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When Speaking Up Fails: Experiences of Unsubstantiated Equal Employment Opportunity Allegations on the Workforce

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When Speaking Up Fails: Experiences of Unsubstantiated Equal Employment Opportunity
Allegations on the Workforce

by

Scottie Slater Visser

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who has chosen to find change through voice, especially those in this study who chose to share their stories. You are an inspiration. May our voices always be beacons of hope for others, and, through our voices, may change take place.

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Abstract

Many organizations have long encouraged employees to speak up about wrongdoing, promoting cultures of open communication to ensure just environments; however, each year a significant proportion of workplace allegations are deemed unsubstantiated as a result of various factors, such as lack of evidence, subjectivity, false claims, and investigative limitations. Because researchers have focused on substantiated claims and reasons for reporting, they have discovered little about either the experiences of employees who speak up and have their claims deemed unsubstantiated or the potential impacts of such outcomes. This interpretative phenomenological study involved exploration of the lived experiences of 10 employees who filed formal allegations of harassment or retaliation with their organization, ultimately resulting in unsubstantiated determinations. Through qualitative data analysis, five significant themes emerged highlighting the impact of inadequate responses to complaints, gender and hierarchical disparities, and erosion of trust in organizational justice. The findings also revealed the emergence of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among participants resulting from lack of support and lack of resolution of their conflicts. During semistructured interviews, participants described the emotional and psychological toll of workplace conflicts remaining unresolved, a finding that emphasizes the importance of timely and fair conflict resolution processes to mitigate adverse effects on employee well-being. The results of this study shed light on the cultural and psychological effects of unsubstantiated allegations.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021), U.S. employees at every level were more willing to report observed misconduct.

Over the past 20 years, the reporting of misconduct has been steadily increasing. In 2020, 86% of U.S. employees said they reported “every” or “some of the behavior” they observed in general, an increase of 17 percentage points since 2017. (p. 19)

In addition, according to a report published by NAVEX, one of the largest corporate hotline providers in the world, allegations of discrimination, retaliation, and harassment all rose in 2021 (Penman & Kelly, 2022, p. 8).

When an individual encounters situations involving mistreatment in the workplace, they have various avenues available through which to address the matter. Organizations strive to mitigate potential liabilities by proactively investigating internal complaints and taking measures necessary to resolve the corresponding issues, thereby averting potential legal actions. Many large companies have established internal reporting structures and systems to support employees in speaking up. Such systems and structures allow an organization to investigate a problem and reach a resolution, thus avoiding the need for litigation. According to Penman and Kelly (2022), between 2017 and 2021 an average of 65.5% of reported cases included concerns related to human resources (HR), diversity, and workplace respect. Penman and Kelly (2022) stated that these reports often involve “internal parties and often relate to employees’ relations or misconduct including discrimination, harassment, retaliation, compensation, substance abuse, and bullying, and general HR” (pp. 17–18).

Following an employee’s report of wrongdoing to a person in authority in their company, it is the company’s responsibility to conduct an impartial investigation to assess potential

violations of company policies, procedures, or laws. This investigation should be fair, be unbiased, and prioritize maintenance of confidentiality to safeguard against any form of retaliation. Typically, such an investigation entails interviewing witnesses and examining pertinent laws, policies, and procedures. At the conclusion of the investigation, the assigned team makes a determination regarding whether the allegations are substantiated, indicating the presence of sufficient evidence, or unsubstantiated, indicating insufficient evidence to support claims made. According to Soltes (2020), “although each organization sets its own standards for the level of evidence needed to substantiate an allegation, preponderance of the evidence has become the de facto standard within many organizations” (p. 416). Substantiation of an allegation by an organization means that the organization has found evidence to support a claim of wrongdoing and therefore must follow its established protocol for corrective action.

Corrective action for misconduct depends on the severity of the misconduct and can range from verbal advice of policy to imposition of disciplinary measures, such as suspension or termination of employment. However, it is noteworthy that only 40% of reported cases specifically related to HR, diversity, and workplace respect in 2021 were substantiated (Penman & Kelly, 2022, p. 29). This indicates that the majority—60%—of reported cases remained unresolved or lacked evidence sufficient to support the allegations. Reasons for cases remaining unresolved include lack of evidence sufficient to establish wrongdoing, difficulty obtaining witnesses or conflicting accounts of the conflict. It is also important to consider that not all reports of allegations are accurate, and some reports may reflect individuals misinterpreting situations or making false claims.

When an organization substantiates an allegation, the organization should follow an organization-designed protocol for corrective action; this can result in an array of actions, from

mandatory training to suspension and firing. Of the HR, diversity, and workplace respect cases reported within the industry in 2021, only 40% were substantiated (Penman & Kelly, 2022, p. 29), leaving 60% of reported cases without resolution. A case can be unsubstantiated for a number of reasons: “The term unsubstantiated is used ubiquitously within organizations despite its lack of specificity, encompassing both allegations that are entirely unfounded and those that are simply lacking adequate evidence to support substantiation” (Soltes, 2020, p. 416). Multiple factors contribute to the classification of allegations as unsubstantiated, including absence of any violation of company policies, procedures, or laws in alleged conduct. In some instances the allegation itself is false or based on misinformation. Lack of evidence can also impede establishment of an allegation’s truthfulness. When an investigation determines a case unsubstantiated, no further action typically occurs after conclusion of the investigation, meeting the legal requirement for a thorough examination; however, it is crucial to acknowledge the emotional impact that investigations can have on those involved, especially employees in nondominant social positions. These individuals may already face systemic barriers or power imbalances within the organization, and the investigation process can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability, mistrust, and isolation. Even without substantiation of wrongdoing, those involved experience emotional destruction that others should not overlook or dismiss.

Background

Although extensive research was available on the topic of employee voice, including the factors that influence whether employees choose to speak up or remain silent, there was a noticeable lack of research regarding the experiences and effects of employees who have reported misconduct or wrongdoing. Researchers have often focused on understanding the barriers and motivators for employee voice, examining factors such as organizational culture,

fear of retaliation, perceived efficacy of reporting mechanisms, and power dynamics; however, there remains a significant gap related to the study of specific experiences and outcomes of individuals who have gone through the process of reporting misconduct only to have their organizations deem their claims unsubstantiated.

Each year, individuals file a significant number of reports regarding unethical misconduct; on average, approximately 40% of these allegations are substantiated (Penman & Kelly, 2022, pp. 4, 29). This statistic highlights the substantial amount of information present within the data regarding unsubstantiated cases. Each individual case represents a narrative of unresolved conflict. The focus of this study was exploration of the firsthand experiences of employees who have faced perceived harassment or discrimination in their workplaces, formally reported their concerns, and received responses from their organizations stating that their claims were not substantiated. For organizations aiming to foster supportive and productive work environments, understanding how unsubstantiated case allegations affect workplace conflicts and employee well-being is a simple yet impactful starting point. This study involved extensive examination of the themes of voice, justice, and their implications, providing a comprehensive analysis of these factors within the context of employees' experiences.

Justification

Organizations often overlook the valuable insights that can be gained from analyzing unsubstantiated case data. These data can provide organizations with deeper understanding of potential risks at both the individual and team levels. Moreover, these data have great relevance from a conflict-resolution perspective, offering rich information about employees' perceptions of wrongdoing. Organizations can proactively work toward risk reduction by actively seeking to comprehend employees' perspectives, regardless of whether specific conflicts breach policies or

violate laws. This process involves helping employees to resolve conflicts effectively. In this research study, I focused on exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of employees who have been involved in unsubstantiated allegations. Through the application of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), participants vividly described their journeys of speaking up, their encounters with investigation processes, and their experiences following determination that their claims were unsubstantiated. It is important to note that the objective of this study was not to evaluate the conflicts itself or assess the fairness and adequacy of investigation processes; rather, the aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of employees' experiences as they navigated through the process of reporting misconduct. Understanding of employees' lived experiences of unsubstantiated case allegations can help corporations by offering a clearer understanding of speaking up through narrative experiences.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the experiences of employees who demonstrate remarkable courage by speaking up about perceived wrongdoing, particularly in sensitive areas such as harassment or discrimination. Employees often face significant challenges when deciding whether and how to report misconduct, including fears of retaliation, peer ostracism, and lack of confidence in the reporting system. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) highlighted that “35% of non-management employees indicated that they did not report an incident of misconduct because they did not believe corrective action would be taken” (p. 20). This statistic highlights the initial uncertainty and fear that many employees may have about the consequences of reporting misconduct within their organizations.

