

1-1-2019

# “Square Peg in a Round Hole” An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Workers’ Experiences with Workplace Conflict

Katherine Joanna Sosa

This document is a product of extensive research conducted at the Nova Southeastern University [College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences](#). For more information on research and degree programs at the NSU College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, please click [here](#).

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nsuworks.nova.edu/shss\\_dcar\\_etd](https://nsuworks.nova.edu/shss_dcar_etd)

 Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

## Share Feedback About This Item

---

This Dissertation is brought to you by the CAHSS Theses and Dissertations at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Conflict Resolution Studies Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

“Square Peg in a Round Hole”  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Workers’ Experiences  
with Workplace Conflict

by

Katherine J. Sosa

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University  
2019

Copyright © by

Katherine J. Sosa  
May 2019

Nova Southeastern University  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

This dissertation proposal was submitted by Katherine J. Sosa under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

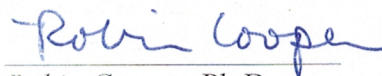
Approved:

MAY 23, 2019

Date of Defense



Neil Katz, Ph.D.  
Chair



Robin Cooper, Ph.D.

Urszula Strawinska Zanko  
Urszula Strawinska Zanko, Ph.D..

MAY 23, 2019

Date of Final Approval



Neil Katz, Ph.D.  
Chair

## Dedication

Dedicated to all the children of immigrants who carry the hopes, dreams, and sacrifices of their families in all that they accomplish. I am rooting for you.

Also dedicated to my daughter, Gabriella Susana-Kay Bowers. Your view of the world inspires me every day to make it better. May my own accomplishments remind you that the things that are not easy, the things that are hard, the things that we fail and have to try again, are our greatest contributions to our community.

## Acknowledgments

This educational journey has been challenging, humbling, and a source of personal growth. I would first like to thank the Creator for granting me the abilities and the social support needed to pursue and complete this endeavor. Fundamental to its pursuit is a network of incredible humans who have taught, inspired, and carried me through the hard times.

To my dissertation chair Dr. Neil Katz, you have been so much more than an advisor. You have been a mentor, an advocate, a confidant, and a dependable source of inspiration to keep working toward meaningful contributions that will last long after we are gone. I hope to carry on your legacy in this field and make you proud. To the exemplary women on my committee, Dr. Urszula Strawinska-Zanko and Dr. Robin Cooper, I thank you for your continued guidance and feedback. I am grateful to have you as role models and professors. I also thank the many professors in the Department of Conflict Resolution Studies who have challenged me intellectually and personally. To the students I have had the pleasure to assist and work with closely, thank you for sharing your journey with me. To the many scholars and practitioners in this field, thank you for building the foundations that make this, and many more pursuits to come, possible.

Behind this big dream of mine is a village of family and friends whose support has made the long days buried in books possible. To my parents, Jorge and Jeannette Sosa, thank you for believing in me and for pushing me to pursue big goals. It was built on your sacrifices, dreams, and countless hours of babysitting. To my grandparents, late and present, the stability and core values you established are the roots that make my growth possible. A special thank you to my sister Stephanie Sosa, for always rooting for

me and making Gabi happy while I attended evening classes and spent long days at the library. To my partner in life Andrew Bowers, thank you for being a steady pillar of support for our family in so many ways. I could not have done this without you holding us up when I felt like I could not do it all. To the love of my life, Gabriella Bowers, you have been both my biggest distraction and my biggest motivation. Thanks to you, I have learned to be more patient, flexible, and less perfectionistic. To my in-laws Andy and Kay Bowers, thank you for supporting our family and especially Gabi. It takes a village to raise a child and I could not have pursued this while becoming a mom without your continued love and contributions. To Silvia Baker, thank you for all of your support in the final stretch of this dissertation. I have made a new life-long friend. To my bestie Emily Skinner, soon to be Dr. Skinner, without you I would have given up long ago. You have been my biggest fan and used every conflict resolution tool and best friend trick in your box to shine light when it got dark and lonely. I am forever grateful. To all of my lifelong friends, thanks for cheering me on and giving me balance.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
List of Figures .....	v
Abstract .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study .....	1
Background: The Life of a Worker .....	1
Background: Organizational Complexity .....	2
The Cost of Workplace Conflict .....	3
Statement of the Problem .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	7
Theoretical Framework .....	7
Conflict .....	7
Organizational Conflict Background .....	10
Organizational Development .....	11
Underlying Theoretical Foundations .....	12
Conflict Management Systems .....	13
Organizational Culture .....	15
Cost of Conflict and Related Studies .....	16
Chapter 3: Research Method .....	22
Research Problem .....	22
Purpose of the Study .....	23
Research Questions .....	23



Research Design .....	24
Research Paradigm .....	25
Sample .....	28
Data Collection .....	29
Data Analysis .....	33
Ethical Considerations .....	40
Researcher Bias .....	42
Chapter 4: Analysis/Results .....	44
Impact from Negative Work-Life Events .....	46
Costly Reactions .....	58
Covert Conflict .....	64
Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience .....	71
Detachment from Organization .....	76
Learning Through Reflection .....	83
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	88
Introduction .....	88
Brief Summary .....	90
Highlight of Key Findings .....	91
Conclusions on Research Questions .....	95
Limitations .....	100
Discussion .....	102
Recommendations .....	105
Closing .....	110

References .....	112
Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Exploring the Experience of Those Who Had Unresolved or Escalated Workplace Conflicts .....	119

## List of Tables

Table 1. A Semi-Structured Interview .....	31
Table 2. The Estimated Cost of Resignations Within Participants' Conflicts .....	64

## List of Figures

Figure 1. General Motors Organizational Structure .....	2
Figure 2. A Project Visualized as a Network of Participants .....	3
Figure 3. Analyzing Your Conflict Management System .....	14
Figure 4. Conflict Visibility and Measurability Matrix .....	19
Figure 5. The Hermeneutic Circle .....	25
Figure 6. Visual Representation of Exploration Guided by Initial Coding Methods ...	36
Figure 7. Visual Representation of Hermeneutic Process of Developing Themes .....	38
Figure 8. Visual Representation of Bracketing Themes .....	39
Figure 9. Visual Representation of IPA Looking for Patterns .....	40
Figure 10. Some Conflict Management Options .....	102
Figure 11. Dispute Systems Design .....	108

## Abstract

Conflict is a predictable aspect of organizational life. Research indicates that workers spend the majority of their lifetime at work and that unresolved conflict is one of the largest reducible costs in organizations. However, the majority of employee conflicts are not accurately addressed by rights-and-power based conflict management systems. This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study explored the experiences and perceptions of workers who had been involved in an unresolved or escalated workplace conflict that was of consequence in their lives. The study sought to learn how it impacted them and how they made sense of the conflict, their organizations, and their options. Nine workers from seven different industries were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Central to this study's gestalt is the *square peg in a round hole* phenomenon that symbolizes what it means to live through a significant workplace conflict. The participants experienced emotional turmoil, a sense of powerlessness, and a perception that their interpersonal conflicts did not fit within their organizations' conflict management systems. Participants' stories are woven throughout the analysis and highlighted in six superordinate themes (1) *Impact from Negative Work-Life Events*, (2) *Costly Reactions*, (3) *Covert Conflict*, (4) *Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience*, (5) *Detachment from the Organization*, (6) *Learning through Reflection*. This study contributes to the field of conflict resolution with insights on workplace conflict costs including the pervasiveness of presenteeism, how a sense of powerlessness can lead to detachment from the organization, and how valuable dialogue can be in reframing workers' experience

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

It is 5 A.M., the sun is not up, and the alarm goes off. Another day of work. Up before the sunrise, pressed button down, brief case, a hot coffee and off to weave through traffic. What is on the agenda for today? Meet with Human Resources about the employee fired for saying something “racially insensitive”; three hours of interviews for the manager position of a department that seems to scare away every potential leader; try to read 60 emails; start dire budget cuts; update meetings that should have been in an email; phone conference with legal counsel for a pending lawsuit from a former disgruntled employee; now 92 emails and it’s 5:28 P.M. Pack up the laptop because there was no time for strategic plans, business proposals, or anything else in the job description.

### **Background: The Life of a Worker**

The life of the average worker in the U.S. is important. Workers spend an average of 90,000 hours, or a decade, of their life at work. This figure represents more time with co-workers, managers, and customers than with family, doing leisurely activities, or even sleeping. As of April 2019, there are about 129.78 million full-time employees, working 35 hours or more a week, in the U.S. (Duffin, 2019). According the Center for Disease Control (2016) “work-related stress is the leading workplace health problem and a major occupational health risk, ranking above physical inactivity and obesity” (p. 1) and the productivity loss associated with health-related employee absences cost employers \$225.8 billion annually or \$1,685 per employee each year (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2016).





*Figure 2.* A project visualized as a network of participants.

The premise of Sloan's organizational structure was coordinated financial control, which is still a main tenet of organizational leadership today. However, one can see with the illustration that the daily operations also means that leadership has become increasingly complex with the demand for high levels of connectivity and interdependence. This led to a need for leadership to facilitate interpersonal and group relations to increase productivity and innovation.

### **The Cost of Workplace Conflict**

Research indicates that, workplace conflict that goes unresolved is the largest reducible cost in many organizations (Dana, 2001). The 25% to 42% of time managers spend settling disputes between team members (Raines, 2013, p. xxii) is rarely listed on



fiscal spreadsheets or job duty descriptions. However, it represents a substantial amount of valuable time wasted, which costs the organization money in salaries, loss of productivity, and often morale. Unresolved conflict also infects decision-making because the most important decisions are made by several decision-makers (Dana, 2001, p.20) so when there is unresolved conflict, decisions are made based on a lack of trust that the information provided is objective, valid, sufficient, or accurate (Dana, 2001, p.20). In the hustle and bustle of pushing through internal conflict and keeping the organization afloat, many more factors influence the cost of conflict: loss of employees, unnecessary restructuring, sabotage, low motivation, loss of work time, health costs, public image, and litigation costs just to name a few (Dana, 2001; Raines, 2013). Given the amount of resources that are invested in employees, systems design, and legal procedures to reduce liability, reducing the impact of workplace conflict is a variable that should be strategically included. It affects the well-being of all levels of employees, directly affects financial stakeholders, and puts at risk the economic viability of the organization.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Conflict is a predictable element in the relationships between employees, teams, and leaders. In a highly competitive and fast-paced business world, reducing operational costs and increasing group work efficiency are top-notch priorities in all organizations. The cost of conducting business is not limited to wages, production and service costs, or economical risks. There is a growing body of research drawing attention to the more covert interpersonal and group dynamics that affect the true cost of operations, including many aspects of workplace conflict. In the description of the business executive's work agenda at the beginning of this chapter, one can begin to discern: issues of values,

grievance processes, high turnover, inefficient meetings, lack of email protocols, mismanaged conflicts that lead to high litigation costs, morale problems, and likely an overworked employee who is contributing to the significant loss of production caused by work-related stress. It is fair to say that organizations that recognize that internal workplace conflict can be managed strategically will succeed in the global marketplace, while those who avoid it will be at a serious competitive disadvantage (Dana, 2001, p. viii).

The cost of conflict in the workplace is not a new concept, and there is a vast amount of literature on managing workplace conflict and designing conflict management systems. The amount of research, logical cost-savings, trainings, and consultants readily available would lead any hopeful organizational consultant to believe that organizational culture in the U.S. has reached a tipping point, where understanding workplace conflict and strategic measures for handling disagreements would become commonplace by 2019. However, there appears to be a complacent approach to workplace conflict as simply *the cost of doing business*, which seems to be another way of saying, *that's the way it's always been done*. This is a perilous barrier to effective change, rendering many questions about underlying interests and motivation.

Given the amount of human capital and resources dedicated to the function of organizations, it is necessary to continue expanding organizational conflict studies to understand contributing factors and improve the tools for addressing it. More specifically, there is a need to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of workers who have been involved in a workplace conflict, and to do it in a way that emulates the source of learning used in other branches of the conflict resolution field. The source of learning

used in other branches have made strides in peace-building thanks to in-depth research studies, and a collection of narratives that render a pathos understanding and support for individuals who have lived through ethnic conflicts, acts of warfare, or other social justice issues. In this study, the workers' stories and personal accounts sheds a deeper insight into the dynamics of workplace conflict, and supplements the case of logos for conflict resolution in organizations with a pathos appeal that is more in-line with decision-making in organizations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding of individuals' lived experiences with workplace conflict to supplement current research and literature with the richness, depth, and texture of experienced work life to understand its meaning and impact. The focus is on workers' memories and their "living through" experience to include the meaning and impact they describe. The purpose of such rich description is to awaken more interest and concern for workers' needs and organizational health (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59 as cited in Cooper, 2014, p. 72).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Theoretical Framework**

Considering the extensive literature on conflict, this theoretical framework delineates the scope of the study, the supporting theoretical concepts, and studies that inform the methodology design. It also serves as underlying the philosophical assumptions guiding the exploration of workplace conflict. The literature begins with the term conflict and the evolution of its meaning. It is followed by an understanding of organizational conflict and its underlying theoretical foundations. Then a brief acknowledgement on the complexity, but importance of organizational culture is assessed. A review on the cost of conflict and related studies is presented and the gaps in the research are identified. More support from literature is used in the discussion chapter in-line with the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

### **Conflict**

First and foremost, it is important to make a distinction between the concept of conflict and what constitutes as organizational or workplace conflict. The term *conflict* itself carries a historical evolution of meaning. In colloquial speak, it tends to evoke an image of frustration, uncertainty, and overt tension. The social understanding of conflict is influenced by its history in which the term's earlier definition was a "fight, battle, or struggle" (Webster, 1983 as cited in Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 7). Prior to the 1980s, conflict was generally defined as an explicit state of action or an occurrence utilizing language such as "neutralize, injure or eliminate" (Coser, 1967 as cited in Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, p. 8). The sociolinguistic context is important because language serves as humans' primary tool for making meaning, which is central to any conflict and the interpretative

phenomenology analysis method of this study. It is also reflective of a society's attitudes or judgements about it.

With the evolution and expansion of social science, the concept matured to include additional attributes in which conflict gained the potential to rebuild and diversify once the psychological underpinnings were embraced to include both covert and overt aspects of human conflict (Pruitt and Kim, 2004, p.7). Folger, Poole, and Stutman (2009), defined it as “the interaction of interdependent people who *perceive* incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility” (p. 4). Pruitt and Kim (2004), presented a similar definition that is focused on “*perceived* divergence of interest” (p.8). Scholars in the field of conflict studies including Wilmot, Hocker, Schreiber, and others, presented comparable variations of the definition all with a semantic focus on *perception* and *interdependence* as a necessary condition. However, there is also a subjective and objective element to this dimension (Mayer, 2012) because interdependence does not necessarily mean both parties must perceive incompatibility. The party who perceives conflict may engage the other in the conflict whether the other shares the perception or not. Thus, the interdependence lies in the relationship.

The spectrum for conflict can range from mild differences or disagreements to acts of violence and warfare. The current linguistic structure of conflict in descriptor terms of human *perception* informs and makes possible an alternative to overt expressions of conflict. In other words, it is not limited to physical or blatant expressions as the earlier definitions implied. Instead, it extends to include more cryptic expressions of conflict such as, but certainly not limited to, contempt, sabotage, projections and stonewalling. This linguistic expansion is significant because the more obscure

expressions of conflict can be as equally destructive in any interdependent relationship, and it helps to expand our understanding of workplace conflict. Since the understanding and lived experiences of conflict subtly shapes our psyches (Cloke, 2005), it is important to gain an understanding of conflict from a worker's perspective and not assume coherence with the refined meaning from the academic jargon.

There are many sources of conflict and the supporting theories are distinguished by the origin they emphasize (Mayer, 2012). Conflict can be categorized as intrapersonal, interpersonal, group (including intragroup and intergroup) or as a hybrid. Intrapersonal conflict is identified as conflict that occurs within an individual. Within intrapersonal conflict lies human needs, values, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, aspirations, inhibitions, personality traits, and history that psychologically influences conscious and unconscious guided emotions, perceptions, and behavior. This is why it is important to not overlook the more covert aspects that affect the conflict process.

Interpersonal conflict refers to at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference from others in achieving their goals (Wilmot and Hocker, 2007). Interpersonal conflict is sometimes more apparent because it is likely to produce an overt identifiable dispute or byproduct of the conflict process.

Lastly, group conflict is divided into two sub-categories: intragroup conflict and intergroup conflict. Intragroup conflict refers to the various forms of conflict that arise between members of the same group. It is at the core of *human relations perspective*, and is considered important in this study because organizations are composed of groups of individuals who must function together and manage conflict to complete organizational tasks and goals. These groups must also address relationship tasks to manage conflict.

Moreover, organizations are often structured into multiple groups. Intergroup conflict refers to the process of perceived incompatibility or interference between groups. This type of conflict is likely the most familiar because it is historically part of the lived experience of all social groupings that develop in and out of groups and strive to satisfy human social identity needs. Due to the nature of interdependence within an organization, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are all parts of the constellation that make up workplace conflict.

### **Organizational Conflict Background**

When workers clock-in they do not check their psychological and social processes at the door. Workers are humans subject to the same set of identities, group formation, and evolutionary survival behaviors they employ outside of the workplace. The difference is that they are required to adapt to both the established and unwritten rules that govern behavior in organizations. Workplace conflict was described by Daniel Dana (2001), as “a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a *business problem*” (p. 5). Dana’s definition highlighted the tangible effect or product of a conflict as constituting a problem that merited prevention or intervention. Constantino and Merchant (1996) conceptualized conflict in the organizational context as a *process* and drew attention to the misuse of using the terms “dispute” and “conflict” interchangeably. Constantino and Merchant considered conflict to be the *process* of expressing dissatisfaction, disagreement or unmet expectations within organizational exchanges, and a dispute to be considered a *product* of unresolved conflict. A study of workplace conflict in nine countries simply defined conflict as any workplace

disagreement that disrupts the flow of work (Hayes, 2008, p. ii). These pracademic definitions discern between what is considered a workplace conflict that requires action and what is benign commonplace disagreement, by providing a business frame of mind in which conflict interferes with workplace operations.

These definitions were also rooted in what psychologist consider the three dimensions of human experience: perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. In the workplace, humans experience conflict cognitively (perception), emotionally (feeling), and behaviorally (action) (Mayer, 2012). As the early definitions of conflict illustrated, the focus is typically on explicit behavior, but understanding the tridimensional function of conflict helps the researcher use a holistic approach for exploring the dynamics of conflict at play and avoid the pitfall of only focusing on the behavioral dimension. In other words, looking beyond the symptoms. The CPP Global Human Capital Report (2008), a workplace study, also highlighted the importance of understanding perception because the study confirmed that workers held dogmatic perceptions of conflict and therefore “it would be prudent for members of the workforce to rethink conflict’s role in the workplace and many assumptions made pertaining to it” (p. 2).

### **Organizational Development**

Scientifically studying individual and group behavior in formal organizational settings began with the inception of industrial psychology in the early 1900s, and later organizational psychology in the 1920s-30s. It was followed by the influential work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin in applied behavioral science in the 1940s at the National Training Laboratories Institute (NTL). Individual and group behavior work significantly grew in the 60s because of WWII culturally-influenced changes, and the growth of



human relations perspective in Organizational Development (OD). These events ultimately informed the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The expansion and acceptance of organizational psychology brought to light the importance of factors such as socialization, motivation, occupational stress, leadership, group performance, group dynamics, and organizational development, thereby giving legitimacy to the application of scientific knowledge to the workplace. Furthermore, conflict resolution approaches gained popularity in the 1970s as mediation, facilitation, negotiation, and other non-coercive processes were used to settle disputes. They became accepted as useful alternatives to litigation, also known as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) (Dana, 2001).

