none of them returned to their prior organization (at least within the time period until this study was conducted). However, many people did boomerang after the "Great Resignation," and many people had done so prior to the pandemic, and thus this post-exit behavior also warrants theoretical understanding.

Another more recent theoretical perspective that can help us to understand turnover and the findings of this study is that of job embeddedness (i.e., the extent to which someone is linked

to and enmeshed within their organization; Lee et al., 2014). Job embeddedness depends on the extent to which someone is linked to other people or activities at the organization, the extent to which their job fits with other aspects of their life, and the extent to which they would have to sacrifice if they were to break the links between themselves and the other people or activities in their organization. Job embeddedness predicts voluntary turnover beyond job attitudes, and it moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and voluntary turnover, such that at low levels of embeddedness, there is a stronger negative relationship between satisfaction and turnover (Crossley, 2007). Thus, job embeddedness can at least partially explain why people remain in jobs, and participants in this study did express elements of job embeddedness that made it difficult to decide to quit (e.g., relying on and being relied on by coworkers). Thus, embeddedness can likely explain some of the time lag some participants experienced between first thinking about quitting and actually quitting. The current study provided some evidence that the “Great Resignation” also impacted how job embeddedness was perceived. For instance, once people transitioned to work from home during the pandemic, the links to other people and to work activities became less prominent. Further, when people were able to step back and re-evaluate other parts of life, including values, identities, and priorities, they may have perceived a lesser degree of fit between the job and the rest of their life. The findings of this study suggest that a “shock” such as a global crisis can substantially disrupt job embeddedness, which may have contributed to the people’s decisions to quit their jobs, but a disruption to or lack of job embeddedness likely is still just one piece of the explanation for why people might leave a job.

Meaningful Work and Existential Theory

The findings of this study also have implications for theory regarding meaningful work and existentialism. Meaningful work has been conceptualized as both a unidimensional, global

construct and as a multidimensional construct (Bailey et al., 2019). The former conceptualization captured individuals' perceptions of their work as worthwhile and important. The latter conceptualizations tend to incorporate elements of personal meaning (i.e., the work is engaging and authentic to the self) with significance (i.e., the work is valuable and worth doing), and with objective meaning (i.e., the work serves a greater good) (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Steger & Dik, 2009). Most participants in this study did not explicitly differentiate between these dimensions of meaning and rather, spoke generally about meaningful work. However, two participants did notably distinguish fulfillment from meaning, indicating that "fulfillment" is about personal meaning, and "meaning" refers to the external meaning of helping others or society. In both cases, the participants stated that personal meaning is more important to them than external, greater good meaning. Given that the definition and conceptualization of meaningful work is not widely agreed upon among scholars (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010), it is likely even more unclear among lay workers. Thus, for meaningful work theory to develop further, careful attention must be paid to the researchers' understanding of meaningful work, as well as the research participants' understanding of meaningful work. For example, some scales use the term "meaning" in item text (e.g., WAMI, Steger et al., 2012), which allows ambiguity and misunderstanding between the researcher and the participant regarding what meaningful work is. Further, many scales are framed around one of the multifactor theoretical conceptualizations of meaningful work (e.g., CMWS, Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; WAMI, Steger et al., 2012), but participants in this study indicated different definitions of meaningful work and that not all theorized factors of meaning are equally important to those definitions. Only once we know what

meaningful work is, can we better theorize about where it comes from, how meaning-making occurs, and how meaningful work relates to a meaningful life.

In an effort to think more broadly beyond the meaningful work construct, some scholars have taken the approach of applying existential theory to career decision-making (e.g., Bland & Roberts-Pittman, 2014; Cohen, 2003). Although not explicitly or specifically about turnover decisions, “career decisions” are an umbrella for work-related choices, such as the choice to turnover. Cohen (2003) writes that there are four stages to this sequential decision-making process. In the first stage, you become aware of the freedom, and thus, the responsibility, of making a career decision. Next, you evaluate alternative options based the potential meaning and authenticity that can be gained, and then you take action and carry out a decision. In the last stage, you evaluate that career decision, again, based on the meaning and opportunities for authenticity it provided. Becoming aware of one’s freedom and responsibility invokes the theme of realizing abundance and agency that participants presented, and the rest of the theorized process aligns with participant experiences as well, providing support for this theory. Further, Bland and Roberts-Pittman (2014) suggest that existential models of career decisions better capture the dilemmas that workers face in today’s world compared to more traditional, cognitive theories of career choice. The findings of this study similarly suggest that a combination of more rational decision-making theory with more existential decision-making theory could better capture the psychological experiences of people are deciding whether to quit a job.

Basic Needs Theory and the Scientist-Practitioner-Humanist Model

As I interviewed participants and then read and coded transcripts, I realized that the ideas that participants had for making work better could be grouped into categories reminiscent of basic needs theories. To code these excerpts, I decided to use the categories of basic needs

outlined by Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory, which suggests that the three basic needs of all humans are existence, relatedness, and growth, and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), which suggests that the three basic needs that drive motivation are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these similar theories are consolidated, there are four distinct categories of basic needs: existence (i.e., basic material needs for living, including food, shelter, and health), autonomy (i.e., ownership over one's own behavior), relatedness (i.e., interpersonal relations and social connection), and growth/competence (i.e., personal development, self-esteem, achievement, creativity). Interviewees most frequently expressed needs of autonomy, which may be due to the inherent nature and structure of work in society, which is such that, in almost all cases, an individual's work behavior is at least partially determined by others (e.g., supervisors, organizational leaders, clients) or by systems put in place by others (e.g., policy that declares 40 hours a typical work week, normal business hours, social norms for professionalism). These basic needs codes served as an important reminder that, at the end of the day, employees are humans, and their choices about work situations are driven by universal human needs and desires. Although these theories can seem relatively simple, and they do not necessarily address how these basic needs operate, they can be useful for understanding the human experience in a work context as well as for understanding the experience of work within the broader human context. Thus, organizational psychology scholars should be reminded to refer to and incorporate theories from social psychology and other fields that seek to understand the human experience beyond work and organizations.

Scholars can also turn to the existing scientist-practitioner-humanist model, which was developed for the field of industrial-organizational psychology and considers work from a human perspective (Lefkowitz, 2008). This model expands the scientist-practitioner framework to

include considerations of morality, employee rights and welfare, and societal benefits. Although not a theory, per se, this model encourages scholars and practitioners to think about work beyond the level of the organization and to consider both lower (i.e., individual) and higher (i.e., societal and global) levels of analysis. Other scholars have also suggested that the organizational sciences ought to take a humanistic approach to understanding work behavior (Zickar, 2010), and theory from other (and more) human-oriented fields would be useful to do so.

Practical Implications

In the following section, I present a few practical recommendations at the organizational, supervisor, and federal or state policy levels. Most of these are taken directly from participant comments and are not necessarily based on empirical evidence of effectiveness, although supporting evidence for these recommendations is provided when applicable. This project was intended to be exploratory and descriptive as opposed to being prescriptive or definitive, and thus, these recommendations are presented loosely.

Organizational Level

This study highlights some of the common reasons that people were leaving jobs between 2020 and 2022. Organizations can take these into consideration as they aim to improve employee experiences as well as employee recruitment and retention. Many of the reasons mentioned were well-known and well-established factors that contribute to turnover, including pay, poor leadership or management, and workload or stress. In particular, compensation has long been understood to be one of the primary reasons for turnover (e.g., Kumar, 2022; Rubenstein et al., 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that so many interviewees mentioned pay as a factor, and specifically that they were looking for a situation in which they would be compensated more.

Based on these findings, organizations should create equitable pay structures and should examine perceptions of (in)justice as they pertain to both the process of determining pay (i.e., procedural justice) and the outcome of that process (i.e., distributive justice) (e.g., Folger & Konovsky, 1989; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992). Workers could also organize themselves into unions, which generally necessitate pay transparency, utilize democratic decision-making, and have the effect of higher and more equitable pay (e.g., Card et al., 2004). Further, following existing trends in industrial-organizational psychology and occupational health psychology research and practice, organizations need to continue to address work stressors and strain (e.g., Richardson, 2017). These interventions would ideally be primary interventions (Beehr, 2019), addressing root cause stressors such as those mentioned by participants, including workload, negative social aspects of the work environment (e.g., interpersonal conflict, bullying), and restrictions on when and where work occurs that negatively impact nonwork time or space. Related interventions include work redesign to allow alternative work arrangements (e.g., Albertsen et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2006; Pryce et al., 2006).

Importantly, participants repeatedly emphasized that need for autonomy, agency, and choice. They expressed desire to do high quality work, so long as they have reasonable leeway to decide where, when, and how they do the work. Specifically, they expressed needing to have their humanity recognized by their organizations as opposed to being treated as dispensable. Thus, organizational leaders should create structures, systems, and policies that prioritize “people over profit” in order to meet people’s basic needs, maintain people’s wellbeing, and reinforce their human independence. Further, this investment in worker autonomy and agency should extend beyond the confines of the single organization. This may include redefining the goals of talent management roles, such that the intention is to invest in employees, not so they will stay in

the organization indefinitely, but so they can pursue meaningful work for as long as they do stay. Fully investing in employee autonomy may also include creating more resilient and sustainable human resource management systems and workflow systems, such that organizations could support individual employees to successfully exit the organization if they determine that leaving is the right decision for a meaningful life.