The primary focus of this research study was understanding the lived experiences of employees who choose to file an equal employment opportunity (EEO) complaint with their

organizations whose cases are ultimately determined to be unsubstantiated. The complexity of human interactions means that multiple factors can contribute to an individual's perception of harassment and discrimination, and acknowledging that perspectives can vary significantly among the parties involved is critical to analyzing the experiences of those parties. I therefore recommend future research to explore the experiences of and impacts on individuals who feel wrongfully accused as well teams affected by unsubstantiated allegations. Expanding the scope of research in this area could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the broader dynamics surrounding cases involving unsubstantiated allegations.

Definition of Terms

Equal employment opportunity (EEO) is the goal of laws that make some types of discrimination in employment illegal. Under EEO law, only job-related factors can determine whether an individual qualifies for a particular job. EEO laws and affirmative action programs ideally combine to achieve EEOs (National Archives and Records Administration, 2021)

Equal employment opportunity laws: The five EEO laws prohibit discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, physical handicap, and mental handicap in any terms, conditions, or privileges of employment:

- the Equal Pay Act of 1963, as amended;
- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 and the Pregnancy Disability Act of 1978;
- the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended;
- the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, as amended; and
- the Civil Rights Act of 1991 (National Archives and Records Administration, 2021).

Equal employment opportunity complaint: A complaint is an allegation of illegal discrimination handled through an administrative procedure. A complaint may result from an employee believing they have received unfair treatment because of race, color, national origin, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical/mental disability. An allegation itself is not proof of illegal discrimination. The investigation that follows acceptance of issues from a formal complaint provides the basis for determination of whether illegal discrimination has occurred (National Archives and Records Administration, 2021).

Unsubstantiated allegation: According to Soltes (2020), unsubstantiated allegations are “allegations for which the investigative process did not collect evidence to convincingly support the veracity of the claim” (p. 414). Soltes (2020) added, “Although each organization sets its own standards for the level of evidence needed to substantiate an allegation, ‘preponderance of the evidence’ has become the de facto standard within many organizations” (p. 416).

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 introduced the study’s main focus and provided an overview of the research, highlighting a growing trend of employee willingness to report misconduct within the United States, a trend driven by increased awareness and improved reporting mechanisms. The chapter outlined the study’s objectives, emphasizing the significance of understanding the consequences of voicing concerns and the barriers that hinder reporting. Chapter 1 also introduced key terms and concepts explored in the study. The chapter underscored the significance of analyzing data from unsubstantiated cases, which can offer valuable insights into risk management and conflict resolution within organizations, and the chapter also emphasized the need to focus on employees’ experiences of navigating reporting processes rather than solely evaluating the validity of their claims.

Chapter 2 explores research on how employees express concerns about potential unethical situations in the workplace. This chapter looks at three main areas: employee voice, views on fairness, and the results of raising concerns. Chapter 2 also explores three theories—standpoint theory, organizational justice theory, and structural violence theory—to provide understanding of how employees experience addressing unethical incidents.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology and research design employed to investigate the research questions. The chapter outlines the chosen research approach, interpretive phenomenology, and justifies its suitability for capturing the complexities of the phenomenon under study. Chapter 3 details the research participants, highlighting the selection criteria and recruitment process. The chapter explains in depth the data collection methods, including semistructured interviews and document analysis, underscoring their alignment with the research objectives. Chapter 3 also addresses ethical considerations, emphasizing participant confidentiality, informed consent, and researcher reflexivity throughout the study. The chapter concludes by outlining the data analysis process, including coding procedures and strategies for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Chapter 4 presents the key findings drawn from the analysis of collected data. The chapter offers a detailed exploration of the themes that emerged from participants' responses during interviews, shedding light on the nuances of employees' experiences when voicing concerns about unethical incidents. The findings reveal distinct patterns in employees' decision-making processes, influenced by their perceptions of organizational justice and their apprehensions regarding potential repercussions. Furthermore, the chapter uncovers the intricate interplay among power dynamics, organizational culture, and willingness to speak up. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of employee voice in the context of

ethical concerns, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape employees' decisions to voice or withhold their concerns.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings and elucidates their implications. This chapter connects the research to the broader literature and presents recommendations for organizations aiming to amplify employee voice and adeptly address ethical concerns. The chapter explores the commonalities identified across participant experiences, centering on voice, justice perceptions, and the consequences of speaking out against workplace concerns. Chapter 5 examines how these themes align with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The chapter also offers recommendations for organizations to encourage open communication, cultivate trust, and establish healthier, ethically sound work environments. Chapter 5 acknowledges the study's limitations, proposes avenues for future research, and underscores the contributions to corporate investigations and conflict resolution.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Voice

This section lays the groundwork for exploration of the significance of employee voice in addressing ethical misconduct. Employees' willingness to speak up in organizations is critical to effectively addressing issues and mitigating risks. However, researchers have found that many employees hesitate to report workplace misconduct because of lack of transparency in reporting processes and concerns about potential retaliation (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016; Gartner, 2022).

The following sections discuss the influence of immediate supervisors emerges as a central factor in shaping employees' decisions to voice their concerns further up the chain of command (Ethics and Compliance Initiative, 2022). Supportive managerial responses contribute to the creation of psychologically safe environments, but dismissive attitudes can discourage employees from speaking up in the future (Detert & Treviño, 2010).

The following sections also delve into how emotional experiences and pressure from third-party actors influence the phenomenon of reluctant acquiescence—in which employees choose to remain silent despite dissatisfaction or disagreement (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). Discussion of deaf ear syndrome highlights cases in which employees' voices remain ignored despite employees using existing reporting mechanisms (Harlos, 2021).

Moreover, research indicates that discursive hegemony, characterized by dominant narratives upholding power structures, can marginalize alternative viewpoints and voices (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). To encourage employees to speak up, organizations need to address trust issues, foster psychological safety, and challenge prevailing discourses that hinder open communication.

Understanding why voices go unheard, such as lack of structured mechanisms and insufficient responsiveness, is crucial for development of effective systems for justice and resolution. By recognizing these challenges and taking proactive steps to overcome them, organizations can create inclusive and supportive environments in which employees feel empowered to speak up without fear of dismissal or reprisal.

Employees' Willingness to Speak Up

Corporate organizations have widely recognized the importance of swiftly escalating issues to mitigate potential risks. Organizations nonetheless often face challenges regarding encouragement of employees to speak up. Research indicates that only “a third of employees believe reporting will lead to a better work environment, improve their team’s performance or increase team morale,” and only “54% of employees feel that reporting workplace misconduct is the right thing to do” (Turner, 2022, para 10 & para 5).

Organizational culture and the concept of psychological safety deeply influence the willingness of employees to report perceived misconduct. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022) made this influence evident by revealing that when employees first encounter ethical misconduct, they are most likely to raise concerns with their immediate supervisors (p. 15).

According to Detert and Treviño (2010):

Immediate supervisors do more than merely reinforce an overall climate for speaking up set by leaders at the top. In fact, they act in a variety of supportive or inhibiting ways that may have little to do with broader influences emanating from above. (p. 255)

Detert and Treviño (2010) conducted a qualitative study of the manner in which leaders influence employees’ perceptions of voice, examining the types of leaders affecting these perceptions and the underlying reasons for such influences. The findings of the study indicate

that a range of leaders, from immediate supervisors to senior managers, both directly and indirectly shape employees' views of expressing their voice (Detert & Treviño, 2010, p. 254). Even leaders positioned several levels above employees significantly impact whether those employees perceive speaking up as risky or productive (Detert & Treviño, 2010, p. 256). These researchers also found that managers serve as the closest connections to authority an employee has in the workplace, and how managers respond to the employee's concerns directly corresponds to the employee's willingness to raise their concerns further up the chain of command or speak up about future witnessed misconduct. Specifically, Detert and Treviño (2010) found that "unsafe to speak up beliefs [were] most frequently linked to supervisory behaviors that created fear of in-the-moment embarrassment, shame, or loss of emotional control" (p. 256). In other words, employees hesitate to express their concerns when they fear negative reactions from their managers that could potentially lead to embarrassment or shame.

Detert and Edmondson (2005) investigated the challenge of upward communication in organizational hierarchies. The researchers conducted in-depth research within a multinational corporation, interviewing 190 employees from various levels and functions. Their findings indicated widespread fear of speaking up, even with ideas beneficial to the organization, causing significant negative emotions for many employees (Detert & Edmondson, 2005, p. 2). The researchers introduced a novel explanation for the prevalence of silence, emphasizing personal motivations for and against speaking up. They found that regardless of formal reporting channels, managers set the stage for psychological safety, and both consistent and situation-specific factors influence the decision to speak up (Detert & Edmondson, 2005, p. 44).