### **Underlying Theoretical Foundations**

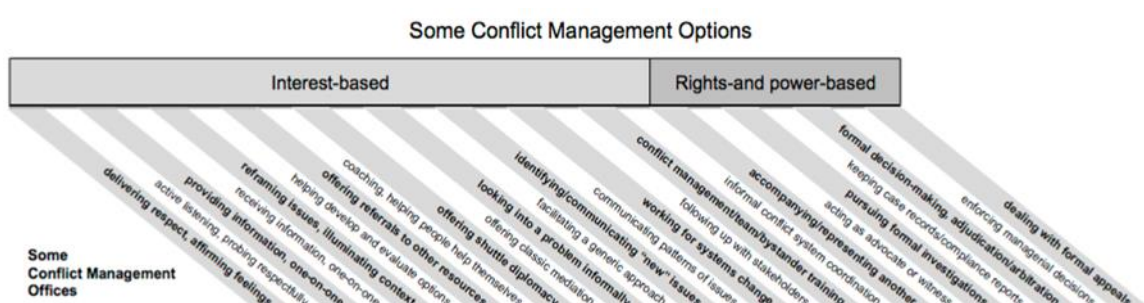
Part of the challenge in identifying human and structural workplace conflict lies in the conflict between competing ideologies or organizational schools of thought. Most modern organizations were built on classical theories such as Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management (1911) and Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy (1922) which focused on task function and attempted to control workers' behavior through organizational structure and task delineation. These theories emphasized hierarchical decision-making power, managerial tactics of control, and punishment to predict behavior. Not only did this inform how organizations were structured and the conceptual role of workers, but it also informed generations of business schooling. This was followed by a neoclassical paradigm shift to humanistic theories that were informed by an understanding of human needs, and included relational and maintenance functions as part of the central role of organizational management. Human Relations theories are

rooted in the Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne Studies (1920s-1930s), the work of Chester Barnard on communication, cooperation, and the informal organization, and Abraham Maslow's work on hierarchy of needs. All of which influenced a shift in focus to the individual worker, dyadic communications, and social relationships at its core. Both schools of thought were critiqued for their underlying assumptions of human nature. Classical theory was critiqued for not accounting to what was referred to at the time as human nature, although unsatisfied human needs is more accurate verbiage today. Human relations theory was critiqued for its optimistic perspective of human nature and lack of process for increasing its central objective of workers' commitment to the organization.

Human Resources theories were based on two principles: that all workers were reservoirs of untapped resources for managers to tap into, and that participatory processes and relationship satisfaction improved performance, decision-making, and control (Miles, 1964). The Human Resources perspective attempted to merge organizational interests in both production and the worker. The gaps in classical and human relations theories led to the systems school, which viewed organizations as an open resource and information processing units with interrelated parts (Kelly, 1974 as cited in Teehankee, 1993).

### **Conflict Management Systems**

Organizations understand that problems arise in the workplace and most, if not all, have some sort of conflict management system in place to address it. Within the conflict resolution discipline, one useful tool was developed by Rowe and Bloch in 2009 (see Figure 3), to assess the conflict management options that some organizations provide.



*Figure 3. Analyzing your conflict management system.*

How an organization manages employee conflicts inevitably influences the experience that employees have when conflicts emerge. The spectrum of options range from interest-based options, such as active listening and mediation, to rights-and-power-based options, such as formal investigations and appeal processes. It is important to note that, “it is not clear that all conflicts can or should be ‘managed’ -- nor is it clear who should manage them” (Rowe, Bloch, Miller, 2009, p.1) and determining what is appropriate is complicated in today’s “multi-issue, multi-cohort, multi-context, cross-boundary, cross-gender, multi-ideological, multi-cultural, multi-generational, multi-law-regulation-policy conflicts [that] are now common in [structurally complex] organizations” (p. 1).

Nevertheless, the expansion of options allows people to “learn the art of dealing with conflict” (Rowe, Bloch, 2009, p. 235). It also seems that the spectrum coincides with the schools of thought. The left interest-based processes are akin to the humanistic theories in which individual needs are addressed and authority over one’s own conflict is central to the process. The rights-and-power based processes are akin to the classical power-based theories in which the processes are used to maintain control and ensure legal and contractual rights.

## **Organizational Culture**

The study of organizations is a century old, yet no single definition of organizational culture or its impact on organizational performance has been agreed upon in the academic community. Culture is inter-disciplinary. The literature on organizational culture is an intersection of organizational theory, management theory, sociology, psychology, anthropology (Gonzalez, 1987 as cited in Teehankee, 1993) and political analysis (Lucas, 1987 as cited in Teehankee, 1993). Per Edgar Schein (1990), there are three levels of culture within organizations, each level deeper and more revealing than the former (as cited in Teehankee, 1993). At the observable level, there are artifacts such as organizational structures, dress code, and observable behavior patterns. The next level is espoused values which provide insight into the conscious value system and philosophies. This represents the “shoulds” that guide worker behavior (Teehankee, 1992). At the deepest level are basic underlying assumptions and values that exist mostly unconsciously, and provide insight into why some things operate the way they do. The definitions of organizational culture were influenced by the discipline of origin and level of culture under study, as well as the methods of study. One of the most analytically useful definitions was developed by Edgar Schein (1986), in which he described organizational culture as:

a pattern of basic assumptions (values and beliefs) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problem of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 9)

This working definition provides a sufficiently flexible, adaptable, and long-term process framework for the research to remain open to data on organizational culture and in particular areas in which organizational culture may appear to intersect or influence operations, or workers' perceptions. There are many issues with the methods of studying culture, and the research does not seek to diagnose culture but rather to stay true to exploration. Therefore, one must be aware that the literature supports the premise that culture exists, it is fluid, difficult to decipher, and it affects worker behavior.

Furthermore, "organizations, groups, and nations don't communicate, people do" (Singer, 1998, p. 163). Communication is interpersonal and is an attempt to exercise influence. It can be telling of power dynamics and how individuals attempt to fulfil their needs, goals, and values interpersonally, within their group, and between groups (Singer, 1998). If patterns are revealed, it could be considered manifestations of organizational culture.

### **Cost of Conflict and Related Studies**

The literature on the cost of conflict in organizations supported the premise of this study that workplace conflict is costly in both human and resource capital. Although it is rarely listed on fiscal spreadsheets, experts believe that unresolved workplace conflict is the largest reducible cost in organizations (Dana, 2001). The Consulting Psychologist Press (CPP), a leader in personality, career, and organizational development assessments (best known for the Myer Briggs assessment) conducted a workplace conflict research study in 2008 in collaboration with the OPP, a leading European consultancy group, in which it analyzed 5,000 workers' attitudes about conflict in nine countries: Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK, and the United States. The study found that in the U.S., employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing

with conflict, equating to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours based on the average hourly earnings of \$17.95 for seasonally adjusted, non-farm workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008 as cited in Hayes, 2008) or 385 million working days. Although a more recent study has not been published, per the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average hourly earnings rose to \$26.00 by December 2016. Furthermore, several studies indicated that managers spend between 25-60% of their time dealing with conflict (Watson & Hoffman, 1996; Hayes, 2008; Bass & Bass 2009). Typically, managers' wages are higher than average non-managerial workers and thus the figure could be much higher when accounting for managerial and executive level wages.

The CPP 2008 study also found that 85% of employees at all levels reported experiencing workplace conflict, and 25% reported that avoiding conflict led to sickness or absence from work (Hayes, 2008). Work-related stress is recognized as the leading workplace health problem, and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that productivity losses linked to employee absences cost employers \$225.8 billion or \$1,685 per employee each year (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2016). This is also known as *absenteeism*.

Another result of unresolved conflict is the cost of litigation. Employee lawsuits are expensive. In the fiscal year 2017, the U.S. EEOC reported that 84,254 employee lawsuits were filed (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2017). For medium size enterprises (500 or less employees), the average cost of defense and settlement was \$125,000 per lawsuit and 275 days to resolve (Hiscox, 2015). If the case goes to court, a median judgment is an additional \$200,000, not including the cost of settlement, payout, or productivity losses (Hiscox, 2015). Employee lawsuits include claims of

discrimination, sexual harassment, disabilities, emotional distress, breach of contract, negligence, and invasion of privacy. The number one cited form of discrimination was *retaliation*.

Another measurable cost of conflict is employee turnover. The main drivers of employee turnover are work relationships, the work environment, the quality of communications, and perceptions of job growth opportunity (Allen, 2008). The costs of turnover include recruiting, hiring and training, and loss of productivity. Consider for example the amount of time spent in hiring a new manager. This can include reviewing applications, processing background checks, conducting interviews, and weighing options in which the decision may be made jointly by several salary heads sitting at the table. Numerous studies indicated that turnover cost is between 75% and 150% of the employee's annual salary and benefits (Raines, 2013). In context, it means that replacing an employee who makes \$50,000 can cost the organization between \$37,500 and \$75,000.

Not all of the costs associated with workplace conflict are as tangible or easy to measure. Loss of productivity may be a result of having to spend time addressing conflict, but it may also occur when a company has to arrange for employees not to interact or when morale is low and employees resort to *presenteeism*. Presenteeism, unlike absenteeism, refers to employees who show up to work either ill or not fit for work and whose productivity declines. It also refers to people who "give up" and their low productivity causes extra workload for others (Buss, 2011). Some experts suggest that absenteeism is only the visible tip of the iceberg and that the hidden cost of presenteeism may be much greater (Buss, 2011). Other hidden costs may include impact on reputation,

costs to the client, sabotage, miscommunication affecting decision-making, and missed opportunities. Only recently have scholars in the field of conflict resolution begun to translate theory into tools and methods to identify and quantify costs. Helmut Buss developed a cost matrix (see Figure 4). Buss conducted a study on the cost of conflict within the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organization, and it is used to provide a visual of some of the negative consequences and cost implications of conflict. The matrix shows that the visibility of negative consequences is not automatically equated to easy measurability of cost (e.g. loss of motivation), and that some of the less apparent consequences are easily measurable (e.g. accidents at work) (Buss, 2011). Unresolved conflict also infects decision-making because important decisions are made jointly with limited information by several leaders. When there is underlying unresolved conflict, decisions are made based on a lack of trust that the information provided is objective, valid, sufficient, or accurate (Dana, 2001).



Figure 4. Conflict visibility and measurability matrix.

Buss' research utilized the *Dana Measure of Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict* (2001) which is a simplified formula developed by Daniel Dana to measure the financial cost of a particular conflict. The formula calculates the unproductive time spent



thinking and dealing with the conflict. Although the tool provides only an estimate, it is useful for influencing decision-making about poorly managed conflict. Buss recommended efforts in conflict cost controlling to be done through a collaboration of organizations' finance and budget departments in order to systematically collect data related to the numerous factors that affect cost. Daniel Dana's cost estimation worksheet is made up of eight cost factors: wasted time, reduced decision quality, loss of skilled employees, restructuring, sabotage/theft/damage, lowered job motivation, lost work time, and health costs (2001). The estimated figure is intended to provide decision-makers an appreciation for the impact of a single unresolved or poorly managed conflict. It can also be used by multiple participants to provide a larger scope of the problem(s). It is limited in its underlying methodology because all information is self-reported and is not based on a replicable quantitative method, like a triangulation of methods, to support the validity of resulting figures. In addition, the cost may be underestimated or overestimated based on perceptions of conflict and avoidance tendencies. In response to this shortcoming, Buss (2011) pointed out that although the exact cost of conflict is difficult to calculate in a number-driven business context, it is preferable to have financial estimates that can be expanded on to subsequently measure the effectiveness of conflict management intervention tools like mediation or an ombudsman office.

With the exception of the study conducted on the cost of conflict within the intergovernmental United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organization, no other governmental cost of conflict studies have been published thus far. The studies produced by Helmut Buss and the CPP with the OPP also did not include any narratives or examples to supplement the findings. Considering that experts believe conflict

management represents the “greatest opportunity for cost control for organizations in the next century” (Slaikeu and Hasson, 1998, p. xii), there is still a gap in the literature of supporting studies with contextual stories for deeper understanding, and studies on the effectiveness of these tools as applied to organizations.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Research Problem**

Conflict is a predictable aspect of organizations and indicative of a breakdown between employees, teams, and leaders in organizations. The research and literature indicates that workers spend the majority of their lifetime at work, that unresolved conflict is the largest reducible cost in organizations (Dana, 2001), and that today's leaders spend a significant amount of time managing employee conflicts (Raines, 2013). Despite this data and the data demonstrating the costs associated with workplace conflict and the health effects of workplace stress, employing interest-based and informal conflict management systems continues to be an exception in organizations rather than the norm.

If unresolved conflict is destructive to good teamwork and holds the capacity to undo millions of dollars in human capital, programs, and public image (Dana, 2001), then why do organizations maintain a strong hold on rights-and-power based policies and procedures, expecting employees to perform through unresolved conflicts? Some research suggests that less than 10% of employee complaints meet the test of legal standards, while 90% consists of perceiving actions as offensive and its accompanying emotions (Herman as cited in Condrey 2010), meaning that they are not accurately addressed by the more formal procedures. Thus, the conflict management processes utilized in most organizations are not necessarily based on the everyday experiences or conflicts that workers have. Since using alternative dispute resolution or interest-based processes is not the status quo in most organizations, this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how these individuals make sense of their workplace conflict experience.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to acquire a deeper understanding of individuals' lived experience with workplace conflict to supplement current research and literature with the richness, depth, and texture of experienced work life. The interpretative phenomenological inquiry, as part of uncovering meaning, is to articulate the nuances of unresolved and/or escalated workplace conflict. The focus is on workers' memories and their "living through" experience to include the meaning and impact they describe. Data was elicited through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a hermeneutic framework. The purpose of "such rich description is not only valuable in terms of providing deeper understanding, but it also 'awaken[s] further interest and concern' for workers needs and organizational health" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59 as cited in Cooper, 2014, p. 72).

## **Research Question**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is concerned with human lived experience and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meaning people impress upon it (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009; Location 699). The research questions are thus directed toward people's understanding and meaning. The primary research question posed is: *How do people who have experienced an unresolved or escalated workplace conflict make sense of their experience, the process, their options, and their organization?* Additional research questions include: *What does going through the conflict mean to them?* and *How do they describe its impact?* The research questions were intentionally open-ended and were situated within the context of an individual's organization, which varied from participant to participant. This study did not seek to

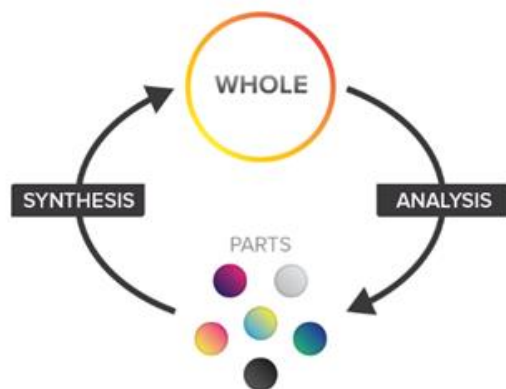
create homogeneity in an organization type or conflict management system because the focus was on the meaning derived from the experience of being engaged in a workplace conflict and not a testing or comparison of systems.

### **Research Design**

Conflict in the workplace has become so ordinary, so matter-of-fact in business life, that reflection of its extraordinary experience is often trumped by simply “grasping the matter straight-out—the values, the goals, [the policies], and the instrumentalities” (Husserl, 1927, p.61). Husserl calls this awareness in the broadest sense. Wilfred Bion calls it fleeing from the non-task work of group life. In this qualitative study, interpretative phenomenological analysis was selected because it attempts to draw on the particulars of the conflict experience, which is made significant through reflection. This research position is influenced by idiography, which asserts that becoming familiar with the particulars is the birth of all knowledge and can be tainted by our tendency to preemptively categorize information (Galton, 1883; Allport, 1951) rather than allow it to emerge organically through discovery. As an interpretative researcher in this study, the researcher and participants were connected, and the resulting data is a creation of an interdependent research process. Thus, the researcher took steps to bracket personal values and worldviews before employing semi-structured interviews and using a circular hermeneutics method. This design was selected because the goal was to look at the phenomenon in a new way and to possibly develop new areas of study (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997, p. 87).

The hermeneutic circle refers to “the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 27). It refers to the

various parts of meaning, the prejudices that the researcher carries, and the dialogue that must take place in the relationship between researcher and participant for understanding to emerge. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an interpretative approach and the interpretation itself was a source of ongoing revision both in the individual parts and the sense of the whole as meaning transpired (Kidder as cited in Timmer, 2015). This began with recognizing my own horizon of understanding, which consists of prior knowledge about conflict, organizations, human behavior, workplace culture, and my own beliefs, philosophies, and associations. It is inconceivable that the researcher may enter with a blank slate because our knowledge and experience inherently frame our worldview and ability for understanding. However, the hermeneutic circle facilitates bracketing of preconceived assumptions and provides a useful model for conversation and meaning to emerge. Therefore, it allows the horizon to expand as illustrated in Figure 5 below.



*Figure 5.* The hermeneutic circle.

### **Research Paradigm**

Phenomenology is a philosophy, a method, and an inductive logic strategy. Its philosophical underpinnings, which are only briefly accounted for in this section because they are quite extensive, inform the approach of the research and the role of the researcher.

Phenomenology as a philosophical methodology grew out of the disharmony between positivism and subjectivism in the aftermath of World War I (Eagleton, 1983, p. 54). It is based on Husserl's rejection of "the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable" (Groenewald, 2004, p.4) because experience and interpretation of the external world can be reduced to personal consciousness (Eagleton, 1983, p. 4). Therefore, "reality is treated as pure 'phenomena' and the only absolute data from where to begin" research (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4). Although German philosopher Edmund Husserl is regarded as the forefather of phenomenology, its origins can be traced to Kant, Hegel, Hume, and Descartes (Vandenberg, 1997, p.11), and its rich history can be traced further back to Hindu and Buddhist philosophers who reflected on states of consciousness (Smith, 2013). The focus of phenomenology is on the first-person perspective and the structures that make up that conscious experience (Smith, 2013). Conscious experiences do not include passive observations or unconscious engagement with the world, but rather experiences we live through or perform through (Smith, 2013) akin to living through or performing through an unresolved or escalated workplace conflict. It is distinguished as *an experience* because it is linked by a common meaning, and in this case likely to be interpreted as *an interrupting event*.

In this phenomenon of unresolved and escalated workplace conflict, it is important to point out that although conscious experience is the starting point, psychoanalysts and others contend that much occurs on the margins outside of our implicit awareness, and that through therapy or interrogation a person may become conscious of how they feel (Smith, 2013). For these reasons, the research delves into

further understanding of the complexities of workplace conflicts, its impact, and potentially underlying motivation or reluctance to create systemic change. It begins by going back to things themselves (Husserl as cited in Kruger, 1988, p. 28), the people who have experienced them, and those who are likely to continue to experience it.

Conceptually when we think of organizations on a broader theoretical level, we think of schools of thought, such as scientific management or participatory management. On a more micro level, we think of the company's mission, the industry type, or what it produces — what it symbolizes. This is evident in business management literature, organizational theories, and in the quantification of workplace conflict studies that are concerned with numeric evidence. However, looking through one lens of conflict analysis in groups, one can see that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. What is produced, whether an intellectual or tangible property, is the result of many orchestrated human beings whose value is greater together than alone. Human beings do not check their psychological and social processes at the door when they clock-in to work. Human beings are sense-making creatures (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). It is no surprise then, that in organizations, “storytelling is the preferred sense making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders...When a decision is at hand, the old stories are recounted and compared to an unfolding story line to keep the organization from repeating historically bad choices and to invite the repetition of past successes” (Boje, 1991, p. 106). It seems then that without stories, the numbers, and sometimes theories, fail to capture the nuances of human experience. Therefore, there is a need to supplement the current research on workplace conflict, to go beyond reporting



informative facts and management strategies to begin to layer on the richness, messiness, depth, and texture of experienced life (Polkinghorne, 1995).

### **Sample**

In this research, the phenomenon dictated the method and the type of participants (Hycner, 1999). Participants were selected purposively, first through *opportunities*, using the researcher's contacts. The explicit criteria in the informed consent letter was sent to individuals who work in organizations in South Florida. They were selected based on the researcher's judgement and the purpose of the research. The individuals contacted were believed to likely have experienced some form of unresolved or escalated conflict. This first-tier selection of potential participants had its limitations, but was supplemented by the list of criteria that the potential participant could read and decide if his or her experience qualified for the research. For example, the workplace conflict must have endured for two or more weeks. The researcher sought to obtain between five and ten participants, and obtained nine. The interviews were the primary unit of analysis. This sample size is considered appropriate for Ph.D. studies and is based on the intent to obtain quality of data, not quantity (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). A second-tier of participants were contacted via *referral* using gatekeepers in the South Florida community (i.e. executives, managers, community leaders, mediators) and *snowballing* with referrals by participants, which resulted in two of the participants. To minimize the risks or implications of these key insiders influencing the course of the research, the use of the participant criteria was especially important, and no outsider influence was detected by the researcher.