Supervisor Level

Organizations should also continue focusing on leadership development. The behavior of leaders and managers has been empirically tied to employee turnover (e.g., Waldman et al., 2015, Wells & Peachey, 2010), however, there is also evidence that employee perceptions of their supervisors explain little of the variance in turnover intentions (e.g., Dulebohn et al., 2012; Griffeth et al., 2000; Rubenstein et al., 2017). Thus, although the existing evidence of effectiveness at reducing turnover is mixed, the results of this study indicate that organizations and employees would benefit from leaders and supervisors having a better understanding of how to best manage and support employees. Specifically, participants mentioned issues with lack of training or guidance, poor listening and communication, fairness and ethics, general mistreatment and unkindness, and lack of support for life outside of work from supervisors. Some of these issues could be addressed by better selection and promotion systems to decide who becomes a manager, and others could be addressed by interventions and leadership development, such as interventions that effectively improve leader emotional intelligence (e.g., Groves et al., 2008).

Given participants' emphasis on work-family and work-nonwork conflict and balance, it would likely also be beneficial to focus on support for employees' nonwork lives. This could occur through well-supported interventions, such as those that develop family-supportive

supervisor behavior (FSSB; Hammer et al., 2011), which have successfully improved work, family, and health outcomes for employees, including organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and turnover (Crain & Stevens, 2018; Moen et al., 2016; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2016). In line with these previous studies, supervisors and leaders play a major role in establishing the relational dynamics, culture, task structure, and workload that contribute to decisions to quit a job. Thus, organizations should continue to invest in recruiting, selecting, and developing high-quality, supportive managers, supervisors, and leaders.

Policy

Importantly, the responses to the question, “What would make work better for people in our country?” were wide-ranging and often focused on potential policy implications. Multiple participants focused on policy that supports specific instances of time away from work, including guaranteed family and parental leave, medical leave, and increasing general paid time off without the necessity of more serious circumstances. These policies could be implemented by individual organizations as benefits, however, to be most effective, some participants suggested broader implementation, such as at the state or federal level. As indicated in many studies (e.g., Appelbaum & Milkman, 2015; Davison & Blackburn, 2023; Harrington et al., 2019; Petts et al., 2020), these types of leave benefit health, work, and home outcomes for working individuals and their families. Further, many individuals also mentioned more consistent approaches to rebalancing time between work and life outside of work. Multiple participants mentioned alternative work schedules, with a large number suggesting a four-day work week. This type of alternative schedule, which consists of working four consecutive days per week with a three-day weekend and generally 32-35 hours of work time per week, has mixed evidence of its effectiveness for various outcomes (Campbell, 2023), but some countries and organizations have

already implemented it (e.g., Barnes, 2021; Kelly, 2021; Mellor, 2022; Ryan, 2021). Participants also noted that a general reduction in work hours in addition to regular three-day weekends would allow them to spend more time and energy on life outside of work, to be healthier, and to be more engaged and productive while working.

Limitations

This study had a few notable limitations. First, and related to both the timeliness and the rich rigor of the study (Tracy, 2010), the timing of this study poses an important limitation. Interviews were conducted between September 2022 and March 2023. Thus, in some interviews, the person had just recently quit their job, and the most recent interviews occurred three years after the COVID-19 pandemic began. This presents two related challenges. First, interviewees were not necessarily all in the same cognitive or emotional stage of processing their decision to quit their job. This makes the sample more heterogenous and more difficult to characterize as a collective. Second, the ability to recall what happened, and how they were processing those events at the time, is both limited and inconsistent among interviewees. Participants did seem able to recall events and emotions fairly well, but it is impossible to know the ways in which their recall was modified by events and emotions in the interim. Knowing that I was conducting this study with this limitation, I attempted to write the interview questions such that participants could reasonably answer with their current perspective rather than necessarily trying to recall their exact perspective at the time of the events. However, more careful consideration of the timing of data collection would be useful for studies that focus on a particular event or time period. Different research questions can be answered by prioritizing consistency in time since the event or prioritizing consistency of data collection within a specific current context.

Next, despite measures taken to limit biases throughout the process, qualitative research is inherently subjective. My background, knowledge, and values influenced the research process, and it is possible that a different research team would have reached different conclusions given their backgrounds, knowledge, and values (King, 2004). For example, as someone who considers my values and identities as central to who I am and how I interact with the world, in developing the interview protocol, I framed the questions under the assumption that other people's self-identified values and identities are central to who they are and how they interact with the world. Not only were these questions often difficult for participants to answer, but one participant specifically pointed out that they believe identities are "reductive" and they intentionally try not to think about identities. Thus, future research on similar topics might warrant first asking participants a broader question about what makes them who they are and what guides their interactions with the world, rather than phrasing the questions around "values" and "identities" specifically. Additionally, as someone who studies work-family and work-nonwork dynamics, I was particularly attuned to comments related to life outside of work, whereas another researcher may have coded the same excerpts differently. I attempted to limit the influence of my biases by triangulating with a team of researchers with different backgrounds, and by practicing reflexivity and regularly discussing our positionalities, but it is still likely that another team studying this topic would have slightly different interpretations of participant experiences.

Another type of bias that might have influenced the results of this study is selection bias, or the extent to which those who ended up in the sample were representative of the sampling frame. There may be unmeasured characteristics that differentiate those who would sign up for and participate in a study such as this one from those who would not. For example, the sampling frame was intended to include equal portions of people from lower-level and higher-level jobs.

Although I made an effort to recruit lower-wage workers through word of mouth, the majority of my recruitment efforts occurred online. Thus, the recruitment process was biased toward those who have access to technology and certain social media sites. Additionally, there are likely people in the intended study population who might have seen the recruitment materials and chose not to participate for multiple reasons that would be relevant to the study, including having a negative experience with quitting such that one would not want to speak to a stranger about it. Thus, the difficulty sampling low-wage and hourly workers diminished my ability to fully and confidently explore potential group differences, and it is possible that sampling bias may have affected the results of this study despite efforts to recruit widely and make study participation accessible. A future study with a narrower sampling frame (i.e., only low-wage, hourly workers) and a more targeted recruitment strategy could better describe the experiences of this important and typically understudied group of workers.

Relatedly, with only 35 participants, and a variety of experiences and demographic variables, it would be inappropriate to generalize these results to all people who quit a job during the “Great Resignation” time period or to any specific group of people who quit a job during the “Great Resignation” (e.g., front-line workers, parents). According to national surveys, people who worked in accommodation and food services, health care, or hospitality, who were younger, and with lower levels of education and income were more likely to make up the population of people who quit a job during the “Great Resignation” (Cook, 2021; Maurer, 2021; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Further, Hispanic and Asian individuals were more likely to quit than white or Black individuals, and women were more likely to quit than men. (Comparisons of population and sample demographic variables can be found in Appendix E.) I recruited participants through a variety of methods (e.g., social media such as Instagram and Facebook, professional

networking sites such as LinkedIn, a popular YouTube channel that features debates, through personal contacts of the research team, and word of mouth) in an attempt to generally match these characteristics in my sample. There was notable diversity in my sample, with 10 non-White interviewees, four transgender or nonbinary interviewees along with almost equal numbers of men and women, almost the full range of the sampling frame represented in terms of age, and a wide range of industries and jobs represented. However, there was limited diversity regarding socioeconomic status, education level (most people had at least completed college), and caregiving responsibilities. Rather than examining such a wide range of people, future research could intentionally focus on specific groups (e.g., only parents, only people in a specific industry) to more closely explore their unique experiences.

Perhaps the most notable threat to the credibility of this study is the lack of participant involvement and feedback beyond the interviews. Ideally, I would have involved participants in “member reflections,” which could involve reviewing their transcripts and making corrections but primarily refers to collaborating with me to review the analysis and provide feedback on the interpretation and presentation of their experiences (Tracy, 2010). These processes help to provide credibility by gathering confirmation of the study findings from participants, and those interactions between researcher and participants can also potentially generate additional data and deeper analysis. Because I could not compensate participants for their time, I did not engage participants in this process, and that limits the credibility of this study.

Upon reflection after data coding and interpretation, I realized the interview protocol itself had some limitations. First, I generally covered a wide breadth of topics across the interview questions, which led me to sacrifice the depth that was possible had my focus been narrower. Second, many of the questions were about the future, which made sense given the

second research question regarding how this time period might affect perceptions of work moving forward. However, to truly understand how people had formed their work-related identities and values, and how they had defined, created, and fostered meaning within and beyond work, I wish I had asked more questions about the past, even prior to the pandemic. Lastly, the interview questions jumped around between being very straightforward and logistical (e.g., what factors at work or outside of work made you think about leaving your job?) to being more philosophical (e.g., how would you describe your most closely-held values?, what identities do you most strongly identify with?, did leaving your job allow you to find or create more meaning in your life?). This may have confused participants and made them unsure of how to answer either type of question. The interviews might have been smoother and richer had I organized the questions from straightforward to philosophical.