According to Detert and Edmondson's (2005) findings,

individuals will tend to use implicit microstrategies to manage the risks of speaking up—selecting the safest target when there are options for whom to speak to, “choosing their moments” by seeking to avoid challenging bosses who are particularly emotional or likely to be caught off guard, and carefully scripting and rehearsing the voice episode. (p. 44)

The researchers emphasized that formal mechanisms do little to help managers or employees surface and change deeply ingrained behavioral patterns or implicit theories about the costs and benefits of taking prudent risks on behalf of organizational learning (Detert & Edmondson, 2005, p. 44).

The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) has been monitoring how employees perceive retaliation when they report wrongdoing; over time, the frequency of retaliation has been rising: “There was a significant increase from 22% 2013 to 44% in 2017. In 2020, the U.S. saw a retaliation rate of 79%, a notable increase of 35 percentage points” (p. 22). The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022) reported that “82% of employees perceive they will be retaliated against for reporting perceived misconduct” (p. 10).

Loignon and Wormington (2022) concurred with previous research indicating that psychological safety is crucial for effective teamwork and that teams with strong psychological safety perform better than other teams. However, Loignon and Wormington challenged the assumption that all team members share similar perceptions of psychological safety. Members may have a variety of perceptions based on past workplace experiences and interactions with leaders. Employees gauge the safety of reporting based on organizational culture and their historical interactions, drawing on personal experiences, shared stories, and past encounters with other managers. Loignon and Wormington examined 278 senior leadership teams and found that

they often had a variety of levels of psychological safety. Although the majority of a team may feel psychologically safe, not all individuals within the team may share this sentiment, because psychological safety is a highly personal and individual experience. Afsharian et al. (2018, as cited in Loignon & Wormington, 2022) emphasized this point: “Team members may have encountered different workplace experiences or interactions with their team leader, which could then contribute to diverging levels of psychological safety” (p. 3). Moreover, Loignon and Wormington found that consistent psychological safety matters for performance and deserves attention. Teams with greater agreement on psychological safety had higher performance and fewer conflicts. This understanding, derived from Loignon and Wormington’s study, suggests team leaders should consider individual patterns of psychological safety, not just the overall level within a team. Consistent psychological safety matters for performance, so strategies for fostering psychological safety should align with a team’s beliefs.

Fernando and Prasad (2019) offered insights into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to employees’ reluctance to express themselves because of the actions of third parties. The researchers coined the term “reluctant acquiescence” to refer to a situation in which individuals comply or submit to a particular course of action or scenario despite their disagreement with the course of action or scenario (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p. 1584). In the context of workplace harassment, reluctant acquiescence relates to employees who choose to remain silent and not voice their concerns or experiences of harassment. Fernando and Prasad uncovered how third parties use discursive strategies to silence dissenting voices in the workplace, leading individuals to reluctantly comply and avoid expression of their concerns. Fernando and Prasad explained silence as a result of individuals’ emotional experiences of being unfavorably positioned in discursive interactions; victims of silencing often face shame and

anticipatory fear, both associated with silence. Characterizing this silence response is a sense of resignation resulting from various factors, such as fear of negative repercussions, social pressures, and individuals' perceptions that others will not hear or take seriously their voices (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, pp. 1574–1575). The researchers found that an alternative understanding of silence is as an attempt to address the conflicting state of mind that victims experience when persuaded by third parties to adopt alternative views (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, pp. 1577–1578). They drew on cognitive dissonance theory, suggesting that individuals may adopt a new perspective to reduce psychological tension, particularly in the presence of significant incentives to avoid negative repercussions (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p. 1585).

Fernando and Prasad (2019) also incorporated the theoretical foundation of discursive hegemony in their attempt to understand why individuals may be influenced in the decisions to voice their concerns. Discursive hegemony means that cultural conditions and representations carry power and influence in a society or specific situation (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). The concept involves the power to shape and control the meanings, interpretations, and norms accepted and prevalent in a particular social setting. In the workplace, discursive hegemony refers to the narratives that maintain and reinforce existing power structures and hierarchies (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p. 1569). According to Fernando and Prasad, these dominant discourses often reflect the interests and perspectives of those in positions of power and serve to marginalize or suppress alternative viewpoints and voices. Such discourses shape the ways individuals view and understand social issues, including workplace mistreatment or harassment, and influence the actions and behaviors deemed acceptable or unacceptable within an organization (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p. 1569). Discursive hegemony operates through various

mechanisms, such as persuasive argumentation, normalization of certain practices, and exclusion or marginalization of dissenting voices:

It merits note that third-party actors often work in tandem with one another, either purposefully or not, to reinforce discursive hegemony. For instance, managers' and HR personnel's efforts to invalidate victims' accounts of sex-based harassment through the discourse that 'one cannot easily challenge the system unless the issue is uncommon and significant' was reinforced by ordinary employees colluding to insist that 'people should trust the system to accord justice' and by underscoring the costs of challenging the system. (Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p. 1585)

In summary, organizations face difficulties encouraging employees to speak up about misconduct because of various factors. Research indicates that employees often lack trust in the reporting processes and fear retaliation, which hinders their willingness to report. The role of immediate supervisors is crucial to shaping employees' decisions to raise concerns further up the chain of command. Managers who respond supportively and address concerns effectively contribute to creating psychologically safe environments in which employees feel comfortable speaking up. On the other hand, employees' fear of negative consequences and perception that others will not hear or take seriously their voices can lead to reluctant acquiescence, in which employees choose to remain silent and accept mistreatment. Reluctant acquiescence is influenced by emotional experiences, such as shame and fear, and the pressure exerted by third parties who try to persuade victims to adopt alternative perspectives. Discursive hegemony plays a significant role in shaping workplace dynamics through dominant narratives upholding existing power structures and hierarchies, often reflecting the interests of those in positions of power. A result of such narratives can be the marginalization or suppression of alternative viewpoints or

voices. Fernando and Prasad (2019) suggested that challenging discursive hegemony requires efforts by organizational leaders to disrupt prevailing narratives, create space for alternative voices, and promote inclusive and equitable discourse within the workplace (p. 1586).

Why Voices Go Unheard

Employees who speak up but have their claims dismissed face significant challenges seeking justice and resolution. This section discusses research on the various reasons for the failure of voice systems, including lack of structured mechanisms for expressing concerns, insufficient responsiveness from managers, and organizational structures that prioritize certain voices over others. Discussion of the phenomenon of deaf ear syndrome highlights cases in which employees' voices remain ignored despite employees using existing reporting mechanisms.

Although researchers have extensively investigated why employees choose to speak up or remain silent, few researchers have investigated employees who speak up but have their claims dismissed. Wilkinson et al. (2018) identified several reasons why employees' voices may go unheard, including lack of structured mechanisms for expressing concerns, insufficient responsiveness from managers, and organizational structures that prioritize only some voices (pp. 714–717). One particular reason highlighted by Wilkinson et al. (2018) is deaf ear syndrome, which corresponds to a situation “where voice structures exist, employees use them, and grievances are heard by management but are ignored” (p. 717). This phenomenon, originally described by Harlos, highlights a gap in research concerning cases in which employees' voices fail to make an impact:

The concern is mounting that some voice systems, ironically, are causing what they are intended to prevent. However, the research literature offers few insights into how and

why systems fail. In part, our limited understanding stems from the historical neglect of negative work contexts; most organizational justice studies on employee voice, for example, examine its role in procedural fairness (i.e., the perceived fairness of the procedures used to make allocation decisions) rather than its role in unfairness. (Harlos, 2021, p. 325)

Harlos (2021) investigated deaf ear syndrome by examining the shortcomings of informal voice mechanisms. The researcher offered suggestions for improvement, such as “challenging cultural norms against voicing and encouraging voice between employees and their supervisors” while simultaneously “considering potential harm to individuals and organizations from voice systems” (Harlos, 2021, p. 337). In contrast, Harlos discovered that although surveyed employees perceived formal reporting structures to be highly formal, they did not find such structures widely accessible. However, Harlos did not explore the perspectives of employees who unsuccessfully used formal grievance processes.