In Interpretative phenomenological analysis it is recommended that the sample population be as homogenous as possible. For the purpose of this study, the homogeneity of participants was a feature of their shared *experience*, more so than sociodemographic factors. “That is, they ‘represent’ a perspective, rather than a population” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, p. 49). All nine of the participants had different workplace conflicts in seven different industries, including media sales, higher education, government, independent consulting, clinical work, legal, and entertainment. Six participants identified as female and three identified as male. In addition to all sharing a geographical factor of working for a South Florida organization, the sample of participants all shared the following criteria:

- a. Experienced the workplace conflict less than five years ago
- b. [and] The conflict involved one or more co-workers
- c. [and] It endured two or more weeks

### **Data Collection**

The unit of analysis for this study is the participants. Data was collected using semi-structured one-to-one interviews that were presumed to facilitate rapport, empathy, and be participant focused. They are “well-suited for in-depth and personal discussion,” as well as aligned with the dynamic relationship between researcher and participant described in the hermeneutic circle (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, p. 57). Semi-structured interviews were preferred over unstructured in this study, because the aim was to access the participant’s worldview and make space for the participant to recount the workplace conflict. The researcher believed this could be done more efficiently with a schedule, or loose agenda, prepared ahead that included guiding topics and flexible open-ended

questions. This made it easier to navigate sensitive topics and become a more attentive listener. This method is similar to conflict resolution practices like coaching and mediation, in which the practitioner is a skilled listener equipped with supporting questions. Thus, the researcher is able to remain present without having to mentally compose the next series of questions. The schedule is designed to move from primarily narrative or descriptive, to more analytic or evaluative. The questions, possible prompts, and categorization of the type of question is explained in Table 1 and also found in Appendix A.

Drawing on the particular experience can be either “a first-order activity” that is derived from the individual’s first-hand experience and his or her inherent relationship with the world and others, or a “second-order mental and affective response to that activity—remembering, regretting, desiring, and so forth” that unfolds through storytelling and reflection in the interviews (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 33). The interviews primarily draw on second-order. The interview began with a vignette of a man in the midst of a workplace conflict that asked the participant to share their opinion about what Victor was experiencing. This was done in an attempt to creatively set the scene for reflecting on a workplace conflict situation and it worked well. All of the participants seemed to interpret what Victor was experiencing in terms similar to their own workplace conflicts. It facilitated the transition to discussing their own story. The interview schedule consisted of ten open questions along with possible prompt questions and one closing question found in Table 1 below or Appendix A.

Table 1

*A Semi-Structured Interview*

Question Number	Open Question	Possible Prompt	Type of Question  *note the type of question may be a combination due to the possible prompt or probe questions
1	Following Vignette:  What do you think about what Victor is experiencing?	Can you imagine what it would feel like?	Evaluative/Comparative
2	Tell me what it's like to be in your position?	Describe a typical day? What is the best thing about _? What is the worst thing about _?	Narrative/Descriptive
3	Can you tell me about your own experience with a workplace conflict?	What happened? What do you think brought this about? Can you describe how you felt about it at the time? What previous experiences did you have for comparison (internal)? If you could name the problem at hand, what would you call it?	Narrative/Evaluative
4	Can you describe how you started to address it?	What options did you consider? Tell me what you were thinking. What did you expect would happen? What happened next?	Structural/Evaluative
5	Can you tell me about your relationship with that person(s)?	How do you feel about _? How do you feel about yourself? How do you think others see you?	Narrative/Evaluative/Circular
6	Tell me about the impact it had on you.	How did it affect you personally? How did it impact your work environment? Tell me about the time you spent on it. What was it like getting up in the morning to go to work? How did you cope?	Evaluative
7	Tell me about the role your organization played in this situation.	How did you feel about using the process provided by your organization? Did anything make it better?	Evaluative/Comparative

		Did anything make it worse? How do you feel about their role? What would help you feel more supported?	
8	Looking back on the situation, how do you see it differently now than before?	Describe what is different in your workday now. What was challenging before? What would you do differently if it occurred again?	Contrast/Comparative
9	If you had kept track of this conflict from the beginning in terms of time, emotions, and people involved, what do you think a final report would reflect and what would it mean to you?	Tell me about how much time you spent engaged in this, from the moment the situation occurred until now or when it was “let go” sort of speak? Can you think of any missed opportunities or other effects it had? How did it affect others who weren’t directly involved?	Evaluative/Circular
10	If Alternative Dispute Resolution could increase the number of options available to employees experiencing conflicts like ___, from an administrative perspective what would you want to know about implementing an ombudsperson, mediator, or other internal conflict resolution role in your organization?	Tell me what the interest would be. Tell me what the reservations may be. Tell me how you think your life would be if you had these options in the future?	Descriptive/Evaluative
11	Given our conversation today, is there anything you would like me to know?		Closer

*Note.* A semi-structured interview schedule with follow-up questions and description of types of question by K. Sosa (2019).

The researcher also used field notes in the interviewing process and coded them after each interview as either Observation Notes (ON) or Analytical Memos (AM). Field notes are considered part of the analysis, although they are produced simultaneously with data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employed a heuristic framework for analysis because hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and in IPA, the dialectical relationship between interviewer and interviewee is essentially a double hermeneutic, meaning that the researcher is making sense of the participant who is making sense of the phenomenon. This sense-making process requires a dynamic, non-linear approach to ensure that it is truthful and that the parts of the meaning that emerge are indeed reflective of the experience in its entirety. The analysis process used of the seven steps outlined below that are drawn from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*.

Although the organization of the steps appear to be linear, they take place over and over again with each participant's interview, and then the seventh step looks for patterns across cases, thus it is cyclical - not linear. The delineation of these steps proved to be critical to structuring analysis consistently, and staying true to the methodology in the midst of a large set of a data.

1. Bracketing Statement
2. Reading and Re-Reading
3. Initial Noting
4. Developing Emerging Themes
5. Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

6. Moving to the Next Case
7. Looking for Patterns Across Cases

## 1. Bracketing

**a. Statement.** Although it is impossible to fully abstain from preconceived ideas about the phenomenon under study, the process of bracketing one's own prejudices is nevertheless a useful and ethical practice. As the researcher, I recognized that I entered the research with a substantial amount of knowledge about conflict, organizational theory, workplace dynamics, and more specifically, training in covert and overt group dynamics informed by the Tavistock and A.K. Rice Institutes on Group Relations that was founded on psychoanalytic perspectives and studies of human behavior in groups. Therefore, I carry a predisposition to analyze workplace conflict through a lens that looks at issues with authority, dependency and counter dependency, intimacy, and stages of group formation. In this case, however, I was not studying a group but rather individuals who do not work together. Therefore, it was perceived it would be easier to bracket this tendency, but nevertheless, influenced interpretations. I also recognized my attitude and beliefs that many of the workplace conflicts that occur are either preventable or could be facilitated by conflict resolution methods. Therefore, I took precaution in the formation of my questions to avoid leading participants. I was also aware of the cost of conflict studies and variables such as absenteeism, turnover, and health costs. Finally, for this research I was more interested in the richness of the participants' experiences than forming any kind of generalization or

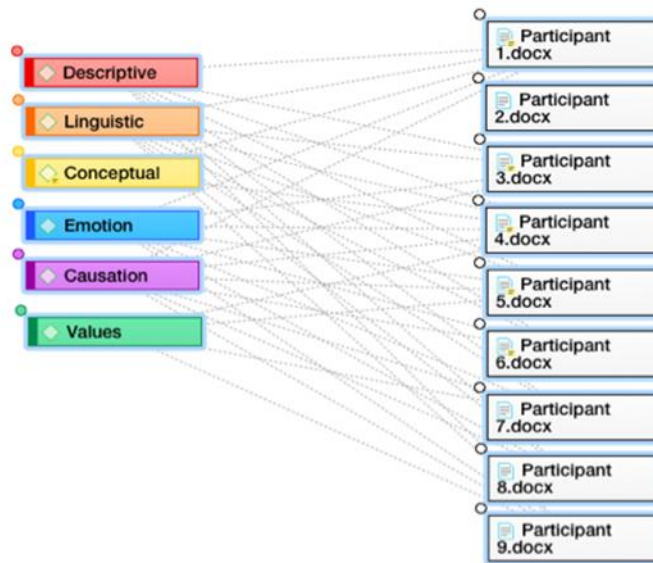
fulfilling a preconceived idea. My hidden agenda was truly to start from the beginning - to put aside what I have learned in graduate studies and have taken for granted as “truth” or applicable, and to study for myself and the future of my practice what individuals experience and what meaning they derive from their workplace conflicts. This is the kind of learning that I hope will become deeply ingrained and eventually be reflexive when I practice conflict resolution in organizations.

**b. Themes.** In the analysis of each participant’s interview the researcher bracketed what was learned from analysis in order to stay true to the emerging themes of the next participant. For example, if a theme emerged about “struggle for power,” it was bracketed for that participant and not applied as a thematic code for the next participant unless it emerged organically. This was done for all nine participants so that each of their themes stood alone.

2. **Reading and Re-Reading** is full immersion in the data. It is a pre-analysis in that the objective is to become familiar with it through reading and listening to the recorded audio before developing any analysis or summary of the content. Transcribing the interviews took place prior to this step and in conjunction with it. The transcription was done using HappyScribe and the audio was listened to multiple times to absorb as much of the data as possible.
3. **Initial Noting** is the meat of the analysis. It is a line by line examination of semantic content and language (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009) seeking to produce detailed notes on the data. Initially the study was broken down into descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual noting but affective methods using Emotion, Causation, and Values was



added to it. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed using the Happy Scribe service. This service then allowed the researcher to listen to the audio at the rate of transcription, and to edit the text for anything missing or worth noting. The researcher then read and re-read the text in the qualitative research software Atlas.ti, listening to the audio and making color coded descriptive, linguistic, conceptual, emotion, causation, values annotations as follows. For a visual representation see Figure 6.



*Figure 6.* Visual representation of exploration guided by initial coding methods by K. Sosa (2019).

- a. **Descriptive** comments described things that were explicitly meaningful to the participant. Subjects such as relationships, places, key words, and explanations described by the participant are at the core of descriptive noting.
- b. **Linguistic** noting looked at how the participant describes or thinks about the issue and examines the semantic content and meaning of language used by each participant. The analysis is focused on word choice, repetition, tone,

pronoun use, and other subtle variations in communication. This analysis will also be informed by Ken Cloke's *The Language of Conflict* that looks at how we communicate in conflict and breaks down verbs, nouns, pronouns, and syntax. It also highlighted the use of shifting between past and present tense simultaneously.

- c. **Conceptual** annotation is interpretative and was be made by contextualizing the participant's descriptive and linguistic patterns of meaning and identifying abstract concepts (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). In this process, the researcher looked at all the parts and synthesized them into larger concepts about the whole set of experience. For example, one conceptual note reads: "The phrase 'I lived it' is referring to a threat. Hints to role of agency and her identity, but also to a sense of time referring to it as having lived through it."
- d. **Emotion** coding was an effective method used to include the subjective quality of participants' experiences. It highlighted emotions expressed and annotations to label or conceptually draw on the expression. It was used to acknowledge and name those experiences later on in the analysis.
- e. **Values** coding was another effective method employed to assess the participant's integrated values, attitude, and belief systems at work. In the annotation stage, it was used to highlight instances of values but not to assess those values unless they came up as an emergent theme.

- 4. **Causation** coding was added because it was applicable to participants making sense of why they had conflict. This proved to be a useful way to annotate instances of causation and to later see if it influenced any emerging themes, which it did.

Participants often attributed causation to external factors, and this helped to understand how participants made sense of their experiences.

5. **Developing Emerging Themes.** In this step, the initial data and the noting data were used to “simultaneously reduce the volume of detail and mapping interrelations, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 91). The aim was to identify themes that “reflect not only the participant’s original words and thoughts, but also the analyst’s interpretation” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, p. 95). For a visual representation see Figure 7.

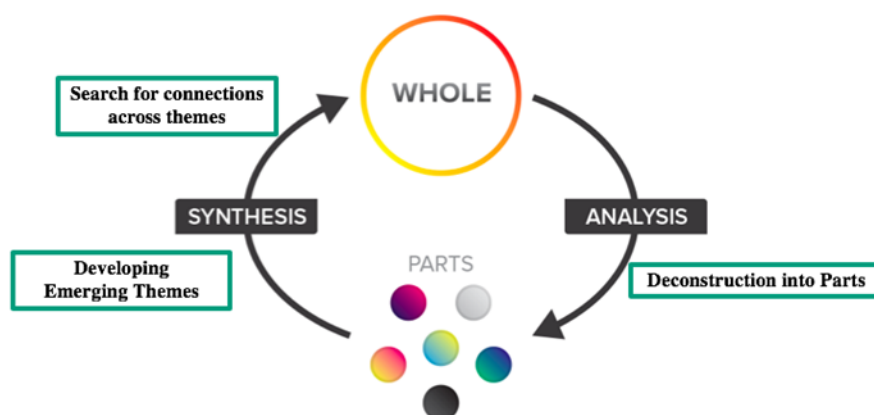


Figure 7. Visual representation of hermeneutic process of developing themes by K. Sosa (2019).

6. **Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes.** The themes were organized in the order in which they came up and clustered into related themes based on abstraction, narrative moments (contextualization), numeration (frequency), function (possibly in view of self or other in the conflict), or other clusters dependent on the data that emerged. Some themes were discarded if not considered relevant.
7. **Moving to the Next Case** meant repeating the process for the next participant’s story. In this step, themes that emerged were individual to the participant and not

necessarily based on the themes that emerged from the prior analysis. Meaning, each one was bracketed. This way, it allowed codes and themes to emerge organically instead of imposing a set from one participant onto the next. For a visual representation see Figure 8.

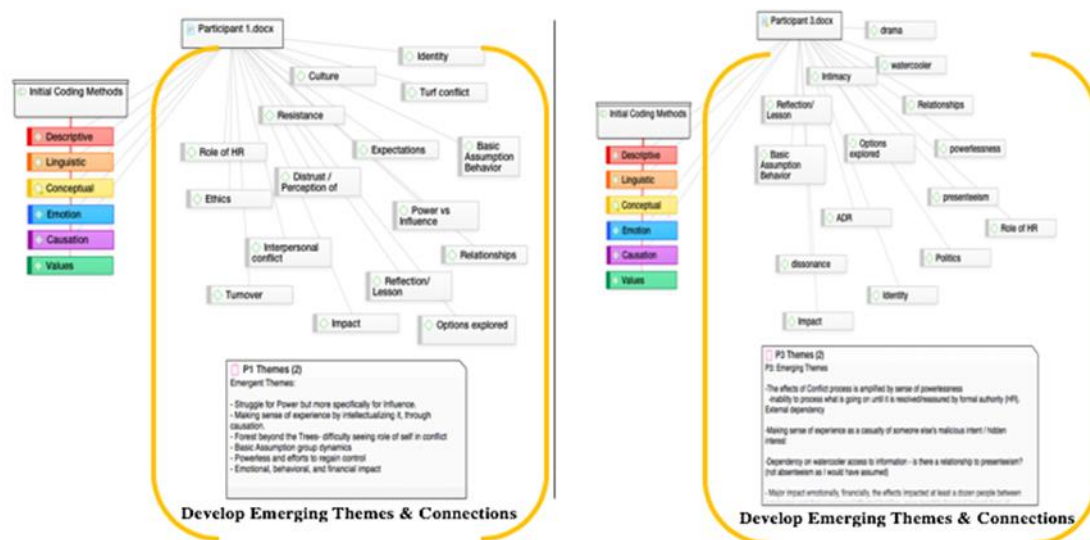
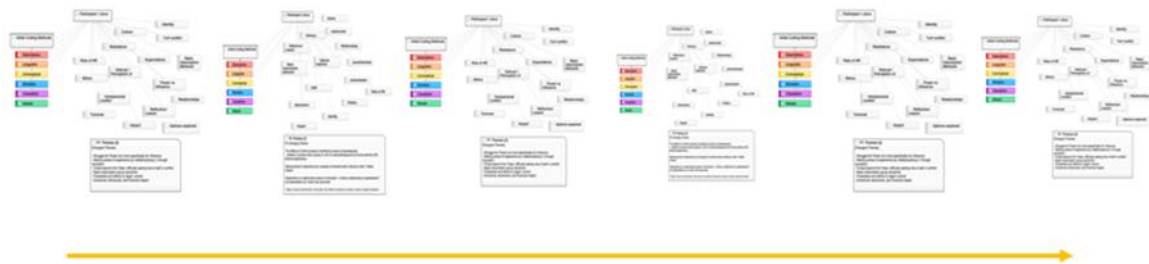


Figure 8. Visual representation of bracketing themes for each participant in IPA by K. Sosa (2019).

- 8. Looking for Patterns Across Cases.** In this stage, the researcher looked for patterns across all of the cases, or participants. It searched for connections, similarities, differences, and eventually led to more theoretical reconfiguration of themes into six superordinate themes: (1) *Impact from Negative Work-Life Events*; (2) *Costly Reactions*; (3) *Covert Conflict*; (4) *Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience*; (5) *Detachment from the Organization*; (6) *Learning through Reflection*. For a visual representation see Figure 9 below.



*Figure 9.* Visual representation of IPA looking for patterns across cases by K. Sosa (2019).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive nature of collecting data on workers' workplace conflicts, ethical practices were deliberately integrated in the design and monitored throughout data collection and analysis. Any study that engages human subjects, that is data through intervention or interaction with the individual or identifiable private information, carries at least a minimal risk. In this study, workers were considered a vulnerable population. This required the researcher to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects, to provide adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects, and to maintain the confidentiality of data. "Vulnerable persons are considered to be those who may be less able to protect themselves and their interests relative to other persons in a given setting or situation" (Rose & Pietri, 2002 as cited in CITI, p. 1). For workers, the vulnerability is referred to as "paycheck vulnerability," which in this case, lies in the potential for coercion or pressure to participate or not participate in the study. Any pressure from supervisors would thus compromise the principle of voluntary and informed consent. Since this is not a case study and participants were purposively selected, this could only occur if gatekeepers informed their employees of the study and encouraged them to participate. However, the study criteria helped to minimize this risk and give participants

a way out if they did not feel comfortable. The results of the study could also adversely affect the worker's job if the employer identified something that could lead to job restriction or job loss. Therefore, the research employed the following specific measures to protect workers from risks:

- **Voluntary and Informed Consent** - all participants were made explicitly aware of the voluntary and informed consent principle, as well as being informed about the purpose of the study, types of topics covered, expectations for time and data use, procedures for protecting their privacy and identity, and contact information should they need assistance or more information about their research rights. This was provided in the form of the consent letter and indicated in the ad approved by the NSU Internal Review Board.
- **Personal Identifiers** - All personal identifiers (name, age, employee numbers, etc.) were removed from the interviews. Interviews were coded and referred to as participant A, participant B, participant C, etc. throughout the data analysis and then given pseudonyms in the write-up of results. The pseudonyms were used instead of Participant A, B, and C because it was perceived that names humanized the participants more.
- **Control of the Collected Data** - Participants were informed that transcripts, memos, notes, and all forms of unedited raw data were not available to anyone outside of the research committee, but that non-identifying quotes could be used in the study results. This verbiage was included in the sign consent forms and was verbally explained to each participant. All personal identifying information before

coding was stored on the researcher's backup hard drive and used two passcode protected points of access.

- **Disclosure of Study Results** - The participants were informed that the inclusion of verbatim extracts in the published report was possible and at the end of the data analysis, the report would be available to them.