Future Directions

There are many potential future directions for research based on this study. First, despite some literature on functional turnover and the idea that some instances of turnover benefits the organization (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Dalton et al., 1982; Park, 1994), the focus has primarily been on the negative effects of turnover for the organization (Hom et al., 2017). I argue that the distinction of functional turnover is limited in that it is still drawn solely from the perspective of the organization and neglects the level of analysis of the individual. “Functional turnover” is considered beneficial because it involves the turnover of an individual who was underperforming or was in some way detrimental to the goals of the organization (Dalton & Todor, 1979). However, in every case in this study, the turnover was functional to the individual regardless of the implication for the organization. Thus, I challenge scholars, to take a human-centered approach to understanding turnover rather than an organization-centered approach. Further,

scholars and practitioners could perhaps focus less on understanding turnover for the sake of prevention and more on determining how to staff and structure sustainable organizations without overburdening individuals with expectations to sacrifice themselves for the good of the organization. For example, a human-centered and existential approach to turnover might involve rethinking employee retention and the extent to which it is an appropriate and healthy goal for employees to stay in an organization indefinitely. Additionally, this might involve exploring career lifecycles or work journeys, which would encompass the many different transitions that employees go through, rather than just what occurs in the lifecycle within a single organization. It would be relevant to collaborate with vocational psychology scholars and possibly developmental psychology scholars as well.

Second, specific to the cohort of people who went through the “Great Resignation,” future research should further investigate the reflection and re-evaluation that people experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes of reflection and re-evaluation suggest that participants were thinking deeply and more broadly about the role of work in their lives, as well as the role that they play in work contexts. Importantly, many of the realizations that occurred are reflective of the growing anti-work movement, which critiques the role of work in our lives, challenges power structures related to work, and advocates for labor rights and a shift toward more meaningful, necessary, and voluntary work (Alliger, 2021; Brossoit & Wong, 2023). It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict if and how this kind of thinking will persist or change over time. Many of the interviews did occur roughly two years after the pandemic began and/or after the interviewee had quit their job. Thus, there is some evidence that even after time had passed, the conclusions that were drawn about work during the pandemic time period have outlasted the pandemic. However, following up over a longer time period with both qualitative

and quantitative methods would allow us to further evaluate how this global crisis affected people's values related to work. Although there is no control group to which we could compare those who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, we could, for example, use surveys to follow those who did and did not quit jobs during the "Great Resignation" at future time intervals and examine changes in their conceptualizations of work identities and work values. Further, this research could address how the new (or altered) values and perspectives at the individual level fit into, or conflict with, the old ways of doing things (at the organizational and societal level) as we move forward beyond this pandemic. For example, qualitative studies could examine people's experiences trying to find work situations that align with their values and meet their needs, navigating the cognitive dissonance of working in environments that do not align with their values, and compromising when deemed necessary.

There are additional research questions for the people who experienced the "Great Resignation" happening around them, but who did not quit a job themselves. Although the rates of turnover were high during this time, the vast majority of people who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic did not quit their jobs. There is some existing research on the effects of turnover on those who remain in an organization (e.g., Laulié & Morgeson, 2021; Verbruggen & van Emmerick, 2018) which suggests that there are effects of both watching others leave your organization, as well as effects of having turnover intentions or desires oneself, but not quitting. The ideas of anti-work mentioned above were likely present in both groups and perhaps explain the phenomenon dubbed "quiet quitting," which is when employees choose to stop overworking or taking on work outside of their specific job description (Detert, 2023; Stahl, 2022). Future research should investigate how these value changes and existential questions influenced the behavior of those who stayed in organizations and jobs during the "Great Resignation."

Job embeddedness or job identification (i.e., the extent to which an employee defines themselves with reference to their organizational membership; Edwards, 2005; He et al., 2013) might provide some explanation for why people choose to stay (Lee et al., 2017), and both constructs are generally considered beneficial by organizations. However, when faced with an existential crisis, turnover contagion, and an obligation to stay, there could be a dark side to job embeddedness or identification as well. Given that those who remained throughout the “Great Resignation” were likely facing similar existential questions about society, health, time, and meaning, it would be interesting to know how those individuals are thinking about work as well. As noted above, studies could compare the psychological experiences over time of those who quit versus those who did not. The potential dark side of job embeddedness can also be studied for those who stay in organizations amidst more typical events of turnover (i.e., not during the “Great Resignation”). For example, studies could capture the time period during which people consider quitting but choose to stay and examine the experiences and outcomes of staying, including potential feelings of resentment, delayed career growth, and unearned compensation. Specifically, individuals who are identified as having high job embeddedness in addition to job dissatisfaction might illustrate prioritizing organizational needs over individual needs.

Beyond the “Great Resignation,” future research should follow individuals after turning over to better understand the psychological experience of making that choice and transition. Turnover research and theory have typically focused on the time leading up to quitting and the effects on the organization post-turnover (Hom et al., 2017; Laulié & Morgeson, 2021), but they have neglected what happens with the individual once they have exited the organization. To focus on the entirety of their experience through that process would be a more human-centered approach as opposed to an organization-centered approach, and it would require us to ask

questions at the human level as opposed to focusing on questions at the organizational level or that are confined to the organizational experience. The emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aftermath of a turnover decision is also informative for understanding the way in which a person enters a new organization as well as future turnover decisions.

Lastly, another avenue for potential research is a clearer connection between existentialism and turnover. Currently, turnover theory is generally based on rational thinking and linear decision-making. However, many of the individuals in this study made decisions that were driven more by emotion and an internal sense of “I just need to go.” These were, at times, represented by the seemingly contradictory themes of fear and of agency and empowerment. The tipping points and last straws that people described were not necessarily due to rationally weighing factors, but rather, intuitively having a sense for when it was the right time to leave the organization. Although every participant did list factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction, there was also often an underlying recognition of one’s own existence and what it would mean for that existence if they were to remain in their current work situation. As discussed above, Bland and Roberts-Pittman (2014) and Cohen (2003) both wrote theoretical articles connecting existential theory to career decision-making, which has yet to be studied empirically, and very few studies have connected meaningful work and career behavior (Cullen, 2013; Lips-Wiersma, 2002). Thus, future research should consider exploring these connections empirically, examining the existential questions and dilemmas that workers grapple with throughout a job life cycle, particularly with qualitative studies.

Conclusion

Findings from this exploratory study demonstrate the wide variety in experiences of those who voluntarily quit a job as part of the “Great Resignation,” the time between mid-2020 and the

end of 2022, during which millions of people turned over from jobs every month amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlighted parts of the turnover process that have not been previously studied or incorporated into relevant theory (e.g., the timing of the process, the doubt and uncertainty prior to, during, and after making the decision to quit, and the role of emotions). Second, this study used a qualitative approach to understand participants' ideas about meaningful work and how meaningful work interacts with a meaningful life. In addition to meaningful work, values and identities also played an important role in decisions to quit jobs. Perhaps most importantly, this study captures some of the reflection, re-evaluation, and reimagining that people experienced, in part due to the pandemic, which reminded them of their humanity, their human needs and priorities, and their agency to create a meaningful life through their decisions about work.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment and Communications with Participants

Post to be distributed on social media/through email/etc.

Were you part of the “Great Resignation”? Did you voluntarily leave a job amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a research study about your work experiences. You must be between the ages of 18-40 and have been living in the U.S. since early 2020.

Participants will be compensated with \$20 for a 1-hour interview.

If you are interested, please complete this screening survey to determine your eligibility. Your information will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team.

Email sent to those who qualify

Hello <name>,

Thank you for your interest in participating in our study about the “Great Resignation” and related work experiences! You are eligible to participate based on your answers in the screening survey, and I would like to schedule a time for an hour-long virtual interview (using the video conferencing software Zoom). When selecting a time slot, I encourage you to choose a time when you can be in a comfortable and private location for the duration of the interview.

At the beginning of the session, we will discuss the risks/benefits of the study and your privacy/confidentiality, quickly verify information that you provided in your screening survey, and then we will spend the majority of the time talking about your experience with work amidst the pandemic and your experience of leaving your job.

If you are still interested in participating, please select a time slot that works with your schedule, and I will be in touch. Looking forward to speaking with you!

Best, Jacqueline Wong (Colorado State University)

Appendix B: Consent and Screening Survey

Hello, thank you for your interest in our study!

My name is Jacqueline Wong, and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Psychology Department. We are conducting a research study on the work experiences of people who left jobs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The Principal Investigator is Joshua Prasad (Psychology Department) and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

We would like you to take an online survey that will determine whether you are eligible for the full study (an hour-long interview). Participation in the survey will take approximately 3 minutes. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

We will be collecting your name and contact information. This will only be used to contact you regarding eligibility, to link your survey data to your interview data (if applicable), and to distribute compensation. We will keep your data confidential; your identifying information will be stored separately from the data on a password-protected server accessible only to the research team. Any data from this survey will also be maintained on a secure server, will be de-identified before being reported, and will only be included in analysis if you participate in the full study (interview). Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information, and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge about people's experiences leaving jobs during the pandemic. You will not be compensated for completing this survey, but if you are eligible for the full study, you will be compensated with \$20 for completing the interview.

There are no anticipated risks of participation. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Jacqueline Wong at Jacqueline.Wong@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, you can contact the CSU IRB at: csu_irb@colostate.edu or 970-491-1553.

Do you agree to participate in the screening procedures?

0 = No

1 = Yes

Do you consent to being contacted by email or phone regarding participation in the main study?

Check all that apply.

0 = No

1 = Email

2 = Phone

What is your name (first name, last initial)? (This will only be used to contact you and to link your responses to this survey to your responses during your interview but will not be retained with any data.)

What is your email address? (This will only be used to schedule your interview, if applicable.)

What is your phone number? (This will only be used to schedule your interview, if applicable.)

Have you lived in the United States consistently since before the pandemic began?

0 = No

1 = Yes

Where do you live now? (zip code)

If you moved during the pandemic, where did you live before? (zip code)

Did you voluntarily leave your primary job during the “Great Resignation” (i.e., between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2022)?