The findings of a study conducted under the auspices of the U.S. EEO Commission in 2016 indicated that organizational culture plays a monumental role in the physiological safety employees feel (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). Physiological safety is of paramount importance to any employee deciding whether and when to share an experience of harassment, discrimination, or retaliation with their employer. Employees must feel safe and supported before they can feel comfortable enough to speak up (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 37). Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) found that power disparities; homogenous, decentralized, or isolated workforces; and coarsened social discourse outside the workplace often discourage employees from reporting harassment and filing complaints (pp. 90–98). An organization with a reputation for not taking allegations of

harassment and discrimination seriously or dismissing such claims as resulting from “poor communication skills” undermines employees’ trust and discourages them from speaking up:

Employees who experience harassment fail to report the behavior or to file a complaint because they anticipate and fear several reactions—disbelief of their claim; inaction on their claim; receipt of blame for causing the offending actions; social retaliation (including humiliation and ostracism); and professional retaliation, such as damage to their career and reputation. (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 16)

Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) also found that employees who occupy lower positions within the organizational hierarchy experience disproportionately more harassment and discrimination: “Low-ranking employees are less likely to understand complaint channels” (p. 94). Employees belonging to minority groups and those in lower positions within the organizational hierarchy are more vulnerable to harassment and discrimination and often downplay their experiences. Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) found that

common workplace-based responses by those who experience sex-based harassment are to avoid the harasser (33% to 75%); deny or downplay the gravity of the situation (54% to 73%); or attempt to ignore, forget or endure the behavior (44% to 70%). (p. 15)

In other words, employees often find alternative ways to deal with workplace harassment before speaking up about their concerns.

In their research, Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) found a gap in understanding of the prevalence and nature of harassment relating to protected characteristics other than sex, highlighting the need for further research and attention in this area. As they put it:

There are significantly fewer academic articles on harassment on protected bases other than sex as compared to those about sex-based harassment. There is extensive literature

on discrimination on the basis of various protected characteristics (such as race and ethnicity), but those studies do not disaggregate harassment from other forms of discrimination. (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 15)

Employees often hesitate to speak up against perpetrators of severe harassment out of fear of potential repercussions. According to Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), “the least common response of either men or women to harassment is to take some formal action—either to report the harassment internally or file a formal legal complaint” (p. 22). The findings of Feldblum and Lipnic indicate that when an organization gains a reputation of downplaying allegations of harassment and discrimination, employees may feel discouraged from coming forward with their experiences. Furthermore, if the organization dismisses such allegations as resulting from poor communication skills, it sends a message that minimizes the gravity of these issues. As a result, employees may become reluctant to speak up and lose faith in the organization’s proclaimed commitment to a “zero tolerance” culture (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 45).

Fear of retaliation is one of the most cited reasons employees remain silent. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) found that “in 2020, the rate of perceived retaliation against employees for reporting wrongdoing in the U.S. was 79% in 2020, an increase of 35 percentage points since 2007” (p. 22). The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022) reported that, as with issues such as harassment and discrimination, retaliation is often challenging to prove and comes in all forms. Retaliation can manifest as a demotion, removal of a work statement, a poor performance review, exclusion by managers or peers, and in other ways (Ethics and Compliance Initiative, 2022, p. 16). Fear of retaliation creates a chilling effect on employees’ willingness to speak up and report misconduct or ethical violations. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022) reported that the initiative’s “research has consistently demonstrated that when employees

experience pressure to compromise their organization's workplace ethics standards, there are higher incidences of misconduct, lower reporting of misconduct and increased rates of retaliation" (p. 7).

Soltes (2020) found that, from a corporate perspective, cases deemed unsubstantiated often lack evidence to support their allegations (p. 425). Evidence gathering often presents challenges for corporate investigators, who must carefully navigate the delicate balance between gathering information and respecting the privacy of employees. Maintaining a high degree of discretion is essential to minimize opportunities for retaliation and protect the rights of all parties involved. Soltes (2020) indicated that investigators must exercise caution to avoid disclosing sensitive information that could inadvertently make someone appear guilty based solely on the investigation itself. Striking the right balance requires skillful handling of the investigative process. Ensuring a fair and objective investigation while preserving confidentiality can be complex. Corporate investigators must carefully assess the available evidence, conduct interviews with discretion, and maintain confidentiality throughout the process. These investigators face the challenge of gathering sufficient evidence to support or refute allegations while upholding the principles of fairness and confidentiality, requiring thorough gathering of relevant facts without compromising the privacy and reputation of individuals involved (Soltes, 2020).

According to Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), fear of disbelief, inaction, blame, social retaliation, and professional repercussions often deter employees from reporting harassment and filing complaints. Fear of retaliation, which is difficult to prove and can take various forms, further discourages employees from speaking up (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 6). Understanding the challenges faced by employees perceiving ethical wrongdoing is imperative to begin to foster

inclusive and safe workplaces in which employees feel empowered to speak up without fear of reprisal.

Justice

Misconduct allegations within organizations present complex challenges, because employees seek justice and resolution for various forms of wrongdoing. However, research findings suggest that substantiating these allegations often poses a formidable challenge, resulting in many cases remaining unverified. The following sections delve into findings that shed light on the contributing factors that hinder the substantiation process, which encompass absence of evidence, subjectivity in evaluating claims, and biases among corporate investigators. These factors collectively hinder the validation of claims and can leave employees feeling unheard and unfairly treated during formal investigations.

One of the key issues preventing substantiation of cases is absence of sufficient evidence (Soltes, 2020). Investigators can find it particularly challenging to prove policy violations in instances of harassment and discrimination, which involve protected characteristics. In such a case, the burden of proof falls on the employee, and proof requires substantial evidence that may not be readily available. Variables such as experience, gender, seniority, and expertise can impact the outcomes of investigations, leading to biased decision-making processes (Soltes, 2020). To address misconduct effectively and mitigate its impact, procedural fairness is crucial. According to Gartner (2022), employees must trust the reporting process and have confidence that their concerns will be heard and addressed without bias. Transparency fosters trust and requires open communication and accessibility of procedures and outcomes. However, perceptions of procedural injustice can arise when employees doubt that their reports will lead to action.

Organizations often provide limited information to reporting parties in cases deemed unsubstantiated, which can further erode trust in the procedural process. Justification and clear explanations of decisions are essential to give employees a sense of assurance regarding fairness of outcomes. Transparency and specificity in communication play a significant role in enhancing perceptions of fairness (Gartner, 2022).

Misconduct Allegations

Each year, people report numerous misconduct allegations through formal channels within organizations. According to Soltes (2019), public records may not reflect the full scope of these allegations because of the confidential nature of corporate misconduct data and attorney–client privilege (p. 931). However, examination of reported statistics from organizations such as NAVEX (a prominent third-party hotline and incident management provider) can still provide valuable insights. NAVEX (as cited in Penman & Kelly, 2022) estimated that “1.3 out of 100 employees will report an allegation of misconduct” (Penman & Kelly, 2022, p. 8). This low reporting rate underscores the challenges organizations face encouraging employees to come forward with their concerns.

Between 2017 and 2021, an average of 65.5% of all reported cases related to problems with HR, diversity, and workplace respect, which include “internal parties and often relate to employees’ relations or misconduct including discrimination, harassment, retaliation, compensation, substance abuse, and bullying, and general HR” (Penman & Kelly, 2022, pp. 17–18). These data highlight that a substantial proportion of reported issues within organizations relate to concerns surrounding employee well-being and organizational culture.

Shedding light on the challenges to confirming and addressing these issues within organizations, Penman and Kelly (2022) found that of those cases, only 24% of retaliation cases

were substantiated, and only 40% of HR, diversity, and workplace respect cases were substantiated. (pp. 8, 29). These numbers suggest that a significant proportion of reported issues do not lead to conclusive findings, which has implications for the perceived effectiveness of internal reporting mechanisms and the trust employees have in these processes. Although employees have the option to report EEO allegations to the U.S. EEO Commission, “less than 1% of potential grievances complain to the EEOC [EEO Commission] and only .13% sue” (Berrey et al., 2017, p. 49).

Why Cases Are Unsubstantiated

Soltes (2020) conducted extensive research and provided insights into the complexities of unsubstantiated cases, shedding light on various factors that contribute to their occurrence. According to Soltes (2020), these factors include absence of sufficient evidence, limitations of investigating organizations or investigators, subjectivity in evaluating claims, and false accusations (pp. 420–421).