### **Researcher Bias**

Although bias is innately implicit and/or unconscious, the consciousness of an act to critically assess one's own bias and the bias of participants can be helpful in reducing it. In this case, it was done through the use of a bracketing statement. Other biases such as social desirability and interviewer distortion or subversion may also be issues because of the sometimes uncomfortable nature of discussing conflict. Indirect open questions, reformatting questions, and analyzing the same set of data through various approaches in the heuristic framework is helpful to reduce social desirability bias, as well as misunderstanding or subversion of uncomfortable questions that may occur in interviews. No discomfort or social desirability was detected in the interviewing processes. Furthermore, it is evident in the introduction and literature of this study that the researcher carries a certain view of organizational conflict and thus, was looking at the research for clues about underlying motivation or reluctance to use conflict resolution methods in an indirect way that may not even be applicable or incorporated in the study itself. However, it may raise a philosophical question as to how one can seek to understand interest-based conflict management systems in its absence. According to Sarte's contribution to phenomenology (1956/1943), *nothingness*, or "things that are absent are as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see

the world” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 19). Research shows that procedural justice, a sense of fairness, a commitment to halting offensive behavior, and psychological satisfaction are important values for workers (Katz, Sosa, Kovack, 2018). In the absence of effective mechanisms to obtain these, “things fight for attention—all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused because the *raison d’etre*” or the underlying motivation for work is missing (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 19). Thus, to understand conflict management systems, the researcher sought to understand the experience with workplace conflict potentially in its absence.



#### Chapter 4: Analysis/Results

*“Let's say I was a square peg in a [round] hole. The more I tried to get rid of those corners, the more corners I started to get. I was like, a prickly star.”* (James)

Central to this study's *gestalt* is a *square peg in a round hole* phenomenon. In this interpretative phenomenological analysis of studying workers' experience with workplace conflict, it symbolizes something greater than the sum of the individual participant's perspectives and encompasses what it means to live through a significant workplace conflict. The idiomatic expression has been used since the early nineteenth century to depict the characteristics of a person, approach, or idea that does not quite fit into the established norm. Historically, the expression invokes a belief that the square peg is the nuisance, the haughty individual or situation that must sharpen its edges or fail trying. This underlying tone also applies to its use in this study to illustrate the experience of nine individuals who reflected on their stories of the impactful workplace conflicts they experienced and captures the essence of feeling like their experience was a square peg in a round hole organization. Despite the consuming effects of the workplace conflicts, participants felt that the emotional turmoil they endured had no workplace outlet and repeated attempts to make it right were fruitless. Ultimately giving way to a sense of powerlessness that was central to the participants' psychological processing and the decisions made thereafter to regain a sense of control. The role played by the organizations was most often reactive in nature, but overall dismissive because the situations were not perceived to fit in the *round hole* rights-and-power based systems of employee management. Participants seem to make sense of their experiences through various forms of causation or attribution to factors outside of their control and in this way

seemed to create enough emotional distance to, at face-value, learn from it in an attempt to prevent it in the future. However, insights emerged that these attempts could be psychological mechanisms to facilitate resilience. The frustrations expressed about the role of Human Resources and upper-level leadership seemed to go through its own psychological process in terms of relationship with authority and decreased in emotional charge over time to the point of emotional detachment from the organization. In some cases this was also physical detachment through resignation, but in other cases only emotional and carried with it a *protect yourself* mental model moving forward.

Insight into this phenomenon includes “interpretations presented as possible readings offered cautiously and using verbatim extracts to support it with the participants’ own voices” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, p. 180). The shared perspectives are conveyed through the following six super-ordinate themes: (1) *Impact from Negative Work-Life Events*; (2) *Costly Reactions*; (3) *Covert Conflict*; (4) *Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience*; (5) *Detachment from the Organization*; (6) *Learning through Reflection*. Each theme carries networks of meaningful topics, concepts, perspectives, relationships, insight into psychological processing, causation, and how participants make sense of their experience. The themes, although divided in write-up, are interrelated and may overlap in explication and analysis. Each has been developed through a double hermeneutic process, a flow of moving between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives – between the participants making sense of their experiences and the researcher making sense of insights that emerged. All nine of the participants had different workplace conflicts in seven different industries including media sales, higher education, government, independent consulting, clinical work, legal, and entertainment. Each theme is described, a summary of analysis

of the shared experience is provided, and illustrative extracts are selected and woven throughout to support the core of what participants were thinking and experiencing in their own voices. IPA methodology guidelines for writing results for studies with over six participants suggested using this approach.

### **Impact from Negative Work-Life Events**

“It did make me feel kind of mentally unstable.” (Michelle)

In this study, impactful is defined as having a major impact or effect and being meaningful to the participant. The intensity of the events varied from participant to participant, but in all cases, there was clear emotional or psychological distress in the short-term and evidence of residual effects years later. Those who felt wronged by someone seemed to carry the effects more prominently than those who could attribute it to another person having intrapersonal conflict that spilled over or was projected onto them. Understanding the differences in severity of impact proved to be challenging because the researcher is not an expert in psychology and research on the delineations between negative life events, stressful life events, and traumatic events is still up for debate in the fieldwork. Part of the debate is attributed to the difficulty of measuring variances in how individual's respond to these events and the intensity of the events themselves, as well as the frequency and length of exposure to such events. The objective here is not to measure the intensity nor to delineate the participants' experiences, but rather to understand how it was of impact to them, so the focus is on what they described, how they described it, and the meaning that emerged. Nevertheless, the linguistic and even conceptual struggle to make sense of the differences was present throughout the

analysis, first for the participants themselves and then for the researcher drawing on the essence of those experiences.

There was a linguistic and perhaps a psychological tug-of-war for both participants and the researcher in making sense of the layers of impact, but in particular, the emotional impact. In reflecting on my own internal struggle, the participants' struggle became more apparent. It was relatively easy for participants to describe sleepless nights, losing weight, paranoia, and even admitting to the strain it placed on their relationships with significant others in the midst of their workplace conflicts. However, there was a reluctance or inability to view the impact as a traumatic event that carried residual effects. Each varied on a spectrum of intensity of course, but no one described it in these terms. "Why?" I wondered. In my observation memos, there is a restlessness as I attempt to conceptually grapple with, *what is impact versus what is trauma?*

The emotional impact is described as severe and all consuming. Even long after the event. Not described as traumatic, but the intensity would point to it. What is the line between impact and trauma? Is there a reluctance to call it trauma? Does that imply [the individual] is a victim and would someone who reports feeling powerless be able to attempt to regain control with a mental model of a victim?

There could be some internal resistance or even reasonable need to suppress that view. (Researcher Observation Memo)

Participants shared one by one what it was like to experience ongoing workplace conflict. Their stories were filled with detail, attribution to a number of factors, intensity of emotion, and general unawareness of the costs associated with it. First introduced is Monica:

Monica, worked as a clinician for a small wellness company owned by a single owner. Monica's workplace conflict was 'ongoing [...], it wasn't necessarily one situation. It was more of, you know the saying, the fish rots from the head down?' Her use of this metaphor is an attribution to bad leadership. Monica described being very excited about her new position but recognized in retrospect that she missed the red flags about her boss' questionable behaviors. She described her boss as the 'ultimate micromanager' who required her to account for every minute of her day. This was emblematic of a culture of distrust that became more apparent and significant as time went on. The boss' mistreatment of not just her, but other employees became a main topic of what I refer to in coding as *watercooler exchange*, which is the exchange of information about the on-going social dynamics of the organization, particularly when there is lack of transparency and the exchange becomes critical to employees' need for information. 'Of course, in any workplace, people are talking, and so you can't just treat one person or two people like that without other people knowing. Then, it kind of built up.' In this secret watercooler exchange, questions about inappropriate billing practices under her clinical license sprouted and led to secretive investigations. 'It just became this issue, where I was really uncomfortable. [...] We were constantly looking up billing rules, and what we could and couldn't do. [...] I feel like she kind of bullied me. She would kind of be pushing [me] to do things [...] like this manipulative direction.' She described having to travel more frequently and do work that she had not agreed to out of fear of unethical billing under her license and fear that her boss would get her into

legal trouble. She attempted to bring it up several times but felt her boss was not receptive and inauthentically acted as though she didn't know about it and would look into it. But more often than not, '[she] was afraid that [her boss] would be not defensive, but offensive.' Reflecting on the emotional turmoil and how she dealt with it, Monica said, 'I really confided, and my coworkers also confided in me, of how frustrated we were. So, that's part of the coping. We were so close because we really bonded over this misery that we were feeling.' In a span of a few months, Monica and three other key employees resigned. They staggered their resignations and some feigned different reasons because they had kept their friendships secret and didn't want anyone to know the different pieces of information they shared with each other. When asked what a hypothetical final report would reflect about how much time, emotions, and people involved the conflict took up of her work, Monica said, 'time-wise, 100%. I would say a good solid seven months of just kind of like anguish. It really took up so much... Looking back, you know, we always look at things with a certain shade of... Usually, I think people look back on things more positively than they really were, long-term. I don't feel that way [...] I just felt miserable on a daily basis.'

(Monica)

Monica's experience included emotional turmoil that persisted for seven months out of the eleven months she worked there until she resigned. In one instance, Monica made a reluctant reference to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The reluctance was important because it conveyed discomfort using the term and was expressed through humor. Humor can be a way to socially ease discomfort and has been found to be less

about entertainment and more of a social response. This reference, although a singular case among nine, stands out because the participant has a clinical background and perhaps was able to verbalize the residual feeling that others alluded to. The exact quotation is too revealing of identity and therefore is supported by the researcher's analytic memo on the quotation:

'PTSD' - Participant joked with her co-worker that they had PTSD as they reflected on their shared experience. They both had resigned and were in new positions. It was presented as a joke, but did not seem like humor but rather a way to frame their experience but not wanting to seem dramatic about it. (Researcher Analytic Memo)

The function of this term is not diagnostic, but rather its use is important because it conveys meaning about the long-lasting impact of her experience. For Monica, it was more than an interpersonal conflict, it was also an internal struggle over her own autonomy between asserting herself to the authority and being coerced by that authority. That feeling has stayed with her. Monica's example is illustrative of how participants described their experience with more ease in terms of impact rather than conceptualizing it as traumatic. Furthermore, a reverse effect of relative deprivation as relative privilege could capture a reluctance to characterize one's emotional trauma in the same category as someone whose trauma is caused by war or physical abuse, and reasonably so. The severity and lasting effects of the emotional turmoil is also shared in an excerpt from Shaun's story, who described the emotional impact of his workplace conflict with more ease and with loose reference to trauma. Shaun is an upper-level

manager who was accused of discrimination by a disgruntled employee following a dispute over an employee evaluation:

Shaun: 'I'm shell shocked. It did [a]ffect me, because now I have to really be careful who I talk to and how I talk to them. [...] it was kind of insulting. It really did bother me. I think I lost weight about that. [...] It [a]ffected my relationship at the time. It's probably one of the reasons why it ended, because she couldn't necessarily understand what I was dealing with [...] she wanted attention and all I could think about at the time was how I'm going to navigate through this whole ordeal. [...] I got sick, it was the holidays, she maybe wanted more time than I had to give at the time. I think I had to kind of block everything. Got to focus on the task [...] Figuring out how I was going to get through the situation, and it was 'do I start looking for another job or what?' [...] I think it just wasted a month and a half of people's time and just think about the emotional investment that we had. [...] It caused a little grief in my department, because people were afraid. [...] but it caused me some trouble for several months and it just changed the way that I approach[ed] [work]. [...] So for me to be in a hopeless, helpless, whatever you call the position, it was really tough.' (Shaun)

Shaun's use of the term *shell shocked* stood out because it is synonymous with PTSD. The expression was used prior to the conceptualization of PTSD. The emphasis on the term shell shocked in this analysis is not to allude to the presence of PTSD because that requires clinical diagnosis and symptoms from a life-threatening event, but rather the emphasis is on the use of the language by the participant and what meaning it conveys about the impact. Shell shocked refers to the impact from a sudden alarming experience



and the participant's use of this term describes not just how he felt at the time of the event, but more significantly his use of the term in present tense, how he feels about it five years later. Examining the temporal construction of this participant's text moving back and forth between the past and present tense reflects an internal struggle of self. It captures the participant's struggle between who he was as a managerial employee before the conflict event and who he is now that it has shocked him and "changed the way [he] approach[es] [work]" (Shaun). Although PTSD refers to the residual effects of a traumatic experience, there was no evidence of irritability or explosive behavior. However, the event of conflict that occurred was a serious accusation of discrimination that Human Resources exonerated. Due to the nature of the event and impact he described, it is reasonable to assume that rather than a propensity for explosive behavior, the participant has a propensity to be on the lookout for any potential character attacks and it informs how he engages with other employees, stating, "Now I have to really be careful who I talk to and how I talk to them" (Shaun). This example was typical of what other participants shared in feeling like they had to be on the lookout. Without more context, it is hard to tell if it is symptomatic of paranoia or a plausible perceived threat, but one other participant did explicitly express feeling paranoia in a similar context. Shaun also described feeling "hopeless [or] helpless." The perception of powerlessness most prominently resounded among all participants. When asked about how it affected his performance at work, Shaun described an inability to do or think about anything else.

Shaun: 'I thought about it all day. I went through the motions of the job, but I really wasn't thinking about work. [...] I think what was consuming me [was] that what everyone else thought. [...] It wasn't that I did something wrong, but like

damn, I wonder if they really believe this [person], because I busted my butt for years to establish myself in my department and to have someone just kind of come out of the blue and make up some claims like this. [...] That was what consumed 100% of my time. 'Cause every person that you run into, you think - 'What is she thinking or what does she know?' You know what I'm saying? [...] Stealing money. I was doing nothing. Clocking in and leaving.' (Shaun)

Shaun described a short-term state of paralysis or sustained presenteeism for approximately 30 working days. Other participants had less tangible, but nonetheless impactful effects, including severe health reactions to the stress induced by an on-going workplace conflict. Participant James described a year-long workplace conflict that was triggered by company structural changes that trickled down the chain of command. James endured severe emotional turmoil, as it impacted his personal life and his health. The compiled excerpt below captures the powerless feeling he conveyed and how hard he tried to persist through it:

James: 'Every time I was just about to fly again, my wings were clipped. [...] Like, you're trying to do something genuinely to help people, and you're completely shut down. [It felt like] the world is moving in on you. Everything from paranoia to, just like, why are people not letting you do things when you can help? So, I tried even harder. And the harder I tried, and the more I tried to do the right thing and the good thing, the worse it was for me. [...] I knew that I was being focused on, but I was trying to squirm to make it right. And the more that I would try to make things right, the worse I made it. [...] I couldn't make sense of everything. I was overlooking and questioning every single thing I did. [...]

[E]motionally, it was like a combination of confused, angry, sad. At that time, it was very dark. There was no solution to me of like, how can I resolve this? [...] So, health, I had problems from something [...] I had from when I was kid [that I] never had problems to basic functioning [before]. Sleeping, eating, [walking], I lost a ton of weight. [...] But even relationships, I was very irritable with my kids, with my wife, with everybody. I was just a rotten person to be around. And then, when I confronted people, I was just very irritated. But, I would also, a lot of times, just go home and just... We had a two story. I would just go upstairs and close myself off. Pull out an iPad or something. [...] This situation, [...] there was no good coming out of it. [...] 'Cause they probably were pissed off too. Like, 'Dammit. We got him. We're making him sick, he can't even function anymore. He's walking in with a cane, a limp, and he's like crying and he's sick, and he's lost weight. And he's still coming here. Dammit, kill him! He's like a roach. Kill him!' [...] It would be kinda like a boxer that's getting punched, and at some point you know you're done. So, you just don't even throw any more punches, you know?' (James)

James used several sports analogies to make sense of his experience and to express it so that the researcher could understand too. In the excerpt above, he conveys how disempowered he felt and how much it consumed him emotionally and physically. He isolated himself and attributed the flare up of a childhood illness to the stress induced by his workplace. The health symptoms seemed to get worse over time, like his conflict, to the point that he was going to work walking with a limp and using a cane. The language he uses to express what he imagines his supervisor was thinking conveys meaning about

feeling like he was targeted and that it was an *us versus him* mentality. The fact that he persisted and went to work, despite having physical difficulty getting there, is emblematic of what all of the participants reported on *presenteeism*.

The findings on presenteeism were surprising. Presenteeism is a term used to describe the problem of employees being at work but due to illness or medical conditions, not fully functioning or being productive. The mainstream usage of the term is problematic because it infers that only medical conditions obstruct functioning at work. The term in this research is used more broadly to include loss of productivity or hindered mental capacity due to workplace conflict stressors, which is in line with how this field uses the term. When I bracketed my preconceived ideas for this research, I included my knowledge of the cost of conflict studies like missing work due to conflict stressors, but I assumed it would be a predominant impact. This belief was based on the latest research on the costs of conflict that always includes absenteeism as a cost that employers bear and one that is easier to quantify because days missed by employees is a fairly easy calculation. When discussing presenteeism, the research does acknowledge that absenteeism is believed to be just the tip of the iceberg compared to the larger impact of presenteeism. My own anecdotal experience in the field of conflict resolution is also that people by default generally avoid conflict. Those two ideas braided together in my mind anticipated a prevalence of absenteeism in my research. Despite bracketing for my knowledge of the studies, in interviews I used missing work as an example repeatedly when asking participants about the impact on their work. To my surprise, all nine participants denied missing any work days. Instead, they were either disinclined to miss work or disinclined to put in all of their effort at work. Some because they felt targeted

and were afraid it would be used against them, and others were highly dependent on watercooler exchange. In the midst of stressful conflict and sometimes limited access to information from superiors or Human Resources, participants were dependent on information from co-workers and even dependent on rumors to inform their decision-making.

Another participant discussed his presenteeism as decreased engagement and even unconscious sabotage of his workplace. Jorge, who worked in higher education full-time but also had other income projects, explained how feeling demotivated by his inability to influence the process and outcome of the conflict affected his performance.

Jorge: 'I was so down on the institution, I literally [told] people who wanted to apply [...] this is the last place you want to come. [...] I turned students to look elsewhere. [...] So, I did the work but I did work in some ways more outside the institution. I put more emphasis there. So, I think like in spirit maybe I was giving like 30% in terms of workload. Maybe 50%. [...] the key word I would say was discouraged because there was anger, frustration, but it [was] really very deeply discourage[ing]. [...] The whole healing process [took] two years until I was fundamentally [in a] better place and so, for two years probably.' (Jorge)

Jorge acknowledged that he felt deeply discouraged and that bled into feeling disinclined to put in his full effort for an organization that was not supporting his needs. Jorge went on to explain that the Human Resource processes he used to seek retribution were lengthy and inefficient. The emotional work to heal and rebuild his work motivation had to be done on his own seeking external therapeutic help. That took two years. He also resounded the feeling of powerlessness over the efforts to alleviate the situation and the

adverse outcomes. Jorge reported feeling isolated by co-workers and like he did not have anyone in a similar position to turn to for advice.

All of the participants felt that the emotional turmoil they endured was like a square peg in a round hole organization in which they had limited choices. If you are a square peg and the only way in is a round hole, there is an inherent feeling of powerlessness. Valentina, later introduced, expressed feeling like, “doesn’t matter what you do, it’s like you fail at everything” when referring to her efforts to alleviate her conflict with a former supervisor/mentor. James, who inspired this overarching phenomenon, explained it as, “Let’s say I was a square peg in a [round] hole. The more I tried to get rid of those corners, the more corners I started to get. I was like a prickly star.”

Overall, the impact on the participants was emotional or psychological, and for most of them, it affected them in and outside of work in various ways. Some participants reported feeling isolated from co-workers and/or personal relationships, while others bonded with co-workers over their tumultuous workplace. Some reported a strain on their personal relationships, while other relied on them to pick them up when they were down. Their honesty about the impact on their work revealed interesting insights into the complexity of presenteeism. None of the participants expressed feeling supported, at least not to the level of validation for what they were experiencing. There was an overall gestalt of *make yourself fit into what exists or there is no room here for what you are* feeling. Relational conflicts are quite ordinary in groups, but they can have extraordinary impacts if they remain unresolved, and none reported reaching a satisfactory level of resolution.