0 = No [*if selected, taken to an end-of survey message regarding ineligibility*]

1 = Yes

The following questions refer to your primary job that you left:

What was your job title?

What was the industry you worked in?

Briefly describe the organization/employment situation (size of org, type of org such as non-profit or corporation, self-employed/traditional employer-employee/gig work).

How long did you work in that role?

When did you leave that job/organization (month, year)?

What was your work schedule like? (e.g., full-time or part-time, night shift, rotating schedule, 9-5)

How many hours did you work per week, on average?

Were you paid hourly or by salary?

0 = Hourly

1 = Salary

2 = Other

What was your annual income **or** hourly wage in that job (pre-tax)?

To what extent was your household income enough for you to live on?

- 1 = Not at all adequate
- 2 = Could meet necessities only
- 3 = Could afford some of the things I wanted but not all I wanted
- 4 = Could afford about everything I wanted
- 5 = Could afford about everything I wanted and still have enough money left over

If there is anything else you'd like to add to give context to your previous work situation, please do so here:

Are you currently working?

- 0 = No
- 1 = Yes

The following questions refer to your primary job now:

What is your job title?

What is your current industry?

Briefly describe the organization/employment situation (size of org, type of org such as non-profit or corporation, self-employed/traditional employer-employee/gig work).

When did you start this job (month, year)?

What is your work schedule like? (e.g., full-time or part-time, night shift, rotating schedule, 9-5)

How many hours do you work per week, on average?

Are you paid hourly or by salary?

- 0 = Hourly
- 1 = Salary
- 2 = Other

What is your annual income **or** hourly wage (pre-tax)?

To what extent is your current household income enough for you to live on?

- 1 = Not at all adequate
- 2 = Can meet necessities only
- 3 = Can afford some of the things I want but not all I want
- 4 = Can afford about everything I want
- 5 = Can afford about everything I want and still have enough money left over

If there is anything else you'd like to add to give context to your current work situation, please do so here:

What changes to your nonwork did you experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic (examples: move to a new city, partner career change, divorce, homeschooling)?

How old are you?

What is your gender?

- 0 = Man
- 1 = Woman
- 2 = Non-binary/genderqueer
- 3 = Prefer to describe _____
- 4 = Prefer not to say

Which categories describe you? Please select all that apply.

- 1 = White
- 2 = Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- 3 = Black or African-American
- 4 = Asian
- 5 = American Indian or Alaska Native
- 6 = Middle Eastern or North African
- 7 = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- 8 = Some other race, ethnicity, or origin, please explain
- 9 = Prefer not to answer

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- 1 = Some high school
- 2 = High school diploma/GED
- 3 = Some college or technical school, no degree
- 4 = Completed college or technical school, with a degree/certificate
- 5 = Graduate study in progress or completed (e.g., master's, doctorate, MD)

Are you currently married or do you have a permanent romantic partner that lives with you?

- 0 = No
- 1 = Yes, currently married and living with spouse
- 2 = Yes, currently married but not living with spouse
- 3 = Yes, currently living with romantic partner
- 4 = Yes, currently partnered but not living with romantic partner

How many children do you have?

How many children live in your home four or more days per week?

How old are your children?

Do you regularly provide at least 3 hours of care per week to an elderly or adult dependent?

- 0 = No
- 1 = Yes OLD

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Script

In conversational style, ...

Hello, my name is Jacqueline Wong and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Psychology Department. We are conducting a research study on the work experiences of people who left jobs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The title of our project is A Qualitative Examination of the “Great Resignation.” The Principal Investigator is (Joshua Prasad, Psychology Department) and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

We would like you to participate in this one-hour long interview and answer questions regarding your experiences with work. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

We will be collecting an audio and video recording of this session to make sure we accurately capture and transcribe your comments. However, only the research team will have access to those recordings, and when we report and share the data with others, we will combine the data from all participants without any identifying information included. There are no known risks or direct benefits to you beyond compensation (\$20), but we hope to gain more knowledge on the experience of leaving one’s job amidst the pandemic.

Do you have any questions?

Would you like to participate?

If yes: Proceed.

If no: Thank you for your time.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, you can contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu or 970-491-1553.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Process

1. Tell me about your job pre-COVID-19. What kind of work did you do? And then coming into the pandemic, how did things change, if that's relevant?
2. Tell me about when you first started thinking about leaving your job.
 - Probe: What factors at work made you think about leaving your job?
 - Probe: What factors outside work made you think about leaving your job?
3. Tell me what it was like leave your job. What was that process like for you?
 - Probe: How would the situation have needed to be different for you to stay?
4. Looking back, how do you feel about your decision to leave your job?

Changes to Values and Identities

5. How would you describe your most closely held values? In other words, what do you think makes a person or an organization "good"?
 - Probe: Did any of these values change since COVID-19 began?
 - Probe: Did any of these values influence your decision to leave your job?
6. What identities (social groups or roles) do you most strongly identify with?
 - Probe: Did any of these identities change since COVID-19 began?
 - Probe: Did any of these identities influence your decision to leave your job?
7. What are the most important elements of your life outside of work?
 - Probe: Amidst COVID-19, did family and your life outside of work change how you think about work?

Meaning-Making and Future Orientation

8. What is the role of work in your life? In other words, why do you work?
9. Did leaving your job allow you to find or create more meaning in your life?
 - Probe: Where did that meaning come from?
10. Can you describe your ideal job? You can think of both content, so what kind of what you would be doing, but also structure and logistics.
 - Probe: What makes that your ideal job?
 - Probe: To what extent is meaningfulness important to your ideal job?
11. [*If currently employed*] In looking for your current work situation or considering possible future work situations, what factors of the job would you consider (or consider more heavily) that you hadn't before?

Closing Questions

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about how your experiences over the past two years have made you think about work?
13. What do you think would make work better for people in our country?

Appendix E: Comparison of Study Sample Demographics to Great Resignation Quit Rates

Characteristic	Subgroup	Percent of Sample	2021 Quit Rate
Gender	Women	42.86%	20%
	Men	45.71%	18%
Race	Hispanic	8.57%	24%
	Asian	8.57%	24%
	Black	8.57%	18%
	White	77.14%	17%
Age	18-29	37.14%	37%
	30-49	62.86%	17%
	50-64	Not included in study	9%
Education Level	High school diploma or less	2.86%	22%
	Some college	8.57%	20%
	Bachelor's degree	42.86%	17%
	Postgraduate degree	45.71%	13%
Income Level	Lower income	34.29%	24%
	Middle income		18%
	Upper income	65.71%	11%
Region	South	11.43%	3.1%
	Midwest	14.29%	2.85%
	West	68.57%	3%
	Northeast	5.71%	2.2%
Industry	Accommodation and food services		6.9%
	Leisure and hospitality		6.4%
	Retail trade		4.7%
	Professional and business services		3.7%
	Trade, transportation, and utilities		3.6%

Note. It was difficult to find high quality reporting on the characteristics of those who quit jobs during the “Great Resignation.” When I could find multiple sources reporting the same characteristic, I cross-referenced that information. Every source I could find reported quit rates (i.e., percent of people in that subgroup who quit) as opposed to frequencies (i.e., percent of quitters in that subgroup). Thus, this is not meant to provide a direct comparison between the sample and the population of the “Great Resignation,” but rather a rough idea of the characteristics of both. White people, highly educated people, people with higher income, slightly older people (30-40), and people in the West were likely over-represented in the sample.

The references used for this table are marked with an asterisk in the references section.

Participants self-described the industries of the jobs they quit, and those answers are provided here, in alphabetical order: Alcohol sales, Automotive, Automotive Leather, Brewing, Childcare, Cosmetology, Education, Financial Technology, Government, Healthcare/Mental Health/Medical, Higher Education, Hospitality/Restaurant/Food Service, Human Resources, Leadership Development, Locksmith, Manufacturing, Marketing/Beverage, Massage Therapy, Public Health, Public Safety, Relocation/Moving, Research Grants Management, Residential Homebuilding, Retail, Sales/Marketing/Client Services

Appendix F: Codebook

Category/ second-level code	First-level code	Definition/ description	Inclusion/ exclusion criteria	Example excerpts
Aftermath of leaving	Appreciated/valued more	Feeling more appreciated or valued by their new organization		“I get appreciated more”
	Generally better treatment at work	Participant mentions that they are generally treated better in their new work situation	Only use if something more specific doesn't fit	“But they actually have listened to my concerns about this. And now we're hiring a new person, I got \$1 raise within my first month, and also full time health care benefits within my first month. And it is a nine hour shift. But I think overtime, which is really nice. And I think it's worth that because of the pay, it's worth the commute because of the pay. And because of how I'm treated, they will actually listen to me.”
	Good for career development	New work situation is good for their career		“And it's a job that actually has room for advancement. Like I started out just packing things in boxes, and now I'm in charge of the entire Amazon inventory, which is a pretty big step for five weeks.”
	Healthier	Healthier in new work situation	Mental and physical health	“Because it feels so much better. Even the moment when we decided last summer, yes, our budget can handle this, yes, just go ahead and quit. I felt 100 pounds lighter. I can sleep at night. I don't have any of--well, I don't have nearly anything close to the mental health difficulties that I was having then.”
	Higher pay	Higher pay in new work situation		“I get paid more.”
	Lower pay	Lower pay in new work situation		“I was leaving to go work for my current employer, which is the [nonprofit foundation name], which is nonprofit group. I was chair of that board and was then going to transition into being the Technical Director. It was a huge pay cut.”