Lack of evidence is a common factor preventing substantiation of cases, because it can be challenging to provide conclusive proof of violation of a policy, procedure, or law. As Soltes (2020) pointed out:

To the extent that an investigator relies on a preponderance of evidence standard when deciding to substantiate an allegation (or an even higher standard, like “beyond a reasonable doubt”), there will be allegations where there is not enough evidence or data for investigators to conclude with sufficient confidence that a violation occurred. (p. 420)

This challenge is particularly evident in cases of harassment and discrimination, which involve unwelcome conduct based on various protected characteristics. According to the U.S. EEO Commission (n.d.), harassment is characterized as unwelcome conduct “based on race, color,

religion, sex, national origin, older age, disability or genetic information” (para. 2). However, substantiating these types of cases often requires significant evidence, which may not be readily available. For employment harassment to be deemed unlawful, the employee must prove that “the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment” and “conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive” (U.S. EEO Commission, n.d., para. 2). The allegation is often considered unsubstantiated if all these conditions cannot be proved. This outcome can arise from lack of witness accounts of instances of harassment and discrimination. It is important to note that prolonged harassment and discrimination may persist without substantiation, leaving employees unable to prove their claims.

Soltes (2020) delved into another factor contributing to unsubstantiated allegations: subjectivity. Subjectivity arises when different parties involved in an alleged situation hold differing perspectives of the matter. Soltes (2020) emphasized the idea that unsubstantiated claims can result when the employee believes a violation of policy, procedure, or law has occurred, but investigative evidence does not align with the employee’s perceptions. Addressing subjectivity in investigations thus necessitates development of robust frameworks and guidelines that help investigators to evaluate cases impartially. Soltes (2020) said:

Allegations can also arise when an employee’s and an organization’s definitions of misconduct differ. This may occur because the employee relies on an intuitive feel of what inappropriate conduct looks like, while the firm relies on a more technical legal definition. (p. 412)

Although an employee may feel that an action, such as continued assignment of unfavorable projects by their manager, is a result of gender discrimination, the manager can easily claim the

assignments are the result of the employee's lack of experience or need for growth opportunities. The subjective nature of the allegation is often challenging for the investigative team to determine. Soltes (2019) said, "While many firms publicly project a stance of 'zero tolerance' toward misconduct, privately many tolerate some amount of malfeasance" (p. 933). This discrepancy, Soltes (2019) noted, emphasizes the complexity of these cases, in which a reporter's perspective, whether accurate or subjective, does not align with the substantiation outcome. Soltes (2020) also pointed out that these cases can potentially impact an organization's culture because of the contrast between employees' beliefs and the organization's position (p. 422). Soltes (2020) highlighted that such a case can have a profound impact on the culture of an organization. When an organization's employees perceive dissonance between their own beliefs and the organization's definition of misconduct, they can lose trust in their workplace. This lack of trust may impact employees' willingness to speak up in the future and create a perception that the organization's commitment to addressing misconduct is inconsistent or unfair.

Soltes (2020) also shed light on the role of biases among corporate investigators. Although corporate investigations should always occur in a neutral and unbiased manner, "a number of different biases can arise that can compromise the ability to substantiate an allegation, even when the evidence merits substantiation" (p. 419). As pointed out by Large (2012), corporate investigators within an organization are often attorneys with specific roles that require them to act in the organization's best interests:

The attorney's duty of loyalty, of course, rests with the organizational client, and the attorney will need to take steps to explain this point clearly to all employees interviewed and to explain that the client's interests are not necessarily the same as the employees "interests." (p. 2)

This misalignment of interests sets the stage for potential biases to enter into the investigation process.

A variety of factors can leave corporate investigators biased. Soltes (2020) explained: Variables can create bias in investigations and substantiation rates, including experience, gender, seniority, and expertise. Ultimately, to the extent that any characteristics associated with individual investigators, or their workloads impact the substantiation of a case, the outcome is biased because it does not rest solely on the underlying facts surrounding the allegation. (p. 421)

Soltes (2020) also noted the potential for biases arising from investigators needing to juggle multiple cases concurrently and swiftly conclude each case within a set time. These needs have the potential to prevent sufficient inquiry into each allegation and lead investigators to prematurely close cases as unsubstantiated. Biases may also arise from factors such as investigators' "experience, gender, seniority, and expertise" (Soltes, 2020, p. 419). These biases among an organization's investigators become reflections on the organization as a whole and can contribute to ideologies that challenge perceptions of impartiality and fairness in the investigative process, potentially further eroding trust among employees and impeding the organization's overall commitment to comprehensively and equitably addressing workplace misconduct.

Soltes's (2020) findings regarding unsubstantiated cases highlight various contributing factors. Lack of evidence is a common factor, particularly in cases of harassment and discrimination, in which investigators can face challenges proving policy violations. Subjectivity also plays a role, because differing perspectives and interpretations can complicate investigations. Biases among corporate investigators, driven by variables such as experience and

seniority, can also influence substantiation rates and create an uneven playing field for employees. These factors contribute to the difficulty of substantiating allegations and can leave employees feeling unheard and unfairly treated during formal investigations (pp. 418-419).

Procedural Fairness

Employee trust in the reporting process is a pivotal aspect identified by researchers of effectively addressing and mitigating misconduct. Whether reporting misconduct to their direct managers or through other designated channels, an employee must feel that their concerns will be heard and addressed impartially. Trust, in this context, corresponds to the faith an employee has in the process and that decision-makers will make fair and unbiased decisions and operate in accordance with the process. Moreover, for employees to perceive a reporting process as equitable, they must also perceive it as transparent, with open communication of, and access to, procedures. Gartner (2022) identified a decline in misconduct reporting, attributed to employees' apprehension that their reports would not yield actionable outcomes, and suggested organizations ensure transparency and fairness in investigations (p. 1). As highlighted by Gartner (2022), this task has remained challenging, because only "42% of employees think their companies have a transparent reporting process, and a similar proportion feel that reporting will lead to fair punishment for the offender" (p. 2).

Researchers have found one of the main reasons for perceptions of procedural injustice is lack of justification of decisions. For employees to effectively engage in a reporting process, they must possess a clear understanding of how the reporting process operates and feel confident regarding the justice of its outcomes. As noted by Gartner (2022), intraorganizational sharing of compliance data regarding reporting and substantiation rates is often limited, and organizational leaders frequently grapple with uncertainty about the appropriate level of transparency to extend

to employees given genuine legal concerns related to the safeguarding of employee privacy (p. 2). The resulting lack of transparency creates doubts and can foster perceptions of unfairness within processes. Only one third of compliance leaders affirm that their companies consistently furnish employees with intricate outlines of their investigation processes (Gartner, 2022, p. 3). Gartner (2022) explained an example of this from its 2021 Compliance Culture Survey results:

[Of] employees who say they didn't report observed misconduct, 33% doubted the company would act on such a report. Further, 19% of employees had experienced their reports being ignored firsthand, and a similar proportion had heard stories of peer reports being ignored. (p. 9)

In an effort to quickly and efficiently process large caseloads, organizations often provide limited information to reporting parties whose cases remain unsubstantiated, which further exacerbates the issue of trust. By limiting information revealed to employees, an organization may cause further damage to the reputation of its procedural process. According to Bies and Shapiro (1988), even “causal information in a justification for a decision influences fairness judgment” (p. 683). Their findings underscore the need for organizations to be transparent with employees, even regarding unfavorable outcomes. Furthermore, Konovsky (2000) said, “Shapiro et al. (1994) found that the specificity of an explanation was most important in increasing fairness perceptions. They also found that information communicated verbally rather than in writing was more effective in enhancing fairness perceptions” (p. 497).

Impacts

Effective communication and employee voice are, by wide acknowledgment, vital components of a thriving workplace, contributing to employee satisfaction and team effectiveness. However, the consequences of speaking up can vary depending on numerous

factors, including the type of voice expressed, the manner of sharing, and prevailing work conditions. In the following sections, discussion of insights from a range of research studies delves into the multifaceted impacts of employee voice.

Although organizations may actively encourage employees to report ethical misconduct, leaders of organizations must understand the potential impacts on individuals who choose to voice their concerns. Research findings indicate that “when employees perceive that they can freely express their opinions and affect changes in the organization, they act in accordance with their true self and, consequently, experience higher well-being (Kahn, 1990; Knoll and van Dick, 2013)” (Rollmann et al., 2021, p. 709). However, Burris (2012) emphasized that the significance of the tone and manner of expression of ideas, whether through challenging or supportive voices, influences the trust and support received from team members.