## Costly Reactions

*“I didn't feel comfortable, regardless of them moving my office to try to create some buffer zone. It just always felt like I was being put out.” (Valentina)*

This theme refers to the cost of the negative consequences experienced or described by the participants. While some of the impacts described in the previous theme were more visible than others, the majority were less visible and more difficult to measure. This research explored impact and costs as one of the possible outcomes, but it did not deliberately set out to provide calculations. More information on some of these factors would be needed to calculate more accurate estimates. However, some estimates were possible and are presented here while others are explained but not calculated.

Presenteeism, as mentioned in the previous theme, was essentially a loss of productivity due to a worker's compromised mental abilities because of a preoccupation with the conflict they were involved in. Presenteeism is somewhat difficult to identify and difficult to measure, but most of the participants seemed to be aware of their presenteeism even if they did not use the terminology. Most of the participants provided percentages to illustrate how much time and energy the conflict consumed their work life. For some it was thirty, seventy, or even one hundred percent their time. For example, Shaun described a state of paralysis for thirty working days until his conflict was resolved. He joked that he was, “Stealing money. Doing nothing. Clocking in and out” something unlike him (Shaun). This led to follow up questions about his presenteeism, which rendered enough data to calculate an estimate of this impact. Together we calculated that this represented an estimated \$10,000 of salary costs, which did not include benefits, facility costs, opportunity costs, or costs associated with the other

impacted employees. Although the claims were determined to be unfounded, there was an additional settlement cost of approximately \$50,000 and one turnover cost at 150% of the employee's salary, which is \$75,000. The total estimated cost of Shaun's workplace conflict was \$135,000. This does not include the litigation costs of reaching a settlement.

Costly reactions either by the employees or their organizations were noted throughout the research. Valentina described management moving her office several times to "create a buffer zone" for her workplace conflict. Participant Michelle, introduced later, also moved her own office to a different floor level to get away from the ongoing conflict. Neither move resolved the underlying issues. Although difficult to measure without more information, restructuring costs can include wasted time, operational costs, loss of motivation, loss of trust or commitment, and miscommunication costs. All of which were present in the participants accounts. Restructuring of teams was noted by three other participants and was attributed to either a conflict related resignation or management's attempt to control the environment in which the conflict was taking place. The latter appeared to breed more distrust. If more information was collected on this particular impact, it could render an estimate of poorly managed conflict.

Additionally, wasted time and underperformance can be visible but difficult to measure unless tools are set in place to do so. Gayle, a supervisor in media sales, discussed the need to mitigate the rumors that were spread by her employee regarding what the employee perceived to be unfair or preferential treatment. She recognized that it was difficult to see or measure how much time and energy it took up because it became the norm and just part of her management of the team.



Gayle: 'So, it was a very serious thing, and it definitely [a]ffected me, because it was stressful. It's like running into someone you don't want to see, all the time. And they have a mouth and they like to talk. Gossip is rampant in sales organizations. [...] I had to have a few conversations about that with a few people about like, 'This is why we're not doing it, here are all the reasons why this doesn't make sense for the company.' I want the money, [...] I needed it too. [...] but if upper management didn't feel it was a good deal, whether it was her or me or whoever trying to sell it, then the answer was no. [...] Because it did impact everybody in the immediate area, you know? [...] I'm sure my name was on more people's mouths than needed to be. Because there, I'm sure, were questionable statements about well, 'If she's doing this for you, why isn't she doing that for her?' And you know, even though it wasn't me, it still was me on paper. [...] I mean, anytime she would come in it was like the air in the room would just like drop, because she was just a negative field. And I'm sure I responded to that also, you know, body language and attitude, but I mean I was never mean or said anything derogatory about her. But she would talk on the floor, she would talk to the other reps and be very loud about her feelings of working with me. [...] I'm sure there were times where I came home, and my husband had to kind of lift me back up and try to remind me how insignificant she really is in the world and in my world, and help me get through to go back the next day, and possibly have to deal with her.' (Gayle)

Gayle expresses a need to engage rather than disengage from the *watercooler exchange* in her workplace because she felt it was necessary to be transparent with other team

members about her decision-making to minimize the effects of the rumors. She also recognizes that “there were days I came home upset, [...] I was still trying to please her and trying to be all ‘American Manager’ and make everybody happy” (Gayle). Although it stressed her, it did not appear to demotivate her or disengage her from her work, as I would have assumed. Rather than being unproductive because of illness or stressors, it caused her to spend time and energy mitigating the effects of rumors which is a misuse of her time and productivity. It is important to add that not all time spent on conflict is unproductive if it is spent on clarifying issues, exploring options, and developing solutions, but in this case it was not. It was time wasted in mitigating the effects of the conflict. Just how much it affected the team’s performance became more evident after her employee resigned. She had normalized managing this dynamic among the team, but after the employee resigned the team soared and went on to win recognition among all the sales teams.

Gayle: “None of us knew and they called our name as the team of the year, and everyone was shocked. [...] When we won that honor, it was huge because no one wanted them. No one thought they were worth that much. [...] So, it was a really great feeling. And she wasn't there by that time.” (Gayle)

Had there been more tools in place to measure the visible costs of the team’s performance, an estimated cost could be calculated and attributed to the underperformance caused by the ongoing conflict on the team. Similarly, had Gayle been guided to keep track of how much time she was spending mitigating the effects, a calculation could have been run on missed opportunities more easily, because she worked in a sales industry where missed sales can be quantified. In fact, Gayle recalled that her

employee kept her own calculation of all the sales she missed due to what she perceived to be unfair treatment.

Another conflict impact that was difficult and less visible to measure was sabotage. Jorge recognized that one of his reactions to the conflict was sabotage, which he did by turning interested students and potential employees away. Both of these represent an opportunity cost and potentially an image cost to the institution. It was less overt but still apparent in Monica's story as well. She described bonding with her co-workers as a way to cope with the misery they were experiencing, but then they consciously or unconsciously sabotaged the small business they worked for by all resigning within a couple of months of each other. Turnover is a big issue for a company's bottom line. But for a small business, losing four key employees is detrimental. In Victoria's case, she was on the receiving end of the sabotage. Her supervisor sabotaged Victoria and the company in several ways, but most prominently by challenging the authority of the company partners and the way they distributed work, therefore, how they received commission. This significantly affected Victoria financially and it was one of the reasons she resigned, despite once being happy with her workplace and her potential to grow there. Vonsha also described instances of sabotage and recognized that it may have contributed to ending her coaching contract early, which represented a specific financial opportunity loss for her and underperformance, relocation costs, and eventually a turnover cost for the company.

In the introduction chapter, the annual estimated cost of health-related illnesses borne by employers was presented. The Center for Disease Control uses absenteeism or loss of work time to determine that statistic. Although the participants' experience of

negative health-related consequences was in line with the established research on the types of impact caused by work-related stressors, none of them reported missing any work days and would therefore not fall under that measurement. The illness and mental health costs described by James, Shaun, Valentina, Monica, and Jorge could be estimated more accurately with more data collection and tools for measurability. The participants described loss of sleep, weight loss, heightened stress, illness, psychological distress, depression, dark thoughts, isolation, and an overall feeling of powerlessness. Some costs borne by the participants could include the cost of additional healthcare visits, therapy, medication, and impact on personal affairs.

One of the more visible and easier to measure negative consequences is the departure of employees or turnover costs. The table below demonstrates the number of resignations reported among all of the participants. These resignations also include resignations of other impacted employees that the participants directly attributed to the on-going conflict discussed. For example, Monica's workplace conflict described in the previous theme included four resignations. The cost of each resignation is typically one hundred and fifty percent of the person's salary in loss of productivity, recruitment, and on-boarding costs. In this case, it is multiplied by four employees' salaries, which is about \$390,000 of turnover costs for one small business. The participants were not required to provide exact salary costs, although some disclosed them organically. The participants' upper-level positions and those whom they supervised are conservatively estimated here at an average of \$65,000. Using the Dan Dana Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict calculation, the resignations cost the participants' employers over \$2,000,000. This is a conservative estimate. For a visual representation see Table 2.

Table 2

*The Estimated Cost of Resignations within Participants' Conflicts*

Participant	Number of Resignations Reported	Dana's Cost of Conflict Calculation for Turnover
Participant 1	2	Number of employees who left = 22 Estimated average salary = \$65,000
Participant 2	3	Multiply annual compensation for each person who has left by 150%
Participant 3	1	
Participant 4	3	Formula: $22 \times \$65,000 \times 1.5$
Participant 5	3	
Participant 6	2	
Participant 7	4	
Participant 8	1	
Participant 9	3	Total cost of turnover= \$2,145,000

*Note:* The Estimated Cost of Resignations within Participants' Conflicts is an estimate of cost to the organizations by Katherine Sosa (2019) .

**Covert Conflict**

The role of covert conflict was prominent in all of the participants' stories. Conflict can be expressed either overtly or covertly. When expressed overtly, it is more explicit, direct, and there may be more clarity around the issues even if there is disagreement or incompatible interests. Covert conflict on the other hand is indirectly expressed, either through passive aggression or indirect behaviors that in this study were felt by participants but difficult to address. All of the participants worked interdependently with others. A common relational tie between the participants' conflicts was that all of them were primarily interpersonal conflicts. Some participants perceived that their interpersonal conflicts were spillover effects of other interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts, but they all involved a supervisor and a supervisee-like relationship. This was not a prerequisite of the study nor was it part of the pre-screening. There was an unease and difficulty articulating the specific behaviors, but not the impact

it had on them. Similarly, there was also insight into covert group-level phenomena that emerged in the analysis of Vonsha, Jorge, James, Monica, Gayle, and Shaun's stories. This group-level insight is limited because it is assessed only through the recounting of events as told by participants and not group observations.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed their own perceptions of what they were experiencing in the workplace that I was able to recognize as covert expressions of conflict such as passive aggressiveness, indirect sabotage, pairing, watercooler exchange of rumors, isolation by co-workers, micromanaging work relationships, and all the behaviors that were felt but difficult to pinpoint to overt conflict. Next introduced is Valentina's story, who felt that she was the target of her former mentor's "psychological problems" that were triggered by restructuring and perceived competition:

Valentina is a lawyer who worked at a tax resolution company where she began as a Junior Associate assisting a top-earning Senior Associate. Valentina described her relationship with her new mentor as starting off great. 'So, when she was training me, she was very much taking me under her wing, and was super nice, accommodating, wanted me to succeed. She was phenomenal [...] And then I got promoted to [be] a regular associate. [...] Her initial reaction was, 'I need you to succeed. I want you to be really good.' So, she was putting a lot of pressure on me, which was fine, and I did well in the first couple of months. But then the management decided maybe I would be better off having a different mentor that [could] teach me a different approach to the job, and so they assigned me a mentor that my old associate didn't like. And so, immediately it was like I was

shunned, like I did not exist to her.’ Valentina goes on to describe four or five months of mistreatment and passive aggressive behaviors in which her old mentor created ‘general animosity in the entire office.’ She prohibited her assistants from talking to Valentina, whom she had developed collegial friendships with, and later, management asked Valentina to move offices to put physical distance between them. ‘It was very disheartening, because as you know, when you’re trained by someone and develop that almost mentor-mentee relationship, and then all of a sudden your mentor shuns you, you feel like you did something wrong, when really I hadn’t done anything other than agree to what management asked me to do. Which, when I’m in the workplace, I just do what I’m asked. That’s my role. And so, I felt like I was being pulled between management, who actually cuts the checks and pays my bills, and my old boss, who helped me a lot for over a year. [...] [At this point] I’m doing everything I can to try to please this person, because I don’t want to have conflicts, but everything you do just almost tends to make things worse.’ When asked how it affected her, Valentina explained, ‘In combination with [other] personal things that were going on, [it] was causing me almost to go into depression. Just because it wasn’t comfortable going to work. It was almost like, if it was your worst class in school and you fail every single test, and you just, you know the next test comes up and you just... What’s the point, you know? And it was just pretty much like I didn’t feel comfortable, regardless of them moving my office to try to create some buffer zone. It just always felt like I was being put out, or being targeted, and regardless of whether I tried to do something to change it, or management tried to do something to change it, it was

just always feeling very uncomfortable, feeling judged, feeling like I have to compete now because for some reason you're putting me in that place.'

(Valentina)

Both Valentina and her former mentor resigned from the company. The former mentor resigned months after the conflict began, but she led a cultural and systemic change that had lasting effects after she was gone. The collaborative working model that Valentina was introduced to was changed when her former mentor decided not to take on small scale clients anymore and only select clients that represented larger financial return. This turned into the norm for Senior Associates who had the seniority to do that, but for lower level associates like Valentina, it meant they had to take on tedious but low profit clients. It was financial sabotage. Valentina cited several examples of the former mentor making attempts to subvert the authority (management), as well as, what Valentina perceived to be, irrational beliefs that everyone was turning against her. The icing on the cake was using her own earning power to change the system and sabotage others. All of which seem to be expressions of covert conflict and behaviors of operating on basic assumption flight mode, in which survival is dependent on aggression and defenses. Valentina felt like the target of "the psychological problem going on" with her former mentor. Given that she does not have any psychological background, I interpreted this as feeling like the target of the other's psychological projection. Such psychological projection is the splitting off of unwanted emotions or behaviors in one or several persons, and then investing another with those emotions or behaviors. Unfortunately for Valentina, her management collaborated in her being the receiver of that projection. They unintentionally facilitated it by disempowering Valentina and limiting her own choices,



by moving her office and strategizing with her on how she could appease the projector. They addressed the overt behaviors through separation or avoidance but did not seem to address the covert underlying issues of sabotage. So, Valentina's choices continued to be limited long after the mentor resigned. It shifted the collaborative working culture to a highly competitive one that left Valentina feeling like she was being taken advantage of and contributed to her resignation one year after the conflict began.

Michelle's story on workplace bullying is the next illustrative example of covert expressions of conflict.

Michelle was working in administration at a higher education institution. Michelle experienced repeated covert conflict and controlling behaviors by her direct supervisor. '[She made] these random, weird comments all the time. Just always putting me down. And I'm a person that makes sure that my work is done correctly and completely. I don't do things halfway; I give them my all. [...] I think it was more of a power practice for her over me. [...] It did make me feel kind of mentally unstable at times. I did feel very stressed. I think I started grinding my teeth a lot. So that was an issue. She was definitely a bully. She wasn't just a bully to me, she was a bully to the other people on the team. [...] She used to make a lot of comments about this other [employee] being overweight. Which I thought was crazy because she was [overweight]. It was definitely direct and indirect bullying.' Michelle attempted to remove herself by moving her office, but it didn't help much. She made attempts to offer conflict management resources to her department, design a manual or a training but she was shut down. She called her father and told him 'I hate my job.' She wrote her resignation but

each time she turned it in, her supervisor told her to write it again. ‘She kept insisting that I needed to do it again.’ She became so discouraged she gave up looking for resources to help. ‘I just did not even care anymore.’ (Michelle)

Although workplace bullying has become a common topic and policies are generally implemented to address its occurrence, Michelle’s story is indicative of the fact that bullying is often indirect and a covert form of conflict expression that is difficult to interpret in real time and especially in the face of power imbalance between a supervisor and supervisee. In her reflection, Michelle openly recognizes that there was both direct and indirect bullying, but throughout her storytelling, it was evident that she still struggled to make sense of it and made attempts to maintain some of her power, perhaps not wanting to be the victim of the bullying. For example, Michelle was the only participant who said the ongoing conflict minimally affected her work even though she expressed the impact of stress, mental instability, and even grinding her teeth with relative ease.

Covert conflict and the sense of powerlessness that participants expressed appear to intersect in their conflicts. For example, when Michelle decided she was willing to take the financial risk of quitting she recalls that her supervisor kept asking her to rewrite her resignation letter. I interpret this as a covert expression and an exercise of coercion to prevent her from leaving. This was followed by “I just did not care anymore” or an expression of giving up which is what one does when one feels powerless. Similarly, Monica called her boss “the ultimate micromanager” and said she felt “kind of bullied [...] [in] like this manipulative direction.” This is another example of a covert expression used as coercion. Participants’ perception of powerlessness came up over and over again.

This stood out and had application in all of the super-ordinate themes of this analysis. Control is an important aspect of our psychological well-being. As human beings, we need to feel that we have some control over our actions, and power to influence the outcomes in our lives. However, there seems to be difficulty exercising control or influence in the face of covert conflicts.

There was also insight into covert group-level phenomena that emerged in the analysis. For example, there were instances of perceived threats to the already existing group(s) as was the case in Vonsha's story. Vonsha was a consultant hired to coach an employee from a lower level management position to a much higher executive level position. In Vonsha's case, she was the external threat coming into an already established group. Through dialogue, Vonsha became more consciously aware of the *pairing*, a covert group behavior, that occurred between her client and a third-party employee, whom she repeatedly referred to as a toxic influencer. The intended task was to coach her client into a higher leadership position. After 6 months, out of an intended 12-month contract, Vonsha decided that her client could not be further coached. Paralysis. "She did in fact demonstrate some signs of progress but then it was ripped away by, I guess, her internal conflict with, um, steering away from that influencing force" (Vonsha). Through storytelling, Vonsha recognized some of her own actions or behaviors that may have been misperceived by her client and the third-party influencer that bred distrust and a perceived hidden agenda to replace her client and stay permanently with the company. Similarly, Jorge's conflict, in retrospect, seemed to carry covert expressions of group conflict as new roles were introduced in a larger restructuring of the institution. This and other participants stories contained examples of covert group expressions such as

elements of inclusion, exclusion, desire to belong, distrust of hidden agendas, withdrawal, avoidance, and sabotage, which are elements of group dynamics and group formation. While a workplace group may have a specific work task or goal, there are also relational tasks and the analysis of the stories provided glimpses into some of the conflicts stemming from questions concerning group membership which appear to be expressed more covertly than overtly in the workplace.

### **Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience**

*“I definitely think [that] as tough as it was, and as stressful it was, and time consuming as it was, it was a good learning experience for life” (Valentina)*

The focus of phenomenology is on the first-person perspective and the structures that make up that conscious experience (Smith, 2013). Part of the structures that make up that conscious experience are psychological processes to make sense of information and experiences. As well as psychological needs, such as autonomy and the need to have a sense of control over one’s choices, experiences of cognitive dissonance, and ultimately how to persist through difficulty. This theme highlights how participants made sense of the turmoil they endured and how that impacted their resilience.

Causation, or what participants believe about the events and their causes, was related to how they perceived the outcome and the steps they employed, or say they will employ, to prevent it from happening again. For example, Vonsha who is a consultant, used causation to make sense of her on-going conflict more so than any other participant. I perceived this to be her way of intellectualizing and trying to harmonize the dissonance between her very serious efforts and, as she referred to it, “its failure.” My field notes indicate “still searching for meaning.” The following analytic memo is an example of me

making sense of the participant's attempts to make sense of her conflict through causation, as all participants did:

- *Struggle for Power but more specifically for Influence.* Linguistically the terms were used interchangeably although in practice they were not the same, it was a struggle for who would influence her client (Referent power vs Expert power).
- *Making sense of experience by intellectualizing it, through causation:*
- Causation: Due to clash of [...] cultures
- Causation: Organizational structure and political power
- Causation: Political environment
- Causation: Toxic individual with influential power
- Causation: Multiple layers of conflict
- Causation: Fear of change and paralysis
- Group Dynamics Theory seem to be at play without conscious awareness of role of self in it
- Searching for meaning that gives hope in facilitating future situations (a hopeful shift from uncertainty to familiarity). (Researcher's Analytic Memo)

All seven forms of causation used by Vonsha were highly analytical and expertly crafted given her expert knowledge on organizations. There is little doubt that the dynamics of the organization were affecting her client, with whom she was having difficulty moving from knowledge attainment to application of skills in the workplace. However, there was little evidence of self-awareness on how *she* was influenced by the conflicting interests and organizational dynamics. This was coded as *Forest Beyond the Trees*, which symbolized an inability to see the forest beyond the trees of the conflict you

are in. This code transformed into an overarching theme for all participants in processing and learning because they shared similarities in an inability to accurately see themselves and the role they played in the conflicts, as well as, how the factors they attributed to their conflict partners also affected themselves.