	More meaning from outside work	Found or created new/more meaning from life outside of work in their new work situation		“I think like, it's just been such a crazy time of growth and shifting in that I have, like, found more meaning in my relationship, and more meaning in my friendships--my primary relationship and my friendships. I wasn't someone who got into, you know, a crazy--like, fell into a hobby and became a master or anything, but I definitely just found more meaning in like, what's important to me? And that's definitely, you know, relationships. It's health, it's taking care of myself, and again, not overextending.”
	More meaning from work itself	Found or created new/more meaning from their new work situation		“Absolutely. Like I mean, don't get me wrong, I got a decent sense of like purpose helping people out with their sleep. But it was so mind numbing, so doing something that I am passionate about, that I love, that I'm making good money, like, I mean, it's just such a good Venn diagram that I'm right in the middle of.”
	No more meaning after quitting	Indicated that they did not find or create any new/more meaning in life in their new work situation		NA
	Social/interpersonal disruption	Social relationships changed or were disrupted after the decision to quit		“I think mostly because I had so many friendships and relationships there that I think about just my team and the people and the work that I did.”
	Work-life balance	Better work-life balance in new work situation	More tangible improvement of work-life balance (time, behavior. Not the realization that work needs to be de-prioritized.	“I think that I always put work first and foremost. I couldn't ever turn it off, where I'm able to do that now and set better boundaries for myself.”
Emotions about new job or situation	Negative emotion	Specific negative emotion words in reference to new job or situation	Doesn't include non-emotion words	“fear”

	Positive emotion	Specific positive emotion words in reference to new job or situation	Doesn't include non-emotion words (e.g., "it's great")	"excited" "happy"
Emotions about quitting (process)	Negative emotion	Specific negative emotion words in reference to quitting previous job	Doesn't include non-emotion words	"scared" "shame" "stressed"
	Positive emotion	Specific positive emotion words in reference to quitting previous job	Doesn't include non-emotion words	"relief" "happy"
Emotions about the job they quit	Negative emotion	Specific negative emotion words in reference to previous job	Doesn't include non-emotion words	"overwhelmed" "miserable" "anxious"
	Positive emotion	Specific positive emotion words in reference to previous job	Doesn't include non-emotion words	NA
ERG/SDT core needs (theory codes) - applied to the "making work better" responses	Autonomy	Ownership over one's behavior		"And I think more ability to be flexible. If you prove that you can do a lot of your job from home in four hours, you should be able to do it."
	Existence	Basic material requirements for living: food water, shelter, health, money (when mentioned generally or in terms of survival), etc.		"I think more benefits. Obviously, we really need more sick leave, because people are going to work sick on purpose. And that was a huge issue during the pandemic."

	Growth/competence	Personal development; competence; self-esteem, self-confidence, achievement, morality, creativity, etc.		“And I think people need to not need to have an educational background. If they can prove I can do this job, they shouldn't need to have a degree unless it's something like teaching or being a doctor or something like that. But for most jobs, I don't think it should be necessary.”
	Relatedness	Interpersonal relations and social connection	Includes benefits that are about family (e.g., parental leave)	“I think empathy--empathy from leaders, empathy from each other.”
Evaluation of/reflection on decision to quit	Could have stayed if...	If there's anything that could have made them stay	Tag what could have made them stay separately as context/factor for quitting	“They could have offered me a little bit more than just \$1 raise, that's the biggest thing if, if anything.”
	Minor regrets	Specifically if they don't regret quitting, but maybe regret some of how the process went or the situation they landed in		“Yeah, if I could go back and redo it, I really should have kept my mouth shut longer and basically not put in, like, a what, five months notice because I was excited. Because I was. I genuinely was, but I didn't realize how much I really set myself up to be burned out so badly by the time I finally did leave.”
	No regrets	Mention of "no regrets" regarding quitting		“I don't regret it, one bit.”
	Nothing could have made them stay	If there wasn't anything that could have been different to make them stay		“I don't think so. I, honestly, at the time I quit, I was like, of the mindset of like, they could offer to pay me \$150,000 to do this job, and I still would not do this job. Like, no, there's literally nothing that could have changed for me to stay there.”
	Positive decision	Any specific mention of quitting being the right decision/best decision or showing explicit confidence in the decision to quit		“I think it was the best thing I could have done, would have done. It's the best decision I did for my career and myself.”

	Regrets	Any mention of regretting the decision to quit		NA
Factors/context for quitting	Changes to personal life	Changes to personal life, including divorce, moving, death in the family, etc.		“So I'm a mom of two young children, so my caregiving responsibilities became, just like a lot of other parents, it just became amplified. So my kids' daycares were closed down during times.”
	Chaos	General description of "so much going on" or chaos		“Things are kind of spiraling out of control.”
	Covid-specific concerns	Any mention of covid/pandemic and its effects regarding their old position/situation		“And then add on with COVID, there's just so many unknowns, and we went back to work way before we needed to, before there was a lot of clarity on everything and that felt very unsafe. You know, I was like double masking and, just doing everything we knew at that time to do, but luckily I didn't catch COVID until 2022.”
	Good elements of previous job	Benefits, resources, etc. (does not include positive social relationships and does not include positive leadership/supervision)		“I was really sticking it out because after two years, they had promised to pay for my tuition. And so I'm still to this day pursuing a doctoral program out of pocket. And that was a really big pull for me, was to be able to have someone else--so I had a job that allowed me to study on my days off, and I had a job that would pay for my studies. I mean, that is incredible, right?”
	Good leadership/management			“And I had a really high amount of trust in my working relationship with her [boss].”
	Great resignation	Mention other people quitting (either in their workplace, friends, or broader society) and that playing a role in their decision to quit	Quitting was common; signals of safety if one were to quit, time was right [if mentioned with gr context], ease of finding another job	“And I'm really like--I was really empowered by, you know, the great resignation, because it was kind of happening at the same time that I was doing this. And I wouldn't say that my actions were like, spawned by it. But it definitely was helpful to feel like I was surrounded by other people who were like, you know, we're fed up with the positions that we're in and how we're being treated. And we're looking for something that's going to treat us as people and humans in this time.”

Job environment changed	Changes to the work environment	Physical separation from coworkers, covid caused remote work	“Well, we were, you know, our department dramatically changed. I mean, we were separate. You know, and what I mean, by separate, I mean, we're physically separate, right? So, I was moved to another department that was pretty fragmented already, from my understanding. So I was in my own cubicle and my own space.”
Job tasks/duties changed	Changes to the actual elements (tasks/responsibilities) of the job		“It actually is related to COVID, in this case, like directly. So I had been working there, I'd begun to feel--So in the end, I mean, I was the person that was sort of tasked with doing all things COVID and monitoring policies and absences. And obviously, that additional workload was stressful and taxing.”
Lack of interesting work	Work was not interesting, under stimulating, boring, etc.		“And, I mean, the bottom line is like, it really just wasn't interesting work. And you could throw however many new technologies you wanted at it, but at the end of the day, it was like, I'm just helping a bunch of really wealthy people stay really wealthy. And there's literally nothing else to it. Like, that's it.”
Lack of meaningful work	Specific mention of the work not being meaningful	Includes words like “fulfilling	“I think they wanted me to but my current role, there was nothing in it that was really fulfilling me anymore.”
Lack of resources	Not having what was needed to get the job done		“They were trying to hire more people, they were hiring like two or three new people a week. But the turnover was crazy high, I was told that a lot of time, like people would leave after three weeks, and just not ever come back or not say anything, they couldn't find enough people to pay the position. Like, and that was the point at which I was mmhm, yeah, that makes sense.”
Lack of support	Mention of insufficient support at previous job		“And I asked for help, and I really wasn't getting the help that I needed.”
Mental health	Any comments about mental health struggles, including specific mentions of		“I was kind of struggling with mental health stuff around the time that I left. I think I probably would not have left so abruptly had I not been having a lot of issues with anxiety.”

		depression, anxiety, etc.		
Negative social aspects of the job	Any negative social or interpersonal dynamics at work (e.g., with coworkers)			“My co worker that I occasionally worked with that would occasionally work with me, was openly racist. They didn't do anything about it.”
No changes with covid	If job stayed very similar between pre-pandemic and in the pandemic			“Um, well, I'm in Texas, so COVID had pretty much no effect on how we ran things.”
Organization not following through	Not meeting expectations; actions not matching words			“You know, they like to claim that they had a lot of programs to, you know, increase on-the-job learning and expand skill sets and like, cross train across a bunch of different technologies. But they were pretty lacksadaisical about doing that.”
Pay	Comments about pay being low or insufficient			“And so I don't feel like the pay was good. I was making less than 50k after having two master's degrees.”
Physical health	Any comments about physical health being poor			“But I had gotten to a point with the physical problems that I was coming home crying every day, from just chronic headaches, and I still get them a lot, especially now that I'm doing a lot of desk work, but it's not the same. You know, it was a very physically demanding job.”
Poor leadership/management				“So one specific factor in the workplace was my supervisor. God bless her, she had zero leadership skills. And when I am unable to communicate with my management about my desires and needs as a college student amidst a pandemic, and also everything else in my life going on, and I'm just told, "Hey, you work in a hospital, suck it up, come here and get paid, you know, dirt," that made me really want to leave.”