Moreover, as discussed in earlier sections, fear of retaliation acts as a significant barrier to reporting of both ethical misconduct and workplace harassment. Substantiating claims of retaliation can be challenging, leaving employees to bear severe implications of their decisions to speak up. This fear of negative reactions—such as disbelief, blame, social retaliation, and professional retaliation—further deters employees from reporting incidents of harassment. Workplace harassment creates within an organization not only direct risks but also significant indirect risks, including of personal harm to victims, impaired well-being, reduced productivity, and damage to the organization’s reputation (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 24). In the sections that follow, insights drawn from various research studies illuminate the reactions of and impacts on employees as they voice concerns within their workplaces.

Reactions to Speaking Up

Numerous researchers have shown that providing employees with opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns increases employee satisfaction and positively impacts team dynamics. Employee voice can help organizations mitigate risks, benefiting the overall functioning of organizations. However, Newton et al. (2022) also found that the effects of speaking up can vary based on the type of voice used, its manner of use, and working conditions (p. 2256). Although an organization may derive benefits, Rollmann et al. (2021) suggested that individuals may not necessarily reap the same rewards. The outcomes of speaking up also significantly influence how employees perceive procedural justice. When employees observe that their voices do not produce consistent responses, it can contribute to a climate of skepticism that discourages employees from engaging in open and transparent communication.

The effects of employee voice also depend on the way employees share ideas. Employing a challenging voice involves questioning the status quo and suggesting fundamental changes to existing policies or procedures, but the focus of employing a supportive voice is affirmation of communication that strengthens social relations and preserves harmony. Newton et al. (2022) suggested that the type of voice, whether challenging or supportive, influences the team members' trust in and support for those voicing their ideas:

We find that supportive voice in a team fosters friendship that enhances the extent to which one is trusted in the broader network, and trust subsequently influences team assembly decisions. Potential team members appear to prioritize the social capital signaled by supportive voice more so than the human capital signaled by challenging voice. (p. 2225)

Rollmann et al. (2021) found that “speaking up at work can benefit employees by increasing vigor and, when job insecurity is low, decreasing fatigue. However, voice can also lead to increases in fatigue when job insecurity is high” (p. 721). These findings are “consistent with prior research examining punitive supervision and perceived organizational support as moderators of the relationship between proactive behavior and well-being (Cangiano, Parker and Yeo, 2019; Zacher et al., 2019)” (Rollmann et al., 2021, p. 718). In ideal conditions, allowing employees to express themselves enhances engagement and feelings of well-being (Weiss et al., 1999, p. 791). However, Rollmann et al. (2021) found that when employees speak up about sensitive topics that may negatively impact their livelihoods and reputations, or when speaking up results in potential negative outcomes (such as retaliation), employees may experience harmful stress effects (p. 712) This phenomenon highlights the importance of fostering supportive and psychologically safe workplace cultures in which employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns without fear of reprisal.

Burris (2012) emphasized that “managerial reactions to employees speaking up depend on the type of voice displayed” (p. 858). Use of a challenging voice, which questions the status quo and suggests fundamental changes, may lead managers to question the loyalty of those using it. However, when individuals contribute supportively, managers are less likely to question their belief in the current course of action. Burris (2012) asserted:

Challenging voice involves a greater degree of questioning the status quo and suggesting fundamental changes to existing policies or practices, and consequently managers may come to question the loyalty of those who engage in it. ... In contrast, when an individual contributes information that is supportive, managers likely do not question their own belief that the current course of action is the best one possible. (p. 5)

The Impact of Emotions on Organizational Justice

In the realm of organizational justice, emotions play a significant role, shaping the experience of employees as they navigate various situations within the workplace. The findings outlined below reveal that the outcome of an employee's situation has a profound impact on their emotional state and, specifically, favorable outcomes evoke feelings of happiness and pride, but unfavorable outcomes tend to trigger anger and dissatisfaction. Researchers have also shown that the emotional responses of employees relate closely to the outcomes they encounter in relation to organizational justice. Weiss et al. (1999) emphasized the strong correlation between outcomes and emotions. Their findings indicated that "happiness was an overwhelming function of outcome with procedural fairness playing little role. In contrast, anger levels were highest when the outcome was unfavorable; the procedure was biased against the participant" (Weiss et al., 1999, p. 791). When employees experience positive outcomes, such as fair treatment or favorable resolution of a dispute, they are more likely to feel a sense of happiness and satisfaction, irrespective of the procedures involved. However, anger levels among employees were significantly elevated when they faced unfavorable outcomes coupled with biased or unfair procedures (Weiss et al., 1999, p. 790). The perception of receiving unfair treatment or experiencing biased decision-making processes intensifies negative emotional reactions, amplifying feelings of anger and frustration. Employees who believe investigators have disregarded their interests or stacked processes against them are more likely than other employees to experience a profound sense of injustice and resentment (Weiss et al., 1999, p. 792).

These findings underscore the importance of considering both the outcomes and fairness of procedures in the fostering of positive emotional states among employees. Although favorable

outcomes contribute significantly to happiness and pride, it is essential to recognize the impact of procedural fairness on emotional well-being. Organizations that prioritize fairness in decision-making processes and demonstrate transparent and unbiased procedures are more likely than other organizations to cultivate positive emotional workplace climate (Gartner, 2022).

Understanding of the intricate relationship between employee outcomes and emotional states is crucial for organizations aiming to create environments that promote organizational justice.

Recognizing the power of emotions in the context of organizational justice enables organizations to navigate employee concerns effectively and create positive work environments that benefit both individuals and the overall functioning of organizations.

Fear of Retaliation

Fear of retaliation is the primary reason employees hesitate to report ethical misconduct. Although many companies have zero-tolerance policies with regard to retaliation, substantiating retaliation can be challenging. According to Penman and Kelly (2022), only 22%–24% of retaliation cases in 2018–2021 were substantiated (p. 9), leaving the majority of employees who made allegations of retaliation to cope with the significant and often severe implications of their decisions to speak up. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) documented the detrimental effects of retaliation reported by employees, which encompassed a range of distressing experiences. In the aftermath of reporting ethical misconduct, individuals may find themselves subject to intentional ignorance or differential treatment from supervisors or colleagues (Ethics and Compliance Initiative, 2021, p. 23). The exclusion of an employee can manifest in numerous ways, such as being left out of decision-making processes or work activities that once included the employee. Furthermore, employees may receive poor performance evaluations, receive unfavorable work assignments, and endure verbal abuse. In extreme cases, retaliation can extend

to theft or damage of personal property, adding a heightened level of violation and insecurity to an already precarious situation (Ethics and Compliance Initiative, 2021, p. 23).

These effects not only hinder the reporting of ethical misconduct but also erode trust and psychological safety within the workplace. Fear of retaliation often discourages employees from coming forward and contributes to a culture of silence. When individuals hesitate to report wrongdoing because of potential negative repercussions, ethical lapses go unaddressed, perpetuating a cycle of misconduct and hindering organizational growth. Fear of retaliation poses a significant obstacle to employees considering reporting ethical misconduct. Despite the existence of zero-tolerance policies, substantiating retaliation has remained challenging, with only 24% of retaliation cases substantiated (Penman & Kelly, 2022 p. 42), leaving employees to confront the far-reaching and often severe consequences of their actions. As highlighted by the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022), “if left unaddressed, retaliation can erode ethical culture and undermine efforts that encourage employees to speak up and raise concerns” (p. 16).

Silent Suffering

This section delves into research concerning workplace silence, which indicates that a significant proportion of employees who experience harassment choose to remain silent and refrain from reporting misconduct, despite the alarming number of charges and complaints filed each year. According to Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), extensive research (primarily focusing on sex-based harassment) indicates that individuals commonly respond to these situations by employing strategies such as avoiding harassers, downplaying the seriousness of harassing behavior, and enduring harassment silently. The underlying cause of this silence on the part of an employee stems from their pervasive fear of various negative reactions, including “disbelief of their claim, inaction on their claim, blame, or social retaliation or professional retaliation”

(Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, pp. 22-23), which effectively deter employees from reporting instances of harassment.

The reluctance of employees to report harassment arises from their well-founded apprehensions regarding the potential reactions they may encounter. Foremost among these concerns is fear of others disbelieving, dismissing, or invalidating their claims (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 6). Furthermore, individuals anticipate little or no action on their claims to address the issues involved, leaving them feeling helpless and unheard. Victims also fear attracting blame for the harassment and having to shoulder responsibility for the offensive actions directed at them. The specter of social retaliation also looms large, encompassing fear of humiliation and ostracism by colleagues, which can isolate and marginalize a victim further. A final point is that employees dread professional retaliation, which can manifest as damage to their career prospects and reputations, potentially derailing their professional growth (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 22). Bergman (2015) said that reporting of harassment often results in adverse job outcomes and psychological distress for victims (see also Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 23). This distressing reality creates an environment in which victims perceive it to be more reasonable to endure harassment silently rather than risk the potential repercussions of reporting.