Dissonance and change were noted throughout the analytic memos in some form or another. In five out of the nine cases, there was a significant change that occurred just prior to the start of the conflict. The change was an internal restructuring of some kind. In some cases, it was a move to a new internal position, such as being promoted from junior associate to associate, as was the case for Valentina. Similarly, Gayle was moved to supervise a different team and Vonsha was brought in as an external consultant to work internally as an executive coach. For Jorge and James, the changes were due to organizational restructuring of departments and roles. For the other four participants, there was no specific external change that occurred, but there was a sudden experience of dissonance between new behavior(s) and the beliefs they held about what was right. Using causation coding methods, insight emerged that in both cases, the participants seemed to make sense of their experience as something *new*. Something they had never before experienced and in that way, they viewed their own identity as premature, inexperienced, or unseasoned to deal with the conflicts that unfolded. Continuing with Valentina's story, she expresses what she believes is the lessons that she learned from her workplace conflict.

'The thing that stands out most to me out of everything is just learning to deal with different personalities... Doesn't matter what you do, it's almost like you fail at everything. And personally, I haven't had that experience often in my life, and

so I definitely think... as tough as it was, and as stressful it was, and time consuming as it was, it was a good learning experience for life because I think at some point or another, we are all going to face someone that is difficult like that. And having that experience I think earlier on in my career, rather than later on in my career, is helpful for the future and maybe once I know that I'm dealing with someone that might react that way... [I will respond by] hedging the conflict and being more up front, or at least speaking with management and saying, 'You know, while I agree that may be more helpful to me, that might create conflict, so let's have a discussion with this other person that's gonna be affected by it,' something like that.' (Valentina)

Valentina's take-away is emblematic of what at the core all participants did to make sense of their experience and to seek a sense of control. They decreased the dissonance or disharmony experienced between their considerable work efforts and the unfavorable outcome by reframing the experience as a learning opportunity, one that they were too surprised by or inexperienced to have influenced differently, but nonetheless something they learned from. I believe this effort is used to facilitate their own psychological well-being and resilience. There is no easy way to measure or to code for resilience. Resilience is not a single trait or action, but rather a way to face adversity and find ways to move forward. Valentina does just that.

Similarly, Vonsha's take-away, or what I perceived to be a reduction of dissonance, is expressed through a somewhat idealistic goal of having insider information about the group dynamics of future clients prior to becoming an insider. Also expressed

is a need to understand how to do it differently in the future. This seems to be important for regaining a sense of psychological control:

‘So I think part of my own, going into consulting now, is to really dig about the company and the relations which there are because [...] I will not enter a work space if it is that I find that the influencer in the organization is not invested in the change. That's going to waste my time. [Also], I want to look at the whole cross-cultural coaching. [...] I've been going through from a [cultural] perspective what are some of the things that would navigate away from a successful coaching endeavor. Obviously, the organization has to be an environment that encourages it. That's the first pillar. But then what do we do if we encounter a not so receptive environment? How does the coach and protégé or whatever navigate and build that relationship?’ (Vonsha)

The powerlessness that participants felt in their conflicts appears to have led to a need to regain control and reduce the dissonance they were experiencing. In this study, the participants were in one of two frames of thought, they either had a somewhat idealistic goal of pre-emptively preventing the conflicts reoccurrence or they employed defense mechanisms such as limiting engagement and documenting engagements in a “CYA-Cover Your Ass fashion” (Gayle). In either case, they were somewhat idealistic ideas about human behavior. Similar to Vonsha’s thoughts on learning about the internal dynamics about an organization before committing to work with one, James expressed, “I don't want to say it ruined my hopes and dreams, but I'm gonna be much more aware of the next organization that I become part of. But not just the company, but also the department and all that stuff. The culture.” Although social awareness is important in



preventing issues, it is nearly impossible to truly understand the culture or relations of any workplace from the outside or to think that limiting engagements with other employees will keep any of them from mischaracterizing you in the future. But it seems that is not the point. What is significant is that the cognitive shift from uncertainty to familiarity, the shift from powerless to control over choices, and reframing emotional turmoil as a learning opportunity, is very important for the participants' psychological well-being and ultimately their resilience. Overall, the purpose of reducing dissonance appeared to be two-fold: 1) reduce psychological discomfort and 2) regain control over choices. Both seemed to facilitate resilience.

### **Detachment from the Organization**

*“It's not like perfect procedures appear out of nowhere, but you need a good leader to follow, and I wouldn't put myself in that situation again if I ever felt that way again about the leader.” (Monica)*

Participants bore the emotional or psychological impact of their conflicts and faced dissonance between their persistent efforts and the unfavorable outcomes. The majority felt they did not have a safe workplace outlet to work through their thinking or explore their choices. Only one participant reported having an employee coach to strategize with. Seven out of the nine participants resigned from their positions, one of which resigned from management but continued with the organization. All seven of the participants who resigned expressed a distinct feeling of powerlessness and the move may have been a way of regaining control over choice. The two who did not resign and remained in the same position could, on their own, attribute their conflicts to someone

else's intrapersonal conflict—a causation of projection or a by proxy conflict. In both cases, there appeared to be a level of detachment from the organization.

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked about the role the organization played in their conflicts, the options they considered, and who supported them. The findings and analysis on this were three-fold: 1) The organizations primarily used a rights-and-power based approach to employee conflict management. 2) The rights-and-power approach did not fit with the types of interpersonal, and on some level covert, conflicts that most of the participants faced. 3) When faced with limited choices or a sense of powerlessness, participants sought another outlet.

The organizations as systems that the participants belonged to, like any cultural or societal system, has preferred methods for dispute resolution. The nine participants' organizations' primary mode of dispute resolution was first power, then rights, and then interests. To be clear, participants did not verbalize this view through dispute resolution terms. But rather, through expressing the gray area of uncertainty they occupied because for most of them, the impact of their conflicts did not fit into their organizations' round hole view of decision making power or employee rights, such as conflict based on sex, race, religion, etc. The disruption of the conflicts was viewed only through a power or rights-based lens that management and Human Resources uses to assess who has decision-making authority and if there is a violation of policies or evidence of poor performance to assess employee behavior. In addition, one participant who used the Human Resources process for his conflict perceived it to be somewhat biased in that its investigative authority and role is structured into upholding the authority of those in

power. None of the participants perceived their dispute resolution systems to be effective in real-time.

Only one participant felt that Human Resources was effective in handling her source of conflict. However, it was addressed after she had already resigned due to its increasing threat and her conflict did fit into the defined category of harassment which is a violation of an employee right. This outlier is a good example of how the existing dispute resolution systems may be more effective in addressing high-level threats that carry legal repercussions, but not in addressing the other 8 out of 9 types of employee conflicts. Even so, this outlier was interesting because even though the conflict explicitly fit into sexual harassment, ultimately it was not the tenant used to terminate the employee.

Next introduced is the story of Danielle, whose conflict story was appropriate for the rights-and-power based options but demonstrates how this option was limited in real-time.

Danielle worked in the sports entertainment industry. She was hired as an intern and quickly became a full-time employee. As a smaller satellite of a larger company, she recalls her hiring process being unorthodox and informal. She was not provided with a Human Resources (HR) onboarding process and it was a 'figure it out yourself kind of environment. It's kind of like the wild west of [sport entertainment].' Danielle began to experience discomfort from the 'very crude' remarks her General Manager (GM) made at sporting events about women and to women. Sexual innuendos and jokes became the norm. Things took a turn for the worse when she had to travel with the GM and another female teammate for an

out of town meeting. On the business trip he continued to make inappropriate sexual jokes that made them both uncomfortable. She recalls, '[We] are both like, 'What the heck is going on?' This is so uncomfortable. But we didn't just want to lose our jobs. I'm trying to make a career out of this position at this point.' So, they carried on with business. But that night, his behavior escalated so much that they started to think he may not be as harmless as they thought. 'I was scared shitless. I didn't know what to do. We barricaded the door. We actually flipped a table, pushed it up against the door in case [he] tried to open the door and get into our room at night. So, it was traumatizing.' Still, Danielle was stuck between jeopardizing her career and persisting through the threat. She persisted. Danielle oversaw interns and an intern she hired came to her to confide that the GM made her feel uncomfortable. That pushed her to ask her GM for the HR contact, to which he replied, 'Why, are you going to file a complaint about me?' with a wink. Now she was terrified to call. In an office of only six, how could she be protected from retaliation? Surely, he would know it was her. During this time Danielle and her co-workers devised ways to protect each other. They created a system to ensure that no female employee was ever left alone with the GM for more than ten minutes. They looked out for each other and bonded over their fear. Three weeks later she resigned and moved away. Shortly after, she was contacted by a former colleague. They needed her help with an HR investigation that was prompted by external complaints of sexual harassment. She agreed because it was now safe to do so. At this point, she felt HR acted swiftly. Within 48 hours, the GM was terminated. However, it was not on the basis of sexual harassment.

Through the investigation they found other policy violations that they used as the basis for termination instead. They feared a retaliatory lawsuit if they terminated him on the basis of sexual harassment. Danielle acknowledged that the former GM went on to work for another entertainment company. (Danielle)

Danielle's story and those of the other participants who utilized upper management and Human Resources processes prompted a larger question: what is truly the role of the Human Resources department in addressing employee conflict? According to the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), Human Resources should play a role in employee relations and in resolving employee conflicts. They should be trained in conflict resolution and they should focus on prevention. However, none of the participants expressed this as a role they saw their respective HRs playing. The two other participants who were involved in their Human Resources dispute resolution processes referred to it as a formal investigation. Both were unsatisfied by the process calling it lengthy, secretive, and distressing. Both were addressed through rights-based grievance procedures and adjudication, although only one of the conflicts seemed appropriate for this approach. Jorge explained, "And certainly HR was no help at all. They just, whatever interaction they had with me was formulaic, what I had to do to get into their system." For Danielle, this option was not safe at the time of her employment. It would have required her to put her grievance into writing and it would not have given her anonymity. Although only three participants engaged with HR's dispute resolution processes, most expressed that it was not within their range of options at the time because they did not feel it was "safe" to go to HR. Some expressed discomfort knowing that anything they said would be considered official record, while others felt HR was not a neutral role and

that what they said would be communicated to their superiors, even if it did not involve them. Some appeared to be aware that their conflicts did not fit into what their HR departments did, while two participants were too far removed from their HRs to even consider it.

How an organization manages employee conflicts inevitably influences the experience that employees have when conflicts emerge. Only one participant out of nine said she had access to an interest-based option, coaching. Coaching within conflict management is an interest-based option to help people help themselves. Valentina found it somewhat useful in terms of feeling supported, but she also felt it ultimately made things worse because it became about strategizing ways to appease her former mentor, and only she was being coached. There were no attempts to mediate and the other party refused to meet with the coach. No other participants reported using interest-based options, and only one other participant reported to having knowledge of the option.

One more interesting finding on participants' options was expressed by only one participant, Michelle, but it is deemed important. When asked about what options the institution provided, she acknowledged that she had an option to discuss her conflict with an ombuds at her institution. An ombuds is supposed to provide all of the interest-based conflict management options. When asked why she did not pursue it, she expressed reluctance because she did not view that individual as neutral because the ombuds was a former faculty member of the institution and a colleague of her other supervisor. An ombuds' role is supposed to be based on four ethical principles: Independence, Neutrality and Impartiality, Confidentiality, and Informality. Some higher education institutions have taken up a practice of hiring faculty members as university ombuds. Technically,

this does not violate the independence principle because the ombuds no longer hold another position that might compromise independence, but in this case it did appear to affect an employee's perceptions about the ombuds' impartiality. This insight, though singular and not directly representative of the whole of the participants, is important for the field of conflict resolution and in particular, those serving in higher education institutions. None of the other participants reported having access to an ombuds or conflict resolution specialist. However, they were upfront about their thought process when considering their options and weighing out the risk of pursuing those options. Thus, it is reasonable to say that if given the option, the ombuds would need to be perceived as a safe, impartial, and confidential option. Shaun, having I presume little to no knowledge on the subject matter, expressed a desire for an ombuds or conflict resolution-like department in his own words:

I think they need some type of policy or some type of process on how you deal with conflicts. You know, investigations, employee complaints. I think it needs to be a department, almost like an internal affairs department, stand alone. (Shaun)

In processing each participant's experience, I initially viewed their resignations as quitting. Through my own concept of time, I viewed it as something permanent, something that marked the end. It was final. I could see the start and end of the on-going turmoil, but then wrestled with what was left, the after thoughts—the things that participants still carried with them years later about their views of organizations and leaders. Participants seemed to *fall out of enchantment* with the authority. The only way to explain it is to liken it to the moment a child, at whatever age it may be, realizes that their mom or dad is not quite the superhero/superhuman they thought them to be. The

moment they realize that mom or dad cannot protect them from everything. There was a shift from dependence on authority to a desire to be independent of that control and to have a choice in their own work life. A detachment.

For six participants, that detachment meant separating from the organization and more specifically, detachment from what caused them psychological distress. It seems it was not the end that I perceived it to be. For participants faced with powerlessness, there was significant limitations influencing their working conditions, resulting in them to sought after another outlet. They may not have been able to influence things to get better, but at least they had the choice to do so elsewhere. The three employees who remained at their organizations appeared to have a similar but different detachment. They did not separate themselves physically through resignation, but they went through their own psychological shift about the role of the authority (organization) and adopted *a take care of yourself because no one else will* mentality. It was more of an emotional detachment. This detachment may also be a way to facilitate their own psychological well-being and ultimately their resilience to persist.

### **Learning through Reflection**

*“I never...I never thought about that. Wow, what therapy [laughs]”* (Vonsha)

In preparing for the role of researcher and interviewer who would be coming face-to-face with individuals sharing emotional experiences, I never stopped to think about the power of dialogue. Sure, I wrote about it in methodological terms explaining the dialectical relationship and hermeneutics of the study, but it was done without grasping the transformational power of dialogue itself. With each interview, I grew more and more certain in the need for employees to have these conversations with someone skilled and



who they can trust to facilitate it. The compilation of excerpts that follow, when read consecutively, illustrate the kind of reflection and learning that was actively taking place in the dialogues with participants:

- Well I never thought about that but when [...]. That element [...] may have created, in terms of optics, people saying hey there's a threat of... (Vonsha)
- Making sense of what it meant for me is that it's difficult [...] So, there are certain assumptions that I held [...] that perhaps, could help to shape or help me enter that space without challenges. (Vonsha)
- I usually like to think the decision I make, whether it's the right one or if it's the wrong one, [is] that I can learn from the experience. (Michelle)
- So, after all this, now I understand that she was going through a lot of the same things that I was going through. (James)
- I think, partially, be more grateful when things are good. I think that's important. (James)
- That's another thing,... another 'aha' moment was, 'Oh, I figured out what's going on.' But, you can't. There's a reason people that are psychologists go see psychologists, and psychiatrists go see psychiatrists. There's a reason. (James)
- At the time, I don't think I realized how much of a sexual harassment case it was. I knew it made me uncomfortable and I knew that something wasn't right, but I was not aware of how invasive it was. I've started looking back on it in hindsight. (Danielle)
- I would have pursued it finally when... I would have taken the steps immediately had I had any sort of idea what direction to go in. (Danielle)

- If I would have had somebody to talk to, I think I would've done... I would've paid more attention to a key question you asked, like what steps had I taken to try to make the situation better? Because I really didn't. (Jorge)
- One interesting thing I learned about conflict is we see ourselves with halos, so I didn't see sort of my own role in it. (Jorge)
- When we're in the conflict, it's very hard to see both sides. And if there's any ability to see both sides, it really has to be [...] engineered. (Jorge)
- Looking back on it, I think I felt that way even from the beginning, and I should've probably trusted my gut on that. (Monica)
- When I've looked back on it, even talking to my friend and what not about it, I've had this desire to just write an email and be like, 'You know, you really were awful,' but I wouldn't do that because it wouldn't be worth anything. After this time, I wouldn't do it, but I wish I could just scream everything I really felt. But that's not professional, and there's no reason for me to do it. (Monica)
- For that to happen, I think I had to kind of take a step back and reevaluate how I deal with people in certain situations. (Shaun)
- I think the way that it affected me, coming from what I've come from, I kind of look at it like 'how could I allow myself to get caught up in a situation like that?' (Shaun)
- You don't think about how much one little isolated incident can affect such a wide range of people when you're doing things like that, but there's a lot of people that benefit off of us. (Shaun)

- Just because you have a conflict with another employee, or another coworker, it shouldn't consume you as much as it did for me, and I know that that's probably easier said than done, but sometimes you just have to try to create that barrier. If people wanted to talk to me about it, maybe saying, 'You know, I'm done with that subject. Let's move on,' or something to make it so that I'm spending less time thinking or worrying about it. (Valentina)
- I think with my experience and time away from it, looking back, I think now, if I was a supervisor for her, I would take a more direct approach. (Gayle)
- Now you get to take it with you, so I don't have it in my brain. (Gayle)

The last quote from Gayle is how she ended our interview: "Now you can take it with you, so I don't have it in my brain." To me, this was symbolic of the catharsis felt by most participants. It was an act of letting go. These kinds of purgative dialogues allow people to rewrite the narratives they carry. To rewrite something traumatic as a learning opportunity. To rewrite something that caused so much stress it made you physically ill. To realize that it's important to be more grateful when things are good. It was through active listening, reflecting, asking perspective taking questions, and most importantly through participants' brave vulnerability, that they were able to cycle around, back-and-forth, and up-and-down through their stories until they had exhausted them. It was through the power of dialogue that participants reflected on themselves, others, their organizations, the cultures, and the layers upon layers of nuances that made up how they viewed their experience and they learned from reprocessing it, and so did I.

I began this study with a somewhat pessimistic view of the negative impact that workplace conflict has on people. I struggled through coding the participants' emotional

turmoil and other negative impacts. The sense of powerlessness that was felt was at times hard to write about and I felt uncomfortable sharing the excerpts from their stories because they felt too raw to share. Through reading, listening, and writing I reflected over and over again on their essence. The participants may have felt like James described, “the more I tried to get rid of those corners, the more corners I started to get. I was like, a prickly star.” However, they cannot all be prickly stars. It seems more likely that the norms for facilitating employee conflicts are the prickly stars—too difficult to fit into. The participants reminded me of a lesson that I always seem to forget. People are incredibly resilient at taking care of themselves.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

The abstract conceptualization of this study began with trying to understand the tangible and intangible gap between 1) the premise that workplace conflict is costly in both human and resource capital as supported by the existing literature and 2) what I perceived to be the cultural lag of organizations whose methods for addressing workplace conflict are based on classical theories of scientific management and bureaucracy that focus on controlling workers' behavior, hierarchical decision-making power, and punitive measures. When organizational schools of thought shifted to humanist theories and eventually human resource theories, and then the emergence of alternative dispute resolution over the past thirty plus years became a common practice for addressing conflict, it should have made a significant difference in how workplace conflict is viewed on a macro scale. It appears to have made slow progress. The primary mode of rights-and-power based methods for addressing workplace conflict in organizations continue to be the norm, almost exclusively the norm. Understanding the motivation or lack thereof to expand these options and attempting to assess the cultural tipping point of U.S. organizations proved to be an endeavor too large to tackle for one dissertation. Instead, it led to a desire to start from the beginning. So, to really understand it, the research followed the underpinnings of phenomenology to begin by going "back to things themselves" (Husserl as cited in Kruger, 1988, p. 28), the workplace conflict and those in it.