Positive social aspects of the job	Any positive social or interpersonal dynamics at work (e.g., with coworkers)	Good relationship with team	“I mean, I was really, really close with my team. There are some amazing educators and like, we're still friends.”
Previous attempts for improvement	Interviewee took action to try to make the current work situation manageable so they could stay		“And just the fact that I had tried several times to communicate that my workload was too high. And that they couldn't keep asking me to make less mistakes while also increasing my workload while I was new.”
Societal crisis other than pandemic	Mention of a societal crisis other than the pandemic (that occurred in the same time period)	Wildfires in CA, Black Lives Matter movement	“Um, I think the focus on social injustice that the world went through, and forced companies to address really helped me.”
Stagnant/comfortable/complacent	Any description that suggests they were stuck or complacent (could have positive undertones like comfortable, but generally negative undertones)		“They saw that I wasn't happy in my job, and that I wasn't progressing the way I wanted, and that I was feeling stagnant.”
Tipping point	An indication that there were multiple negative factors of the job and the pandemic (or some factor of it) was an inflection point that tipped them over the edge and made them unable to withstand the conditions and stay	Can't do this anymore, fed up, final straw	“There was definitely like a final straw, I think in the summer of 2021, where the clients that I was being given really didn't align with my personal like morals.”
Under-appreciated/valued			“I was not getting recognition for the work that I was doing above and beyond my own tasks. And my director either

				did not recognize or would not acknowledge the work that I was doing that came from their plate.”
	Workload/demands	High workload/demands of the job		“My workload was too high.”
	Work-nonwork conflict	Conflict between work and life outside of work	Work expectations spillover to life; work affecting home life	“I think my work-life balance was just off whack. I was working a lot more than I was mentally and physically at home, and I was having a really hard time setting those boundaries for myself. Even though I felt support to be able to set those boundaries, I was just having a hard time doing that, because there was just so much work to do. So that was definitely a big struggle.”
Ideal job/considerations	Alternative work schedule	A nontraditional/alternative schedule for work hours	Four-day work week, flextime, etc.	“I think an ideal world wouldn't be working nine to five, I think it'd be like something more of like two weeks on two weeks off--that's idealistic.”
	Autonomy	Control over one's own work, including what kind of work and how to do it		“But as far as the structure and day to day, that I have thought about a lot, and I would say it would definitely be some sort of either self employment or contract work of some sort, where I have the freedom to do something that I'm good at, at my own pace at my own--I wouldn't say leisure but at least at my own discretion of what kinds of jobs I'll take and how often I'll do them and to be able to get paid what I think I deserve for it.”
	Benefits	Such as paid time off, sick leave, parental leave		“Health insurance. That was something that during the pandemic I was like--because when pandemic started, and I was still in my 20s, and it wasn't as big of a deal for me, but once you just watch the plague happen for long enough, you start thinking seriously about, okay, how am I gonna protect myself with health insurance in this country? That was a huge part.”
	Connection	Desire for the social elements of the job, including work community and connection with others		“And so I think, the ideal job is also like--I guess I didn't mention--is like very people centric. I love working with people.”

	Covid considerations	Health and safety considerations related to the pandemic		“And then also just the general perspective of the company around COVID. Like around how seriously they treated the pandemic, like even now, we are, you know at the end of 2022, the studio that I work for is still like every other week, you know, we evaluate what are we doing? Are we doing in person sessions or is the risk level too high right now? Should we do only remote sessions, like it's a constant conversation to talk about COVID and how it affects people and how we can make others feel more safe. Whereas at my last position, it was like, How can we pretend COVID isn't real so that we can appease rich people?”
	DEI/justice	Better working conditions for marginalized groups	Representation and role modeling for other minorities	“For as long as I can remember, DEI issues have been very important to me. And it's something that I'm still trying to find out how I bring into my role, how it fits into my role.”
	Do good, help society/people, make an impact	Any mention of wanting to have practical/real-world, positive impact on people, society, or the world		“So I think I want to be a part of something that makes society better, I want to leave the world a better place than I found it. And I may be incorrect. All of these things that I implement may actually make the world worse. But as far as what I understand, now, I feel like it's going to make things better. So I was told a quote, I think it's a Greek proverb, and I think it roughly translates to something like, the world is made better by old men who plant trees, in whose shade they will never sit. And that one always stuck with me.”
	Dream is unrealistic	Mention of a dream job that is very different from what they are doing and generally something they're passionate about but that doesn't pay well or is very uncommon		“You know, I'm a work to live person. So I really like juggling, that's one of my favorite hobbies. My ideal job, I mean, how big do I dream? I'd be like a circus performer. That would be like, yeah, that'd be great. I don't think it's realistic. I'd also be like a DJ, like spinning techno music at festivals. That would be fun. I'd go with the arts, I guess, if I was a very unpractical person, I would go with the arts.”

	Growth/advancement	Opportunities to advance one's career		"And, you know, I wanted to work at a place that, I saw upward momentum, and I was rewarded for hard work."
	Hopelessness/doubt	If they imply a kind of despair or giving up around finding an ideal work situation		"So I'm making up a job because it probably doesn't exist."
	Hybrid	Part time in a physical office, part time remote work		"I don't see myself going into an office five days a week anymore. It's nice to have that hybrid. Sometimes I work with clients directly, sometimes I travel, and sometimes I'm at home. I like that. I don't see. I mean, I guess I could, but I don't think that'd be ideal for me anymore. I'm becoming more of a homebody."
	In-person	Full time in-person		"It's all in person. I'm an in-person--like, I just don't do well working remotely. And so it's really nice. Like, I work at the [city government] now and like we're all in person. I get to see my boss every day."
	Meaningful work	Specific mention of meaningful work (could also use the words fulfilling, passion, purpose)		"I would be willing to be overworked and underpaid for a job that brings me more fulfillment." "Meaningfulness in a personal sense, like, I can find some sort of joy or utility in what I'm doing--that's fairly important. Meaningfulness in like the wider social sense would be great. I mean, if I had two equal options, and one of them also provided more social, practical meaning, then I would probably prefer that one. But I would also see that as kind of auxiliary. And like, I could do a job without much wider sense of meaning, as long as it had something that provided for my personal desires, my personal sense of meaning."
	New industry	Desire to change to a different industry than previous job	Not the same role as previous job, not in the mental health field	"Not being a therapist was the major thing. That and again, it was hard to say that out loud to people. And by people, I mean, friends, family, and colleagues. Colleagues were the worst. Like colleagues were the worst when it came to verbalizing "I think a non therapist role is perfect for me." So yeah, that was the Achilles heel, for sure. No therapy included was my mission."

	New type of organization	Desire to change to a different type of organization (size, ownership, profit-orientation)		“I mean, at this point, like, I don't think I can ever work for, like, a corporation again. And so when I was finding this job, it was like, very focused in terms of what I was looking for. Like, I could basically, you know, look at whoever posted the job and be like, yeah, no, I'm not going to apply for this job at all.”
	No/shorter commute	Commute time being reduced		“And then, oh gosh, work would be like within a 20 minute drive, super close.”
	Other	Only use if nothing else works		
	Pay	Mention of pay as a factor to consider in new jobs	Include comments about equitable/fair pay, not just more pay	“I like a high paying position, which everybody does.”
	People over profit	Wanting to work for an organization that prioritizes its people over the profit of the company		“I wish that as a physician, there was a much better work life balance, there was much less push towards productivity and making money. So I guess my ideal job would be a company that exists to truly help people who need it without going bankrupt, and that respects and appreciates their employees and gives some, you know, mental health support, and you know, understands that their productivity changes, and you know, it's not about the money. I think in any job, my ideal job would be that it's not about the money.”
	Positive culture	Mention of organizational culture (or elements of culture)		“I would say the job I'm working at now has a really nice environment in terms of the work culture. I like a non hierarchical place. I like that if you prove yourself quickly, you will be rewarded quickly and advanced quickly. I think that benefits everyone.”
	Positive evaluation of coworkers/peers	A good impression of the people the interviewee would be working with	Does not include supervisors	“And obviously, you don't always know this going in, but working with people that you love and feeling like you're a part of something special.”
	Positive evaluation of leadership	A good impression of the leadership of the organization or of	Does not include coworkers/peers	“I would say that this one I knew the CEO of the company and a couple of the facilitators and that, how much I

		their specific supervisor		learned from them and respected and looked up to them, was probably my biggest factor in going this direction.”
	Remote work	Full time remote work		“So I think 100% remote, which if you asked me pre pandemic, I would never have even wanted. Like I literally would never have wanted this but 100% remote was like top of my list.”
	Resources	An organization or team that has what it needs to get the work done well		“Yeah, so I think, like, my current administration, mixed with my team from my last position, with a little bit more resources. Like we're always struggling to come up with money, you know, making sure that we have things to supply the kids, that we have the materials for the science, where we just aren't struggling to provide that. So that we can do more and be more creative. And like, I like hands on learning, but I feel like we never get a chance to do it. Because it's, there's never any time, there's ever any materials, and planning that goes into it, it's just, more than we have the capabilities of providing sometimes.”
	Use skills	Wanting a role in which they can more fully utilize their skills, abilities, education, etc.		“Yeah, um, like the job I'm currently in, I'm actually using the degree that I got at [university]. And that I think, was always my goal was just like, use the degree I got. Otherwise, what was the point of going through all that work? And [company name] just definitely was not using a biology degree. So I think, like, right now I'm doing environmental microbiology work. So yeah, it's just, it's great to feel like my hard work in my undergraduate is finally coming to fruition.”
	Variety	Variety, usually in tasks or clientele		“I think my ideal job is one, not static. So I don't love doing the same things every day. I like a variety of topics. I like a variety of people. I like a variety of being in the details and also in the clouds.”
	Work-nonwork balance	Balance between work and home/family/life, in terms of time, segmentation/separation, etc.		“Um, definitely work life balance. That's something that I was asking, in all my interviews. I was like, can you tell me like what work life balance looks like at your institution, and that was a huge priority.”