Physical and Psychological Impacts

According to Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), workplace harassment incurs not only direct costs but also significant indirect costs. Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) outlined a number of impacts of workplace harassment: “Since 2010, employers have paid out \$698.7 million to employees alleging harassment through the [U.S. EEO] Commission’s administrative enforcement pre-litigation process alone” (p. 24). The indirect costs associated with harassment are even more worrisome: “Employees experiencing sexual harassment are more likely to report

symptoms of depression, general stress and anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and overall impaired psychological well-being” (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 26). Moreover, witnessing or perceiving mistreatment in the workplace can harm the mental and physical well-being of other employees who feel empathy, concern, or fear. Reduced productivity is a common consequence of workplace harassment, resulting in job dissatisfaction, work withdrawal, disengagement, distraction, absenteeism, and interpersonal tension. According to Minder-Rubino and Cortina (2007, as cited in Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016), “employees, female and male alike, who observed hostility directed toward female coworkers (both incivility and sexually harassing behavior) were more likely to experience lower psychological well-being” (p. 27). These negative effects can spread throughout a work group, impairing its functioning. The cumulative impact of lost time due to harassment is significant, and employee turnover is often costly. Workplace harassment can also damage a firm’s reputation, affecting its ability to attract employees and retain customers. Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) said, “Perhaps most costly of all, workplace harassment can lead to increased employee turnover. Even conduct that is not harassment can lead to employee turnover” (p. 28).

van der Velden et al. (2019) found that whistleblowers—individuals who reported instances of workplace misconduct to external organizations—faced significant mental health challenges. The researchers found that “about 85% suffered from severe to very severe anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity and distrust, agoraphobia symptoms, and/or sleeping problems, and 48% reached clinical levels of these specific mental health problems” (van der Velden et al., 2019, p. 632). These findings highlight the significant impact whistleblowing can have on an individual’s mental well-being and suggest that whistleblowing has a negative impact on the lives and mental health of those who come forward, despite the potential cultural benefits.

The researchers called for targeted interventions to support whistleblowers and prevent employees from remaining silent in the face of unethical misconduct.

Transparency of communication, including employee voice, has received wide recognition as a crucial aspect of organizational dynamics that contributes to employee satisfaction and team effectiveness. However, as research indicates, the effects of speaking up depend on factors such as the type of voice expressed, the manner of expression, and work conditions. Favorable outcomes of speaking up lead to feelings of happiness and pride, but unfavorable outcomes increase anger. The manner of sharing of ideas, whether through a challenging voice or a supportive voice, influences the trust and support received from team members. It is also crucial to recognize that fear of retaliation is a significant barrier to reporting of ethical misconduct and harassment. Retaliation is often challenging to substantiate, leaving employees to cope with its severe implications. Fear of negative reactions—such as disbelief, blame, and social and professional retaliation—prevents employees from reporting harassment incidents. Workplace harassment inflicts not only direct costs but also significant indirect costs, including personal harm to victims, impaired well-being, reduced productivity, and damage to organizational reputation.

Theoretical Framework

Theories serve as valuable tools for understanding phenomena and examining previous attempts to address those phenomena. Theories provide a framework with which to comprehend the ontological and epistemological aspects of a particular subject or field of study. In the context of this study, three theories were examined to gain insights into the experiences of employees choosing to speak up about perceived unethical incidents.

Standpoint theory offers a perspective on voice and emphasizes that individuals possess unique viewpoints shaped by their personal life experiences. The theory includes recognition that perception of truth depends on an individual's distinct background, and those in a position to determine truth may lack the shared experiences necessary for comprehensive understanding.

The focus of organizational justice theory is the means of determining justice within an organization. This includes examining the individuals involved in creating processes and procedures, understanding the treatment employees receive when they decide to speak up, and exploring the implementation of justice within an organization. Similar to standpoint theory, organizational justice theory is concerned with ensuring fairness throughout the process and aims to continuously capture the perspectives and voices of all employees.

Structural violence theory applies to investigation of instances of violence within a system when intended processes fail. It seeks to define structural violence and uncover both the immediate and long-term consequences of unresolved conflicts. Examining the functioning of the process, this theory sheds light on the occurrence and impacts of violence within a structural context.

The aim of incorporating these theories into the analysis was to deepen understanding of the experiences of employees choosing to speak up about perceived unethical incidents and to provide insights with which to address challenges and foster more supportive and just work environments.

Standpoint Theory

According to standpoint theory, an epistemological view applicable to the analysis of conflict, a marginalized individual has a unique perspective and valid way of viewing the world based on their experience. Sandra Harding coined the term "standpoint theory" to describe a

feminist theory of how dominant western male views oppress women's voices: "A standpoint is achieved—earned through critical reflection on power relations and through engaging in the struggle required to construct an oppositional stance" (Wood, 2005, p. 61). The theory predicts that interactions enable and limit knowledge while providing opportunities to think in new ways. Subsequent development of standpoint theory has included the repression of voices from other marginalized groups.

Standpoint theory poses the question of whose viewpoint influences determination of an outcome. The theory allows consideration of whether the exploration of truth, as sought through a corporate investigation, consists of asking specific, potentially biased questions determined by a powerful majority. Standpoint theory encourages interrogation of whether policies, procedures, and governing laws related to EEO allegations originate from, and serve, the powerful majority and therefore lack justice for less powerful, marginalized people. Rolin (2009) suggested

that relations of power can suppress or distort evidence in at least two ways. First, they can suppress relevant evidence by intimidating potential informants, invoking uncomfortable emotions, or by inflicting what Miranda Fricker calls a "hermeneutical injustice" on potential informants (Fricker, 2006). Second, they can limit access to relevant evidence by undermining a relationship of trust between a researcher and informant. (p. 220)

The aim of corporate investigations is to uncover truth in a company's best interests, but this may not align with the interests of reporting victims. Employees who report wrongdoing may experience shame or fear, leading them to withhold evidence out of concern about how the organization will perceive them. Sociologist Husu (2001, as cited in Rolin, 2009) examined gender-based discrimination experiences in academia and found that documenting such incidents

was challenging because it demanded emotional and social effort (p. 220). I employed standpoint theory in this study to delve into each employee's perspective, focusing on their emotions and feelings as they sought help from their organization, a dominant power that subsequently constrained them in a potentially harmful manner.

Organizational Justice Theory

An organizational justice theory model consists of three primary components—distributed, procedural, and interactional justice—that, when operating ideally, create an open systems approach allowing for continuous feedback. A flawed component of organizational justice can create an environment perceived as inequitable and create unintended negative consequences. Organizational justice theory links to the philosophical works of Aristotle, Hobbes, and Marx and has undergone refinement over the last century. Rawls (1971) set conditions for organizational justice to incorporate basic principles of justice, including a right to basic liberties and accessibility to all (Cohen & Greenberg, 1982, p. 7).

An organizational justice theory model has three primary components: procedural, interactional, and distributive justice. Procedural justice is concerned with fairness of a procedure, which includes both input and influence of the procedure and determination of how the outcome of non-compliance will be determined. Interactional justice refers to how individuals are treated during the decision-making process. Distributive justice corresponds to perceived fairness of the allocation of resources, benefits, and rewards within an organization, with a focus on the equitable distribution of goods, opportunities, and outcomes among individuals or groups. All three of these components are vital to a just system.

The concept of procedural justice centers around the notion of fairness in a process or procedure used to reach a decision. The concept encompasses two key aspects: input and

influence of the procedure and determination of the outcome of noncompliance with the procedure. The objective is to ensure that all individuals involved perceive the process itself as fair. The input and influence of the procedure correspond to the various elements that shape the decision-making process. According to Gilliland (1993),

procedural rules suggested that decisions should be made consistently, without personal biases, with as much accurate information as possible, with interests of affected individuals represented in a way that is compatible with their ethical values, and with an outcome that could be modified. (p. 697)

Consistency implies that similar cases should receive similar treatment free of arbitrary distinctions. By eliminating personal biases, decision-makers should make impartial judgments uninfluenced by their own preferences or prejudices. Decisions should depend on reliable data and facts, rather than speculation or misinformation. Another important aspect of procedural justice is the representation of the interests of affected individuals in a manner aligned with their ethical values. This requirement means that a procedure should provide an opportunity for decision-makers to hear and consider individuals' perspectives during the decision-making process and represents an acknowledgment of the importance of inclusivity, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders have a voice in the proceedings. Furthermore, procedural justice emphasizes the importance of outcomes that are modifiable as needed. This emphasis implies that decisions should not be final and rigid but should allow for adjustment and reconsideration if new information emerges or circumstances change. Procedural justice includes the idea that decisions should be open to review and appeal, a recognition that human judgment is fallible.