The models in this field and in organizational development were developed from human observations and studies, so I decided to start the same way. It was a risky

endeavor. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a complicated, abstract, and a very open-ended methodology. “What is your hypothesis?” I was often asked. “I don’t have one, I’m just going to see what emerges.” This was met with unspoken concern. There was a small seed of doubt in every research method step taken in this study, but it was overshadowed with instinctual curiosity and an earnest desire to understand the lives of the people who go unrecognized in the studies that result in charts, figures, models, and the theories that we all follow in hopes of making lives better. This study started by attempting to understand the lived experience of people who have lived and performed through unresolved and escalated workplace conflict. Their stories revived a sense of importance in humanizing the people that organizational conflict resolution seeks to address. The insights, raw emotions, impacts described even years later, and most importantly the power of their story-telling and especially the re-writing of their narratives led to the main takeaway of this study. Resulting in a conclusion that having a safe and skilled outlet for dialogue and processing of emotional situations is a necessary platform for “managing” workplace conflict and creating healthier organizations. At the core of their experiences was a sense of powerlessness felt by not being able to positively influence the negative outcomes of their conflicts. This sense of powerlessness was magnified by their organizations lack of options that fit their types of conflicts and an inability to *see the forest beyond the trees* of the conflict they were in, leaving them feeling like a square peg in a round hole. It may have also been affected by the obscurity of covert expressions of conflict that are difficult to address. What follows is a brief summary of the introduction, literature review, and methodological research design. Then a highlight of key findings is presented and expanded on by answering the three research

questions. Followed by discussion on the limitations of the study and recommendations. Finally, the study is concluded with the contributions of this research to the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution and what will follow.

### **Brief Summary**

In the first chapter, the context is set for the life of the average worker in the U.S. who spends an average of 90,000 hours or a decade of their life at work, more than time spent with loved ones, doing leisurely activities, or even sleeping. The shift from industrial-era organizational structures to present-day organizations that are highly interconnected and whose leaders are tasked with managing human connections to increase productivity and innovation is presented as the present-day leadership need to facilitate interpersonal and group relations strategically. An overview of the cost of workplace conflict was presented and the problem was posed that organizations who want to succeed in the current global marketplace need to shift from treating workplace conflict as simply the peril or cost of doing business, to recognizing the need to manage it more strategically. Given the gap between the existing research on the costs and the lack of interest-based conflict resolution methods in organizations, the study sought to acquire deeper understanding of the lived experiences and impact of workplace conflict on workers to enhance the literature and awaken interest in workers needs and organizational health using the type of methods that elicit interest, empathy, and change. The literature review begins with an understanding of the term conflict, then organizational conflict and its underlying theoretical foundations. Conflict Management Systems are presented through a framework of interest-based and rights-and-power based conflict management options. Organizational culture is debated and a review of the existing studies on the cost

of conflict and their limitations is presented. After the research analysis was conducted, the literature is expanded in the discussion of findings in this chapter to discuss group relations theories and the need to incorporate them into conflict management study and practices.

In chapter three, Research Methods, workplace conflict and its effects are presented as the research problem and three research questions are posed: (1) How do people who have experienced an unresolved or escalated workplace conflict make sense of their experience, the process, their options, and the organization? (2) What does going through the conflict mean to them? (3) How do they describe the impact? These research questions are presented as central to the interpretative phenomenological analysis underpinnings concerned with human lived experience and the meaning people impress upon it. The design was presented as philosophically guided by the hermeneutic framework referring to the various parts of meaning, the prejudice that the researcher carries, and the dialectical relationship between researcher and participants that is necessary for meaning to emerge. Data was collected from nine participants using semi-structured one-to-one interviews and the seven steps from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) in *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. It was carefully followed to ensure the validity of the research methods and purity to the double hermeneutic process of making sense of the phenomenon.

### **Highlight of Key Findings**

The meaning and other insights that emerged from the participants' stories were categorized into six super-ordinate themes. First, *Impact from Negative Work-Life Events*. In this theme, the results chapter presented the emotional, psychological, and physical



impact that participants described in symptomatic terms such as losing weight, being irritable, feeling paranoid, feeling mentally unstable, isolation, having dark thoughts, and especially feeling powerless. The section used excerpts from their stories to bring it to life. The impact described by most participants was significant and there was some uncertainty discussed in its interpretation about what is impact versus what is trauma, because the effects of the unresolved conflicts were still present even years later. It also shed insight into the pervasiveness of presenteeism which led to some calculations in the second theme. In the theme *Costly Reactions*, the cost of the negative consequences or impacts was expounded on and some estimated costs were presented. For example, the cost of Shaun's workplace conflict which included presenteeism, turnover, and a settlement cost was estimated at \$135,000. The total cost of collective resignations among participants was estimated to be over \$2,000,000. Other impacts were discussed in terms of potential costs such as sabotage, restructuring, underperformance, wasted time, as well as illness and mental health costs. All but one participant recognized that it significantly impacted their work engagement, reducing productivity and commitment to the organization.

The third super ordinate theme, *Covert Conflict*, presented an interpretation of the types of conflicts that the participants described. They were primarily interpersonal, but the researcher interpreted some of the more meaningful, yet difficult to articulate expressions, as covert expressions of conflict such as microaggressions, controlling, character insults, coercion, and sabotage. Glimpses of intergroup covert conflict such as pairing, isolating, and distrust of hidden agendas emerged, but more generally it seemed to be questions concerning group membership. This finding was recognized as limited

because it is limited to the participants' stories and not on group observations. The impact of the covert expressions was felt, but difficult to pinpoint to overt behaviors which may have added to the confusion and dissonance participants experienced. It is possible the covert expressions also contributed to the powerlessness they felt.

The fourth theme, *Reducing Dissonance to Facilitate Resilience*, elucidated how participants processed their experience as a new or unfamiliar state. This created a dissonance or state of psychological uncertainty when participants made repeated efforts to influence their ongoing conflicts to alleviate the stress they were experiencing. However, they felt powerless when their repeated efforts did not positively impact the outcome or when their experience did not fit within the scope of their organizations conflict management. Almost all of the participants used causation to make sense of their conflicts. The most significant emotional descriptions revolved around feeling powerless, hopeless, and like nothing they tried worked. It was interpreted that the participants reduced this dissonance by reframing their emotional turmoil into something more positive like viewing it as an opportunity to learn from it or now feeling more familiar with the type of conflict or difficult person. The expressions of this reframe appeared to be somewhat idealistic and were thus interpreted as a mechanism for facilitating their own resilience.

The fifth superordinate theme was *Detachment from the Organization*. Seven of the nine participants resigned from their positions and all seemed to detach either through resignation or emotionally from the idea that their organizations could help them resolve their ongoing conflicts. Only one participant reported having access to an interest-based conflict management option and the rest were in line with the Dispute Systems Design by

Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1988) that illustrates “the relationship between three ways of resolving disputes: by negotiating interests, by adjudicating rights, or by pursuing power options” (Brahm, Ouellet, 2003, p. 3) with the primary mode being power, followed by rights, then interests. Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1988) considered this as a distressed and costly system, which was in line with the square peg in a round hole analogy used to explain the participants’ experience with it as a whole. For those who did not resign, they seemed to adopt a *take care of yourself* mental model moving forward. In both cases, there was a detachment or distancing of oneself from the organization. Given the alignment with the distressed dispute system, one could see why the participants would grow weary of their organizations’ dispute systems.

The final theme, *Learning through Reflection*, provided an analysis of the process of sharing their stories through the interviews. In real-time it created a space for the participants to reflect and learn from the stories they had constructed making space for revisions, new viewpoints, and aha moments. There was a perceived shift from an inability to see the role one plays in the conflict, coded in the analysis as seeing the forest beyond the trees, to becoming more aware of their role and the things they had missed. For some it evoked sympathy for whom they were in conflict with, others it evoked empathy for themselves, and for others it seemed to give them the closure that maybe they were unaware they wanted. My hope is that they each got out of it what they needed. The dialogue itself was transformational and a testament to the need for employees to have these types of conversations with someone skilled who they can trust to facilitate it.

## Conclusions on Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this IPA study was *how do people who have experienced an unresolved or escalated workplace conflict make sense of their experience, the process, their options, and the organization?* The metaphor that captures the essence of the answer to this complex and layered question is that participants viewed their experience as a square peg in a round hole. In other words, as not quite fitting into the scope of workplace conflict management. It seemed that all nine participants made sense of their experience through causation or attribution of the source of conflict to a number of external factors such as organizational change, a distrustful working environment, poor leadership, group dynamics, or even due to the other party's psychological distress that was impacting them and others in the workplace. The use of causation seemed to be helpful in the psychological processing or making sense of their experience, but there was also an experience of dissonance between their efforts to positively influence the ongoing conflict and the negative outcomes that resulted. Overall, there was a sense of powerlessness evoked in all of the participants' experience of the process. The participants also seemed to fall out of enchantment with their organizations, feeling like there were no constructive outlets or processes for the interpersonal conflicts they were experiencing. Also, that their conflict experiences were like square pegs in the round hole rights-and-power based approach to employee conflict management within their organizations. The role played by the organizations was in all cases reactive, and participants expressed that their options or choices were perceived to be limited. Out of nine participants, seven of them resigned from their positions. Accounting for the resignations related to their conflicts and there were a total of twenty-

two resignations. Those who used upper-level leadership and human resource processes to address their conflicts reported feeling frustrated by the lengthy, and what they believed to be ineffective, processes. Those who resonated this sentiment had interpersonal conflicts that were adjudicated by formal grievance procedures. Only one participant had a positive view of the Human Resources procedures, and her conflict was a good fit for the right-and-power based conflict management options because it was a harassment case, which is an explicit violation of workers' rights. In all cases, there seemed to be a resulting detachment from the organization, either through resignation, or emotionally for those who stayed. It is possible that the sense of powerlessness combined with the emotional turmoil endured may have led to the high rate of turnover because when participants were faced with limited choices and an inability to influence their working conditions in the midst of ongoing conflict, they sought another outlet to exercise control over their work lives. For those who stayed, there appeared to be more of an emotional detachment in which they persisted by shifting from operating in a belief that the organization could take care of them, to one in which they had to take care of themselves and enact methods of protecting or healing themselves. In both cases, it appeared to serve the purpose of facilitating their own psychological well-being.

The second sub-research question posed was *what does going through the conflict mean to them?* This research question is central to the phenomenological underpinnings of the study in which the living through or performing through the phenomenon is at the heart of the study. This proved to be an interesting journey in the dialectical relationship between the researcher and participants in which each participant journeyed through their story moving from past to present, back and forth. That is, until what their stories meant

to them shifted from the emotional turmoil and the distressing act of *going through it* to an almost cathartic act of deriving meaning from it as a learning opportunity. Going through it meant stress, uncertainty, searching for meaning or cause, and feeling powerless when trying again and again to rectify it, to now meaning that they have lived through an incredibly impactful and tumultuous negative work event and found a way to learn from it. This reframe was a shift from finding themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation that caused a great deal of psychological distress to now being in a somewhat more hopeful state of using it as a learning opportunity to be more socially aware and preemptive of future conflicts. As shared in the results section, this appeared to be somewhat idealistic in terms of how to prevent future conflicts, but that did not seem to be the primary purpose of the shift. What was significant was that the cognitive shift from uncertainty to familiarity, from powerless to control over choices, and reframe from emotional turmoil to a learning opportunity was important to the participants' psychological well-being and ultimately their resilience.

The third sub-research question was, *how do they describe the impact?* Although, none of the participants specifically referred to their work conflict experience as a trauma, the severity of the impact they described would point to it being at the very least a significant negative work life event with residual effects. In some cases, the emotional effects were felt for years after the demarcated end of the conflict. However, the participants made only reluctant mentions of PTSD, or feeling shell shocked, or referred only to specific incidents as traumatic or bullying. But overall, they did not use these linguistic terms to describe the whole of the impact because there seemed to be discomfort using these kinds of terms. Perhaps it is because there is some relative

privilege felt that makes one reluctant to categorize one's experience in the same terms used to describe the impact of abuse or war. This is understandable and may be indicative of a need to expand the language on the impact of workplace conflict without needing to reduce its significance.

The emotional and psychological turmoil participants experienced was more comfortably described through symptomatic descriptions like feeling stressed, losing sleep, losing weight, teeth grinding, conflict with significant others, paranoia, isolation, physical illness, depression, mental instability, paralysis, misery, fear, demotivation, feeling discouraged, feeling like a failure, and feeling like there was nothing left to give. The impact the participants described is somewhat summarized here for the purpose of providing closure to the research question, but the impact cannot be fully understood without the stories behind them. Listing isolated words does what the existing body of literature already does. It isolates the impact into quantifiable variables and forms neutral models, but fails to capture the living experience of the humans behind it. At the heart of workplace conflict is people. People with emotions, hopes, fears, and families who depend on them. The excerpts shared in the results chapter are purposively used to humanize the findings and to incite thought, empathy, and hopefully more attention to the needs of workers.

Other forms of tangible impact were described because of the semi-structured questions that sought to understand how it also impacted the organizations. Using the Dan Dana Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict calculation tool, it was estimated that the collective cost of turnover to the organizations was over \$2,000,000. This is considered a conservative estimate because it is limited to averaging the cost by salaries

and may not include the full scope of loss of productivity, low morale, reputation, restructuring, impact on other not-accounted-for-employees, and so on. Another more tangible impact described was the reports on presenteeism. Despite the existing research on the notable impact of absenteeism, none of the participants reported missing any work days during their ongoing conflicts. Instead, they reported reduced engagement and productivity because they were consumed by their conflicts. Some ranged from giving work 30-50% of their effort, while others said they completed their immediate tasks but gave no effort to anything else, others reported spending too much time in watercooler exchanges trying to figure out what was going on or mitigating rumors, and one participant reported clocking in and clocking out for a month straight with no productivity until the conflict was resolved. The cost of presenteeism was not estimated for all participants except for the latter. The estimated presenteeism cost in salary alone, plus cost of one turnover, plus the settlement payout of that turnover, estimated a total of \$135,000 for one single workplace conflict. The recommendations on this finding are in line with the existing literature on the cost of conflict that urges organizations to implement more measures to track the costs of unresolved conflict that will render more accurate figures to demonstrate how it affects their bottom line, which can ultimately lead to more strategic options. In addition, the research and scope of presenteeism should be expanded because based on the stories of these nine participants, it differed for each of them in practice and there could be a host of consequences that are not measured because they do not fit in the current definition and scope of presenteeism in its current application. The current research tends to see presenteeism similarly to absenteeism, as a health-related consequence, which does not account for the various motivations people



have for being present but not engaged in work during emotionally stressful times. In chapter one, it was explained that the Center for Disease Control estimates that productivity loss due to health-related employee absences cost employers \$225.8 billion annually (“Workplace Health Promotion,” 2016). None of the participants’ presenteeism would be accounted for in this formulation because none reported missing work. Therefore, the cost of presenteeism is believed to be a major hidden cost to employers.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study can be best understood as a methodological struggle between what is essentially an exploratory approach of understanding the experience and meaning of a phenomenon, and the dissertation pressure to present findings that can be interpreted as being significant contributions, while also concealing the identity of participants who shared vulnerable experiences. For one, using nine participants is a large sample for an IPA study in which it is acceptable to use as little as one to three participants. To capture the essence of meaning from nine participants took many revisions and trips around the circular hermeneutic process of analyzing the parts of each participant’s meaning, along with my own interpretative analysis to form whole themes, to then bracketing those themes for each participant over and over again, until finally reaching a point of looking for patterns across cases, and then attempting to reduce them to only six superordinate themes and discreetly support them with excerpts that would not identify the participants. This was like learning a new research art form and not knowing if it was a Picasso or a preschooler’s work of art in the process. Thus, my view of the limitations is primarily in the write-up of results and presentation of analysis, and in further reducing them to shorter conclusions in this chapter because it does not capture

the full breadth of the participants' lived experiences. There were so many more layers as well as data I found to be important in meaning in each participants' data. But to stay true to the methodology, it was presented if it was significant among all of the participants. Meaning, it was reflective of all of their experiences and not just one or two. In the analysis write-up, I made a judgement call to make a few exceptions. But overall, it is in of itself a limitation founded on the pervasive belief in statistical significance within the sciences and research. In fact, there is a movement that scientists and statisticians are putting forth to ban what they view as a "widely abused scientific method" because the world is far more complex and uncertain than the statistically significant answers imposed on complicated questions that leave out information that may be ambiguous but useful (Harris, 2019).

The pressure as a Ph.D. student to create something never done before and never found before, alone, is enough to deter the research away from seeking to shed light on meanings that are less perceptible, while embracing uncertainty in the process. Had it not been for my training in Group Relations where one of my major takeaways was to learn to embrace the unknown, I do not believe I would have followed this methodology simply out of fear and the discomfort of not feeling in control of the data. Furthermore, this training and my knowledge of conflict resolution and organizations without a doubt colored my interpretations of the participants' meaning, and I believe someone with a different background would find new and interesting insights in the data. This is also not necessarily in line with the purpose of scientific method studies in which a study should be able to be reproduced and the findings should stand. The double hermeneutic process makes that unlikely because it embraces the subjective element and does not pass off

interpretations as objective. Instead, the markers for validity are based on transparency of the process of analysis and the researcher's own role in forming it, which I did throughout the analysis to the best of my writing ability but could inarguably be improved with time and more experience.

## Discussion

Conflict Management Systems was discussed in the literature review prior to the completion of the study. However, in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, insights may emerge that connect to literature not previously discussed or sufficiently exhausted. The insight on interpersonal conflicts and covert expressions of conflict leads to further discussion on the table developed by Rowe and Bloch in 2009 (see Figure 10), that is used to assess the conflict management options that some organizations provide.

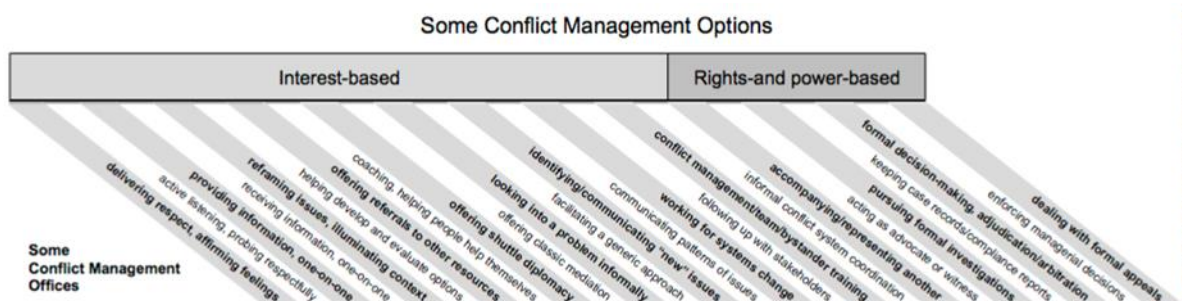


Figure 10. Analyzing conflict management

It includes a full range of interest-based and right-and-power based options. This initially appeared like an exhaustive set of options, however, it seems to also overlook the covert expressions of conflict and those related to group development. While these could certainly be addressed by a professional familiar with these elements within some of the options listed, it is hard to find conflict management models that address these specifically. Instead, it is a separate entity found within group relations theories and institutions such as the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, U.K. or the

A.K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems in the U.S. The A.K. Rice Institute's mission is "the study of how unconscious thoughts and feelings significantly impact our lives when we are in groups—from family to workplace to nation" ([akrice.org](http://akrice.org)).

Similarly, "Tavistock is dedicated to the study of human relations for the purpose of bettering working life and conditions for all humans...in all aspects on the formation or development of human character or capacity" ([tavinstitute.org](http://tavinstitute.org), n.d.). I attended a six-day A.K. Rice living laboratory conference to explore just that. I have also had the opportunity to work as a consultant for a course modeled on these methods of group study and was therefore able to pick up on the covert, and possibly unconscious nuances, that the participants had difficulty naming but were nevertheless very aware of the impact it had on them. Participants used causation methods to try to understand these elements, but would cast them as personality issues or the psychological problems of their conflict counterparts. These institutions and study methods are based on the underpinnings of psychoanalysis and integrated them into the study of group development. It seems this element is lacking within the field of conflict management because it focuses more on overt interest-based conflicts that can often be managed or negotiated, or value conflicts that cannot be negotiated but can sometimes be accommodated. However, if these covert and unconscious elements do not fit within the interest-based options, then these experiences may continue to remain square pegs even in an expanded conflict management system.