Identities	Work-specific	Identity that pertains specific to work/labor/organizations		“mentor” “therapist” “teacher”
	Not work-specific	Identity that is presented more broadly, applying to life outside of work	Includes demographic identities (e.g., race, gender), social roles (e.g., parent, sibling)	“partner” “Jewish” “Chinese American”
	Affected by covid	Identities were affected/changed by the pandemic or other factors during the pandemic time period	Renegotiated identity	“Yeah, the caring part. The last two identities were definitely impacted. Just so many areas of just American life--the Hustle and bustle, the capitalistic greed, I think, really made me not want to help organizations and just focus on people. And, yeah, I just saw like, there were some companies that were so good about giving, like, hazard pay. And then there's so many others that didn't, and that made me question and set new boundaries for the length I'm willing to go out to help organizations, help people. And by people I mean, like, non-baseline, non-frontline, like usually management, the limitations that I go to help them versus the people like my peers.”
	Not affected by covid	Identities were not affected/changed by the pandemic or other factors during the pandemic time period		“Hmm. No, no, they didn't. Yeah, I identified as a queer woman, pre pandemic and still do. You know, as a sister, I may have taken on a lot more responsibilities with my older brother, but yeah, no, those are the sort of pre- and post-pandemic.”
	Played role in quitting	Identities influenced or affected the decision to quit		“Without question. I think that my responsibility to my family gave me a deep motivation to not bring a disease home, to not allow it to spread through my community, to spend more time making my kid's life better instead of just making money.”
	Didn't play role in quitting	Identities did not influence or affect the decision to quit		“I don't think consciously they influenced my decision. And so I'll go with no.”

	Identity conflict	Description of conflicting identities or identities being in conflict with job or with other aspects of life	Betraying your identity. Conflict could be resolved or unresolved	“I think in some ways, but I think also... I'm not sure how it is in other cities, but after graduation, I've been in DC the whole time. And there's definitely like a distinct type of person, like, you know, who's working in the Pentagon on the hill. And I think I started realizing that I was more like, it's easy how I could be seen as aligning with that, I guess type, rather than what I self- identified as and so that also caused some I think, like, just existential crisis or quarter life crisis, whatever want to call it so.”
	Difficult to answer	Any indication that identifying identities is hard/new/unexpected	Questioning identities/social groups	“That's a tricky one. And I feel like says so much about me as a human if I can understand what the answer is.”
Important outside of work	Adventure/exploration	Adventure or exploration is important outside of work	Includes travel. Has some undertone of openness to new experiences	“And then I would say, I guess the only other thing is just adventure. It comes in a lot of different ways. But adventure is a really important piece of, I guess me in general, that I'm always seeking to bring to light even though it looks different sometimes.”
	Balance	Mention of “balance”		“Work life balance. That's a big thing.”
	Family	Family, in the expansive and inclusive sense	Family, spouse/partner, children, parents, pets	“Definitely family, time with loved ones.”
	Friends	Mention of friends or community	Friends, community, relationships	“I think my, like social connections. So the community that I've built around me.”
	Health	Physical or mental health		“Physical health, so staying healthy. I do have a lot of physical activities. I go rock climbing. The gym. Gym is probably the most important thing.”
	Hobbies/activities	Includes any hobby or activity, such as sports, arts, social groups	Getting better at activities you enjoy	“Gardening” “Reading” “Video games” “Beach volleyball”
	Meaning	Mention of “meaning,” helping others, doing good		“And on top of that, just like, again, continuing to do good, and devoting resources of some kind, it doesn't really matter. Like, in my opinion, it doesn't really matter how

				much time, as long as you put time into doing good and like doing what you feel will help people. And so, yeah, I think those are like some of the biggest things outside of my career.”
	Other		Only use if no other category fits	
	Personal accomplishment	Personal growth or accomplishment		“And just, like, really dig into those and see, you know, how far you can get like, I guess it's like this almost quest of like, self actualization, I suppose, where you're like, trying to do what you love, but you do it really well. And I think that's something that I've been really striving to do.”
	Service	Volunteering, giving back, etc.		“And also giving back when I can of my time to the queer and trans community in my area, that's very important to me.”
Making work better	Supports nonwork existence	Anything that makes it easier for people to be people/live the life they want	Comprehensive healthcare, comprehensive childcare, fewer work hours, design work for humanity, balance, flexibility, remote work, higher pay, sick leave	<p>“Obviously, better pay. Pay for fewer hours.”</p> <p>“I guess, just a real emphasis on--well, it's not even work. I think there should just be like socialized healthcare, because depending on work in order to have healthcare, especially what we've seen with the pandemic, is just not okay. Like, there will be more pandemics. Like this is known, it's not like a new found thing. Or there will be another major world event that will necessitate people to have access to hospitals and medicine and health care. And I just think it's a little inappropriate that we still tell people that they have to have a job in order to have health care.”</p>
	Supports work existence	Anything that makes work itself better	Understanding each other's role and priorities, having a mentor, opportunities to switch roles, more entry-level positions, fewer barriers to good	<p>“I think maybe having a mentor, or a coach, or somebody to help them figure out their path. And it's not just a test you took in fourth grade that said, you should be a firefighter or a teacher or whatever, it's somebody later in life. I mean, I think it could even be, I don't know, it could be anytime during your life.”</p> <p>“I think if it was less hierarchical, that would be great. I think if the hierarchy was based off of how much do you know, how good are you at what you do, and that was what</p>

			work, less hierarchical	got people to ask you for guidance, or delegation. I don't think it should be based off of who owns the most amount of the company, or who's been there the very, very longest.”
Process of quitting	Closed conversation	Initiated a conversation with certainty about quitting		“So the work side of things, the day I gave my notice, I you know, sent in an email to the director. I said, Hey, I'm going to be resigning effective this date. Please let me know if you have any questions.”
	Job searching	Any mention of exploring other possibilities before quitting		“So I took about a year I think, until I found a different role. But I was just starting to apply elsewhere, trying to shift from like the corporate world back into like, the nonprofit Think Tank sphere, which I realized was like, I guess, with the timeframe I realized was harder than I thought it was going to be especially like during that June 2020 to June 2021 phase.”
	Mental/emotional preparation to leave	After deciding to quit, gearing oneself up to actually quit and to tell others		“And in part because I was feeling a little burned out. But again, I didn't want to make a decision based on that. So I was feeling this at the end of 21, but I made myself not do anything with it until mid April of 22. So I made myself kind of sit with those feelings and really make sure that I was not making a decision just based on like, yeah, like an inclination or like an emotion of the moment, right. But this was like, no, this really feels right and I'm at peace with this.”
	New job accepted before quitting	Had accepted a new position before quitting		“So I got the call from the [university], down here. And they asked me after my interview if I wanted to join the team, I said yes, yes, I would.”

	No job lined up before quitting	No job lined up, but maybe they had started looking/applying		“When I left the childcare position, I had literally no idea what I was going to do.”
	Open conversation	Initiated a conversation about their role (about quitting), but with openness to staying (hadn't made their mind up yet)		“Yeah, I think I talked to my boss one day, like, a few days before I left or a week before I left, I like talked to him in person and said, Look, if you don't take care of this rat situation, like, I don't know how much longer I can stay here. And he kept telling me that they were working on it, they're working on it.”
	Potential job before quitting	Had received an offer or was pretty confident in a new position before quitting		“I did not at first. I had made the decision sort of throughout the course of like, I would say 2020 into like mid 2021, by summer of 2021, I was like I'm leaving. Like, even if I don't have a position lined up, I'm going to leave by the end of this year. And I started job searching and job searching, and luckily something came up right around in December of 2021. So it was like right at the end of the year, but I was going to leave anyway.”
	Support from organization	Organization or representatives of it (supervisor, team members, HR) were supportive during the quitting process		“But then, you know, I did feel a lot of support. You know, there was understanding and yeah, I felt like, you know, the team was supportive, and I felt a lot of relief for being able to kind of get that kind of out there in the open.”
	Talked to coworkers	Talked to coworkers about quitting		NA
	Talked to people outside work	Talked to people outside of work about quitting		“I think that my family is especially saw that I was so unhappy at the sleep center, and how it was physically affecting me. Like I was gaining weight, especially from sitting at a desk all day. And I wasn't taking care of myself. And it was making my depression and anxiety so much worse, just dealing with that on a daily basis. My family, I think finally understood, like, he's got to be happy. Like, if he's not happy, then what is he doing here? He just needs to

				get out. So in relation to COVID-19, I mean, like I said, that was the catalyst for all of this to happen.”
	Talked to supervisor/higher ups	Talked to supervisor/higher ups at work about quitting		“So I sat down and told the CEO directly, because he was the one who actually brought me onto the team. I had known him from my previous employer. And that was really important for me to tell him directly.”
	Thinking about quitting (early)	Interviewee specifically mentions thinking about quitting for a long time, pre-'pandemic, or early in their tenure		“So it was pretty soon after I started, I think I was there for less than a year, maybe like six or seven months. And it being my first real job like full-time marketing role, I was realizing like, this is not necessarily the type of marketing that I wanted to do.”
Purpose of work	Do good, help society/people	Purpose of work is to help others		“I like to help people, and I think that's why I work is I want to help people.”
	Growth/learning/personal accomplishment	Purpose of work is to grow, learn, accomplish		“And when I work for, essentially pride, like I am a very competitive person. I want to win at everything I do. And I think that goes back to, you know, I was very athletic growing up, I've always expected to be the best. And I've always thought like, whatever I put my mind to, I'm capable of doing.”
	Meaning	Purpose of work is to find/create meaning, find passion, purpose, calling		“That just excites me and means a lot to me. And I feel like I'm making an impact. I mean, it may not be something I see immediately, or ever, with clients. It just depends, but I know that it matters. It's important, and that also gives me the drive to work as well.”
	Money/pay	Purpose of work is to make money/get paid		“Um I definitely work to make sure that I have a place to live. So to, like, have money and like pay for things that I need.”
	Routine/structure	Purpose of work is routine/structure		“Work, I feel, or at least like a job or a career in modern terms, it provides like a routine with a lot of structure to it. Or maybe not as much structure as it used to be, but like, there's some semblance of structure. There's some resemblance of routine in there.”

	Social connection	Purpose of work is to have (build and maintain) social relationships and to be around people		“I mean, it almost gets into like theoretical, but there's definitely like a social aspect of work that's very fulfilling. You have almost like a second family or friend group that you go and you work alongside every day. I love that. I think that engaging with people, which is kind of what I do, is very rewarding. And so there might, there is definitely a part of that that I absolutely love.”
	Stimulation	Purpose of work is to be engaged/not bored		“I've always liked to work. I've learned work since I was young. I would be bored if I wasn't working.”
	To be able to do other things/to live	Purpose of work is to be able to do other things one enjoys and/or “to live”	Includes if the person mentions money but with the purpose of fulfilling other needs besides existing/surviving	“The role of work in my life is to enable me at this point in my life, in my early 20s, to enable me to do the other things I love, to provide for the people I like. I like being able to take my girlfriend out for dinner, I like being able to go to concerts, I like having money for lots of produce, so I can cook really nice healthy food.”
Reflections brought on by quitting/pandemic	Abundance/agency	Realizing they don't have to settle/can redefine self, remembering that there is flexibility and freedom to have/be whatever they want		“It's actually, I think, really empowered me to know that I am in charge of my own happiness, and that I can make hard decisions, if I take the time and take the energy to really be thoughtful about those decisions.”
	Existential crisis	Mention of an existential or internal crisis		“I think this entire time period has really, for whatever reason, maybe it's because everybody's going through like this weird internal crisis at the same time. But it's forced me to look inward and consider what's important in life, what do I value, what really matters.”
	Gratitude	Expression of gratitude or thankfulness in reflection on the pandemic		“So I was there for like six months before the pandemic started. And I think I was mostly just happy to not be where I was before. Like, if that makes sense. And so I hadn't really like, run to that job, and it wasn't really like a good job for me. But then, like, when COVID happened, it was just kind of like, Well, I'm happy to have a job right now, you know, so I'm gonna wait it out.”

	Increased importance/prioritization of work	The reflection or realization that work should be more central to life	This also includes excerpts in which the participant doesn't necessarily state that work should be more central, but that finding specific work is more central/important	"But then after, you know, after the pandemic, and quitting these jobs, I'm kind of just like, if I can have a job in like the art field, even if it doesn't pay, like, so much that I'm going to be able to get a house or you know, whatever it is, I would just rather be happy in my job. And even if it doesn't make the money that I expected to be making at this age, like, it is okay, because work is also a part of life. So I have to just like enjoy the work that I do, and if I can find a job doing that, then that's like, way more important."
	Pandemic provided perspective on the job itself	Pandemic highlighted or exacerbated issues at the job causing reflection		"And then like with COVID, none of that stuff happens, so you start seeing kind of the cracks in the wall a little bit more."
	Reduced importance/prioritization of work	The reflection or realization that work should be less central to life	Reflection on what really matters, work doesn't have to be life, work was dominant part of worth	"It did, I would say. Definitely, I mean, I think it changed my relationship with work in the sense that with all of this happening, and just kind of this larger, like, great resignation shift, and like reading about it, I would say it also kind of shaped my views in terms of basically not working until you die. Like, what that means in terms of, you know, you're allowed to be a person outside of your job, and like, really embrace those identities. They shouldn't be kind of secondary. That you are more than your work. Although, in the line of work I've now chosen, it's kind of hard. But just really being able to find a balance, be more than just a job or a position or things like that, just being a person, a human."
Unfolding model paths (theory codes) - applied to every transcript re:	Path 1	Shock (a negative or positive event in the work context or outside of it) —> preexisting plan	The pandemic can be a shock only if the participant indicates that it directly played a roles in them quitting, otherwise it has to be	

overall process			something more specific	
	Path 2	Shock that violates person's values or goals		
	Path 3	Shock = unexpected job offer		
	Path 4	No shock, just job dissatisfaction → evaluating alternatives		
	No path applies	If none of the above codes seem to apply to the situation	Can also be used alongside one of the four path codes if the path kind of applies but not exactly	
	Not enough info to identify path	*only use as a last resort		
	Values	Work-specific	Value that pertains specific to work/labor/organizations	
Not work-specific		Value that is presented more broadly, applying to life outside of work		"Family" "Honesty" "Integrity" "Community" "Faith"

Affected by covid	Values were affected/changed by the pandemic or other factors during the pandemic time period		“It did, I would say. Definitely, I mean, I think it changed my relationship with work in the sense that with all of this happening, and just kind of this larger, like, great resignation shift, and like reading about it, I would say it also kind of shaped my views in terms of basically not working until you die.”
Not affected by covid	Values were not affected/changed by the pandemic or other factors during the pandemic time period		“I don't think that my core values have shifted.”
Played role in quitting	Values influenced or affected the decision to quit		“It definitely influenced my decision to leave. I think more than the pandemic, my upbringing in California really kind of shaped who I am. And so to be exploited, like genuinely and kind of pushed around in the workplace just was not acceptable to me, I would much rather be poor, and able to do what I like with my times than kind of be forced to suffer for somebody else's paycheck.”
Didn't play role in quitting	Values did not influence or affect the decision to quit		“I'd say for me, I don't know if those changes were as strong [inaudible] for leaving the job. Mostly because some of those things were set in motion based on beliefs already, like I knew I wanted to change, I knew I wanted to grow in my career. Because it wasn't matter of if, it was a matter of when and just like how. So, some of those like beliefs, I think already had certain balls set in motion.”
Values conflict	Description of conflicting values or values being in conflict with job or with other aspects of life		“And that I think, began to shift, not just my change for the job, but really looking at, Do my values align with the leadership? And that's when I started to kind of over the progression by December--it really took me a full year to really come to the courage to say, No, I don't want to work for a company that doesn't hold these values.”
Difficult to answer	Any indication that identifying values is hard/new/unexpected		“Okay. Um, man I was not prepared for this.”

Appendix G: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) Checklist

COREQ (CONsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research) Checklist

A checklist of items that should be included in reports of qualitative research. You must report the page number in your manuscript where you consider each of the items listed in this checklist. If you have not included this information, either revise your manuscript accordingly before submitting or note N/A.

Topic	Item No.	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page No.
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity			
<i>Personal characteristics</i>			
Interviewer/facilitator	1	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	27
Credentials	2	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD	33
Occupation	3	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	33-34
Gender	4	Was the researcher male or female?	33-34
Experience and training	5	What experience or training did the researcher have?	33-34
<i>Relationship with participants</i>			
Relationship established	6	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	27
Participant knowledge of the interviewer	7	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research	27
Interviewer characteristics	8	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? e.g. Bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	33-34
Domain 2: Study design			
<i>Theoretical framework</i>			
Methodological orientation and Theory	9	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	30
<i>Participant selection</i>			
Sampling	10	How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	27
Method of approach	11	How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	27
Sample size	12	How many participants were in the study?	24
Non-participation	13	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	27
<i>Setting</i>			
Setting of data collection	14	Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace	27-28
Presence of non-participants	15	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	27-28
Description of sample	16	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date	24-26
<i>Data collection</i>			
Interview guide	17	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	26-27
Repeat interviews	18	Were repeat inter views carried out? If yes, how many?	29
Audio/visual recording	19	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	27-28
Field notes	20	Were field notes made during and/or after the inter view or focus group?	29
Duration	21	What was the duration of the inter views or focus group?	29
Data saturation	22	Was data saturation discussed?	28-29
Transcripts returned	23	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or	29

Topic	Item No.	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page No.
		correction?	
Domain 3: analysis and findings			
<i>Data analysis</i>			
Number of data coders	24	How many data coders coded the data?	30
Description of the coding tree	25	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	30-32, 118-140
Derivation of themes	26	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	30-32
Software	27	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	29
Participant checking	28	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	29, 79-80
<i>Reporting</i>			
Quotations presented	29	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number	yes
Data and findings consistent	30	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	yes
Clarity of major themes	31	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	yes
Clarity of minor themes	32	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	yes

Developed from: Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*. 2007. Volume 19, Number 6: pp. 349 – 357

Once you have completed this checklist, please save a copy and upload it as part of your submission. DO NOT include this checklist as part of the main manuscript document. It must be uploaded as a separate file.