To provide insight into this type of analysis, the work of one of the pioneers in group relations is presented to further understand the nuances and dynamics of groups. According to Wilfred Bion's seminal work in "Experiences in Groups" (1961), groups

operate on two levels: an overt aspect known as the work group, which is formed by a consciously agreed on task or objective, and a latent covert aspect known as the basic assumption group. Individuals bring into groups their hidden agendas. Hidden agendas, in contrast to the colloquial use that infers intentional manipulation, is defined as conscious and unconscious parts of the individual that they plan to not share with the group. The work group pulls together all of their skills to achieve their intended task-goal, but “the group’s combined latent hidden agendas make up the basic assumption group and this is made up of unconscious wishes, fears, defenses, impulses, and projections” including a relationship with leadership as well as power and authority (Hayden, Molenkamp, n.d.). According to Bion, the basic assumption group is geared towards a more primitive reality, and sometimes irrationally in survival mode in “various kinds of collective regressive behavior, or attempts to satisfy needs for security, safety, dependency, and affection, etc.” (Hayden, Molenkamp, n.d.). In groups, this can be observed or felt as vies for belonging, dependency and counter-dependency on authority, group paralysis, and a variety of microaggressions that were noted by participants such as indirect coercion, bullying, controlling, and sabotage.

This is not an exhaustive literature of group relations theories, but rather a glimpse into how it applies to conflict and the workplace. Based on the findings of this study, it is important to find new ways to incorporate this school of study on group relations with organizational conflict studies, and to use it to inform our models and conflict management practices.

## Recommendations

Some recommendations were integrated in the prior section in Conclusions on Research Questions discussing the need to expand the scope of presenteeism and measurability of conflict costs. Now, the limitations led to the first recommendation for future research, which is to employ more multiperspectival design methods to understanding workplace conflict. For the purpose of this IPA research, the sample was homogeneous in their shared experience of a single phenomenon, workplace conflict, and as stated earlier, the analysis or results were focused on their shared perspectives. The recommendation is to expand the research to include the use of multiple perspectives to explore the same phenomenon. For example, in this study the primary purpose was to understand how people living through workplace conflict made sense of their experience. Using a multiperspectival approach, the same phenomenon would include the accounts of other people “who belong to the ‘lived world’ of the person, such as a partner, friends, and colleagues” to use multiple perspectives to capture more “complex and systemic experiential phenomenon” (Larkin, Shaw, Flowers, 2018, p. 183). It was clear that the participants’ conflicts impacted many more people, but that did not fall within the scope of the study. My hidden agenda in this recommendation is a hope that expanding the understanding from being just about the individual, who is the square peg, to recognizing the scope of impact beyond the individual, could help make a larger push for expanding conflict management options in organizations or at least uncover motivations to do so. This recommendation was inspired by a completely unrelated insight from two studies that found that male managers were more likely to elevate female employees if they had a daughter (2011) and Supreme Court Justices were more likely to vote in favor of

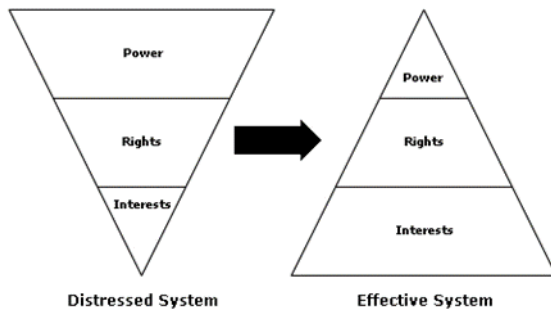
women's rights if they had a daughter (2015), aptly coined as the "daughter effect" (Evans, 2014). It was not the case if they had a mother, sister, wife, son, etc. The motivating factor was a shift in their worldview as a father to a female. Why is this relevant? The specific motivating factors that shift worldviews and lead to action is unknown and unpredictable, but worth continuing to search for.

The second recommendation for practitioners in this field is to use other practitioners in this field, and in the psychological field, to assist in their own psychological processing. This may not yet be a requirement or ethical guideline for conflict resolution practitioners, but given that a few of the participants had at least certificate level knowledge of conflict management and others had more, their experiences living through conflict stood out to me because they were no different than the other participants who had no experience with formal conflict resolution. Yet, they also had difficulty seeing the forest beyond the trees. It seemed that their education and experience was limited when they found themselves in conflict, and this may be because of the physiological responses to conflict or psychological defenses that arise in a state of emotional arousal, in which, there is some imbalance between strong emotions and clear cognitive thinking (Katz, Lawyer, Sweedler, 2011). Everyone has blind spots of awareness, and those with more conflict management knowledge were no different in processing their own conflict than those without it. In any case, they too benefitted from dialogue and revisiting the narratives they had formed as true to expand their view and understand their own role in it. This recommendation was derived from the learning one participant shared toward the end of his interview. He reflected, "That's another 'aha' moment, [it] was 'Oh, I figured out what's going on' but you can't. There's a reason

people that are psychologists go see psychologists, and psychiatrists go see psychiatrists. There's a reason." He was referring to the fact that despite his knowledge of conflict practices, he was so consumed by it that he is now aware of his own limitations and the reasoning that even professionals need professional help in processing stressful or emotional events.

The third recommendation is not limited to this study, but to the larger field of conflict studies. Research from the literature, the study itself, and the anecdotal experience of being in this field for seven years has led to a realization that what we come to learn and understand as logical human needs and appropriate methods for facilitating resolutions are not in line with the larger societal U.S. culture that is deeply rooted in power and rights. Whether it is based on constitutional rights, hierarchical power and authority, or reliance on right and wrong being dictated by parents from a young age, as a society we have developed patterns of seeking adjudication of right and wrong when in conflict. In this field, we may recognize that this method is not appropriate for all conflicts, and that interest-based options may empower individuals to problem-solve and reduce the resources that go into it. However, this is not the norm, as seen in this study. A shift to expanding organizational options for conflict management or inverting the Dispute Systems Design triangle by Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1988) (see Figure 11) will likely require a larger cultural shift.





*Figure 11.* Dispute systems design.

The following diagram was based on human studies and developed in 1980s. That is more than thirty years ago and is enough to be considered a cultural lag. Although cultural lag typically refers to the gap in progress or change between material things like technology and non-material culture, here it applies to the gap between a primarily rights-and-power based system of conflict management and the culture of conflict in organizations that is primarily interpersonal, and in this study also covert conflict. Which is not adequately addressed by the older systems developed to manage labor practices and production lines.

Similar to the shift that takes place in any industry based on technology and innovation, or the mass educational shift that leads to consumer awareness when pesticides and toxic substances are found to impact health and therefore consumer demands, the field of conflict resolution studies must influence a cultural shift by expanding its engagement with other disciplines. The field of conflict resolution is somewhat stand-alone, and when integrated, is typically associated with the legal field. However, the fields of business, leadership, organizational psychology, healthcare, education, public affairs, and the sciences are without a doubt impacted by and simultaneously influencing conflict management systems with or without the input of

conflict resolution specialists. Investing in mainstreaming the principles and tools of this field is an investment in the application and longevity of the field.

This type of cultural shift is needed for the final recommendation, which is for organizations. Given the existing research on workplace conflict impacts, the costs of unresolved conflicts, the complex and highly interconnected state of most present-day organizations, and this type of insight into workers' conflict experiences, it is safe to say that all organizations need conflict resolution practitioners or trained personnel. In my own anecdotal experience with consulting and training for organizations, it is evident that there is an over reliance on Human Resources to be the end-all be-all for worker affairs. This research demonstrated that this role was limited and that most participants did not feel comfortable using it or found it ineffective. Organizations from the top-down can have a disparaging view of interpersonal conflict as "drama" and this was explained by two female participants whose experiences closely paralleled each other's. They were both caught between what they called "the boy's club" upper-level management, and managing a female with whom they had an on-going conflict. In both of those cases, the management did not view it as a business-related problem. Daniel Dana (2001), defines workplace conflict as "a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem" (p. 5). Thus, organizations must overcome a complacency in relying on Human Resources to handle all employee matters, and instead attempt to be more strategic in managing conflict with practitioners such as specialists, ombuds, mediators, and coaches. Organizations should also provide more training for

employees, leaders, and Human Resources personnel to empower them to use these tools. They would also benefit from making the roles and duties of Human Resources clearer.

### **Closing**

The limitations discussed and overarching recommendations for the field of conflict resolution lead to a final recommendation in the field to resist the urge to reduce uncertainty and engage in conflict studies of all types to dig deeper into the experiences that we often take for granted. At the heart of those ordinary experiences lie human stories that may lead to extraordinary findings, but they may also lead to an understanding of the nuances that are required in the field to expand the methods, tools, educational preparation, and our ability to practice in real-time. This research method was influenced by idiography, which asserts that becoming familiar with the particulars is the birth of all knowledge. This research is a necessary step in having the knowledge to inform the next phases of research and practice to further develop models, practices, and theories. The learning from the dialectical relationship between the researcher and participants did not only produce learning for the participants, but it also produced learning for me on the needs of workers, showing how deeply conflict can impact people even if they do not show it overtly. It also shows the importance of control and choice in facilitating resilience, and ultimately how valuable dialogue can be in processing emotionally difficult situations and expanding viewpoints. This and the particularities of their experiences, not all presented in this study, will impact the research that will follow on conflict management options, tools, and at least for my own work, an endeavor to skillfully craft stories into the business case for conflict management. This is because I believe a cultural shift in the views on workplace conflict will require more than a

presentation of costs and development of models. It will require empathy, a desire to create healthier organizations, and a commitment to providing the resources for people in disputes and interpersonal conflicts to seek resolution and to heal.

## References

- Allen, D.G. (2008). Retaining talent: A guide to analyzing and managing employee turnover [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/special-reports-and-expert-views/Documents/Retaining-Talent.pdf>
- A.K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.akriceinstitute.org>
- Allport, G.W. (1951). The use of personal documents in psychological science. New York, NY: Social Science Research Council (Bulletin No. 49).
- Bass, B., & Bass, R. (2009). *The handbook of leadership: Theory, research, and managerial application*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Bion, W. (1961). *Experiences in groups and other papers* [E-book 2004]. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from <http://freudians.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Wilfred-R.-Bion-Experiences-in-Groups-and-other-papers-1991.pdf>
- Bloch, B., Miller, D., Rowe, M., (2009). Chart. *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, 14(1), 237-238.
- Boje, D.M. (1991). The storytelling organization: A study of story performance in an office-supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 36(1), 106-126.
- Brahm, E., & Julian O. (2003). Designing new dispute resolution systems. Retrieved from [https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/designing\\_dispute\\_systems](https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/designing_dispute_systems)
- Buss, H. (2011). Controlling conflict costs: The business case of conflict management. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 4(1), 54-62.

- Cooper, R. (2014). Phenomenology in peace and conflict studies research: Getting to the essence of an experience. In L. Finley & R. Cooper (Eds.), *Peace and conflict studies research: A qualitative perspective* (pp. 69-90). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Costantino, C. A., & Merchant, C. S. (1996). *Designing conflict management systems: A guide to creating productive and healthy organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dana D. (2001). *The Dana measure of financial cost of organizational conflict*. Retrieved from <https://www.mediationworks.com/white-paper-cost-of-conflict/>
- Dana, D. (2001). *Conflict resolution: Mediation tools for everyday worklife*. New York City, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Dana, D. (2005). *Managing differences: How to build better relationships at work and home*. Prairie Village, KS: MTI Publications.
- Duffin, E. (2019). Full-time employees - seasonally adjusted number in the U.S. April 2019. Statista. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/192349/seasonally-adjusted-number-of-full-time-employees-in-the-us/>
- Eagleton, T. (1983). *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Equal Employment Opportunity (EEOC). (2018). *Charges filed with EEOC FY 1997 through FY 2017*. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov//eeoc/statistics/enforcement/charges.cfm>
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), p.42-55. doi:10.1177/160940690400300104

- Harris, R. (2019). Statisticians' call to arms: Reject significance and embrace uncertainty!  
Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/03/20/705191851/statisticians-call-to-arms-reject-significance-and-embrace-uncertainty>
- Hayden, C., & Molenkamp, R. (n.d.). Tavistock Primer II. In *Group Reader Relations 3*. Jupiter, FL: The A.K. Rice Institute.
- Hayes, (2008). Foreword. In CPP GLOBAL, *Workplace conflict and how business can harness it to thrive*. Retrieved from [http://img.en25.com/Web/Cpp/Conflict\\_report.pdf](http://img.en25.com/Web/Cpp/Conflict_report.pdf)
- Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (2009). *Working through conflict: Strategies for relationships, groups, and organizations*. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.
- Herrman, M.S. (2010). Understanding and using conflict in the workplace. In S.E. Condrey (Ed.), *Handbook of human resource management in government* (2nd ed., pp. 326–350). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Husserl, E. (1927). Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931). T. Sheehan and R. Palmer (Eds.). Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht
- Hycner, R. H. (1999). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. In A. Bryman & R.G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research*, 3(1), 143-164. London, UK: Sage.
- Katz, N., Lawyer, J., & Sweedler, M. (2011). *Communication and conflict resolution skills*. Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

- Katz, N., Sosa, K., & Kovack, K. (2018). Ombuds and conflict specialist: Navigating workplace challenges in higher education. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*. Retrieved from [https://ioa.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/JIOA-2018-1\\_Ombuds-and-Conflict-Resolution-Specialists\\_Katz-Sosa-Kovack\\_PDF.pdf](https://ioa.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/JIOA-2018-1_Ombuds-and-Conflict-Resolution-Specialists_Katz-Sosa-Kovack_PDF.pdf)
- Kelly, J. (1974). *Organizational behavior*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Kruger, D. (1988). *An introduction to phenomenological psychology* (2nd ed.). Cape Town, South Africa: Juta.
- LaReau, J. (2008). After the frenetic Durant era, Sloan brought order from chaos. Retrieved from <https://www.autonews.com/article/20080914/OEM02/309149952/after-the-frenetic-durant-era-sloan-brought-order-from-chaos>
- Larkin, M., Shaw, R. & Flowers, P. (2018). Multiperspectival designs and processes in interpretative phenomenological analysis research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 16(2), 182-198.
- Lucas, R. (1987). *A great place to work: What makes some employers so good (and most so bad)*. New York, NY: Avon Books.
- Mayer, B. S. (2012). *The dynamics of conflict: A guide to engagement and intervention*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, R. E. (1964). Conflicting elements in managerial ideologies. *Industrial Relations*, 4(1), 77-91.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.



National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

(NCCDPHP).(2016). *Workplace health promotion*. Retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/aag/workplace-health.htm>

Markku, A. (2015). Complexity in systems, organizations, and the workplace. Retrieved from <https://workdesign.com/2015/06/complexity-in-systems-organizations-and-the-workplace/>

Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. 8(1), 5-23.

Pruitt, D. G., & Kim, S. H. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Raines, S. (2013). *Conflict management for managers: Resolving workplace, client, and policy disputes*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Rose, S.L. & Pietri, C.E. (2002). Workers as research subject: A vulnerable population. Retrieved from <https://www.citiprogram.org/index.cfm?pageID=14&message=64>

Rowe, M. (2009). Organizational system for dealing with conflict and learning from conflict: Introduction. *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, 14(1), 279-288.

Singer, M.R. (1998). *Perception and identity in intercultural communication*. Pennsylvania State University: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Schein, E.H. (1986). *Organization culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Schein, E.H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist*, 45(2), 109-119.

- Slaikeu K. A., & Hasson R. H. (1998). *Controlling the costs of conflict: How to design a system for your organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Osborn, M. (1997). Interpretative phenomenological analysis & health psychology. In L. Yardley (Ed.), *Material Discourses of Health and Illness* (pp. 68- 91). London, UK: Routledge.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. London, UK: Sage Publications, LTD.
- Smith, D.W., (2013). The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Phenomenology. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>
- Teehankee, B. (1993). Organizational culture: A critical review of literature. *DLSU Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Cultural Studies*, 27(1), 66-92.
- Timmer, S. (2015). Hermeneutics for Designers | UX Booth. Retrieved from <https://www.uxbooth.com/articles/hermeneutics-for-designers/>
- Hiscox. (2015). Employee charge trends across the United States. The 2015 Hiscox Employee Lawsuits Handbook [PDF File]. Retrieved from: <https://www.hiscox.com/shared-documents/The-2015-Hiscox-Guide-to-Employee-Lawsuits-Employee-charge-trends-across-the-United-States.pdf>.
- Tavistock Institute, (n.d.). Who we are. Retrieved from <https://www.tavainstitute.org/who-we-are/>
- Ury, W., Brett, J., & Goldberg, S. (1988). *Getting disputes resolved: Designing systems to cut the costs of conflict*. London, UK: Jossey-Bass

Vandenberg, D. (1997). Phenomenological research in the study of education. In D.

Vandenberg (Ed.), *Phenomenology & education discourse* (pp. 3-37).

Johannesburg, South Africa: Heinemann.

Watson, C., & Hoffman, R. (1996). Managers as negotiators: A test of power versus

gender as predictors of feelings, behavior, and outcomes. *Leadership Quarterly*,

7(1), 63-85.

Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2007). *Interpersonal conflict*. Boston, MA: McGraw-

Hill.

## Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Exploring the Experience of Those Who Had Unresolved or Escalated Workplace Conflicts

Vignette: Victor has been with the Facilities Management department of a multinational corporation headquartered in South Florida for the last eight years. The last six months have been very stressful. Victor was promoted to supervisor, a position he feels he earned and is well-suited for, but he did not expect that the change would bring so many conflicts. Victor is now part of a team of supervisors and has experienced tension with Jade, another supervisor. Jade has been a supervisor for several years and Victor expected to learn a thing or two from her since he had good interactions with her in the past. But for the last six months he has only had tense, and at times humiliating, conversations with Jade. Jade takes the lead on collaborative projects since she has seniority, and dumps Victor with a bulk of the tedious work. Although Victor doesn't enjoy being the rookie, he played sports his whole life and understands the rookie experience well. So, he does the work and doesn't complain. However, Jade is often late to distribute work, forcing him to cut into family time on the weekends. When he turns in his share of the work on time, she is dismissive and downright degrading. When he attempted to bring it up to her in private, she accused him of being defensive to corrective feedback. He is now hearing rumors that she has accused him of trying to sabotage their project. Employee evaluations are coming up and he is afraid to bring it up and appear unable to manage his new role, or worse, for his superior to hear the rumors and question his integrity.

1. What do you think about what Victor is experiencing? [Possible prompts: Can you imagine what it would feel like?]

2. Tell me what it's like to be in your position? (Possible prompts: Describe a typical day? What is the best thing about \_? What is the worst thing about \_?)
3. Can you tell me about your own experience with a workplace conflict? [Possible prompts: What happened? What do you think brought this about? Can you describe how you felt about it at the time? What previous experiences did you have for comparison (internal)? If you could name the problem at hand, what would you call it?]
4. Can you describe how you started to address it? [Possible prompts: What options did you consider? Tell me what you were thinking. What did you expect would happen? What happened next?]
5. Can you tell me about your relationship with that person(s)? [Possible prompts: how do you feel about \_? How do you feel about yourself? How do you think others see you?]
6. Tell me about the impact it had on you. [Possible prompts: How did it affect you personally? How did it impact your work environment? Tell me about the time you spent on it. What was it like getting up in the morning to go to work? How did you cope?]
7. Tell me about the role your organization played in this situation [Possible prompts: How did you feel about using the process provided by your organization? Did anything make it better? Did anything make it worse? How do you feel about their role? What would help you feel more supported?]

8. Looking back on the situation, how do you see it differently now than before?

[Possible prompts: Describe what is different in your workday now. What was challenging before? What would you do differently if it occurred again?]

9. If you had kept track of this conflict from the beginning in terms of time, emotions, and people involved, what do you think a final report would reflect? [Possible prompts: Tell me about how much time you spent engaged in this, from the moment the situation occurred until now or when it was 'let go' sort of speak? Can you think of any missed opportunities or other effects it had? How did it affect others who weren't directly involved?]

10. If Alternative Dispute Resolution could increase the number of options available to employees experiencing conflicts like \_\_\_, from an administrative perspective, what would you want to know about implementing an ombudsperson, mediator, or other internal conflict resolution role in your organization? [Possible prompts: Tell me what the interest would be. Tell me what the reservations may be.]

11. Given our conversation today, is there anything you would like me to know?