Interactional justice corresponds to the treatment individuals receive during a decision-making process. Interactional justice encompasses all interactions that occur in relation to

procedural and distributive justice. While procedural justice focuses on the fairness of the process, and distributive justice centers on the fairness of the outcome, the focus of interactional justice directs attention to the interpersonal aspects of decision making. According to Colquitt et al. (2013, as cited in Towler, 2019), “interactional justice is the way in which an individual is treated when decisions are made” (para. 5). Interactional justice relates to the quality of interactions, including the communication and behavior of those involved in making decisions. The emphasis of this type of justice rests on the importance of respectful and empathetic communication and creating an environment that fosters trust, dignity, and fairness. Interactional justice also entails avoiding biased or prejudicial questioning, emphasizing the need for decision-makers to ask questions in a neutral and objective manner without favoring or discriminating against any party. Avoiding biased or prejudicial questioning allows individuals to feel their perspectives are receiving genuine consideration and that they are receiving fair and respectful treatment. Interactional justice includes how information about the process is relayed to the individuals involved. Clear and transparent communication about the procedures, progress, and outcomes of decision-making processes is vital for upholding interactional justice. Timeliness is an important aspect of interactional justice because delays in the relaying of information can lead to feelings of uncertainty and frustration. Ensuring that individuals remain informed in a timely manner demonstrates respect for their time and interest in keeping them involved in the process.

Distributive justice pertains to the impartiality and fairness of outcomes and encompasses the equitable distribution of rewards and punishments. Such justice involves examining whether the individuals involved in a situation perceive the consequences and outcomes of the situation as just and balanced. Achieving this goal includes assessing whether rewards—such as promotions, bonuses, and recognition—are allocated fairly based on merit, performance, and

contribution. Distributive justice also involves examining whether punishments, such as disciplinary actions, are proportionate and unbiased, ensuring individuals are held accountable for their actions in a consistent and equitable manner. In an ideal distributive justice scenario, the actors involved believe the actions resulting from a procedure are fair and just, apply fairly to all, are shared with all stakeholders, and are both explained and understood. According to Gilliland (1993), “although equity appears to be the primary distribution rule underlying distributive justice perceptions, situational factors may increase the salience of the alternate distribution rules of equality and needs” (p. 698).

I aimed with this research study to identify the experiences of the participants as they encountered each of these stages of organizational justice, and I examined their experiences in terms of procedural, interactional, and distributive justice. Their experiences helped to shed light on potential deficiencies experienced within the system structure.

Structural Violence Theory

Galtung (1969), a prominent sociologist and peace researcher, introduced the concept of structural violence to draw attention to the harm inflicted upon individuals or groups as a consequence of imbalanced laws or policies within organizations. The purpose of introducing the concept was to illuminate and problematize the underlying mechanisms that lead to both direct and indirect forms of harm. Galtung (1969) referred to violence “as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual” (p. 168). The violence Galtung referred to is avoidable violence, and he made a distinction between classical violence and structural violence. In other words, violence, according to Galtung, is not just the visible manifestations of aggression but also the absence of the conditions necessary for individuals to achieve their full potential and well-being. Structural violence, as distinguished by Galtung, arises from the avoidable

imbalances in social structures, institutions, and systems. The characteristics of such violence are systemic inequalities and injustices that perpetuate harm. This form of violence is not always intentional but rather can result from underlying power dynamics and structural arrangements. In contrast, classical violence consists of the more conventional acts of physical force or coercion, such as direct physical aggression or explicit acts of harm. Classical violence is often easier to identify and condemn than structural violence, which tends to be more subtle, embedded within the fabric of social, economic, and political systems. Emphasizing the distinction between classical violence and structural violence, Galtung aimed to broaden the understanding of violence and highlight the need to address the underlying structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and harm. Recognizing structural violence enables a deeper examination of the social, economic, and political factors that contribute to injustices and provides a framework within which to seek transformative change.

Galtung's (1969) conceptualization of violence encompasses both physical and psychological harm, an acknowledgment that both forms can damage the human body and deserve recognition as acts of violence. In the context of unsubstantiated cases, in this research I focused on understanding the impact of organizational decisions on employees. It is crucial to recognize the psychological effects that occur when claims are dismissed and comprehend how an organization's actions contribute to the prevention of employee potential. The goal is not to assign blame but to gain insights into employees' experiences and perspectives on the loss of potential. An organization's representatives must consider the short- and long-term effects of the organization's action or inaction in conflict intervention. Violence exists even in threats of physical or mental violence because these constrain human action (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). This understanding highlights the fundamental aspect of structural violence theory: the recognition

that violence does not consist solely of individual actors committing explicit acts but “is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently and unequal life chances” (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). Galtung (1969) further asserted that intention is not a prerequisite for violence and explicitly called out jurisprudence, noting that “ethical systems directed against unintended violence will easily fail to capture structural violence in the nets” (p. 173). This argument challenges the notion that ethical systems focused solely on preventing unintended violence can fully capture the complexities of structural violence. Galtung also differentiated between manifest violence, which is evident and measurable, and latent violence, which carries the potential for realization and may have delayed and long-lasting effects. This distinction reflects recognition that consequences of latent violence may only become apparent over time.

Through the lens of structural violence theory, it becomes evident that organizations can perpetuate violence even when the system itself remains unchanged. This theory highlights how the structure and functioning of an organization can lead to harm and suffering, particularly when processes and procedures fail to adequately address conflicts or injustices.

Organizations operate within a set of established norms, power dynamics, and hierarchies that can unintentionally contribute to violence. Structural violence occurs when these systems and structures result in the deprivation of basic human needs, the reinforcement of inequality, or the marginalization and oppression of certain individuals or groups.

In the context of employees speaking up about perceived unethical experiences, structural violence theory emphasizes that existing organizational structure may hinder the resolution of conflicts and perpetuate harm. This can occur when reporting mechanisms are ineffective, employees who speak up face retaliation or indifference, or decision-making processes lack

transparency and fairness. As a result of such situations, employees who voice concerns may experience harm, such as social isolation, loss of opportunities, or psychological distress.

Furthermore, the persistence of structural violence within organizations is attributable to power dynamics and the resistance to change. Although individual incidents of ethical misconduct may receive attention on a case-by-case basis, the underlying systemic issues and structures that enable such misconduct remain unchallenged, allowing an organization to perpetuate harmful practices without fundamentally altering the power structures or reevaluating the processes that contribute to ethical misconduct.

Galtung (1969) emphasized that violence can exist without direct actors and is inherent in social structures, leading to unequal power dynamics. Absence of intention does not negate the occurrence of violence. The distinction between manifest and latent violence highlights the immediate and long-term effects of structural violence. In this research study I aimed to understand the impact of organizational decisions on employees and prevention of their potential.

Chapter 3: Methodology of Research

Qualitative Research

Fully understanding the nature of a conflict requires understanding both the cause and effects of the conflict. Qualitative research yields insights into past experiences while also allowing researchers to make sense of those experiences, thus shedding light on the present and future. By engaging in methods such as interviews and collection of observable data, qualitative researchers uncover detailed accounts of experiences and understandings. These insights shed light on the complex underlying factors of conflicts to allow discovery of potential pathways to resolution. The type of information a researcher wishes to obtain is one deciding factor in their choice of methodology. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), “committed qualitative researchers lean toward qualitative work because they are drawn to the fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature of this approach in contrast to the more ridged and structured format of quantitative methods” (p. 13).

The aim of this research study was to gain a deeper understanding of the firsthand experiences of employees who chose to speak up about incidents of perceived harassment, discrimination, or retaliation and whose organizations deemed their allegations unsubstantiated. By delving into these individuals’ experiences, I sought to shed light on the challenges, emotions, and outcomes associated with speaking up in such situations where employee claims were not substantiated. Through this exploration, valuable insights were obtained to enhance understanding of the complexities surrounding employee voice and the impact of investigation outcomes on individuals who raise concerns.

By exploring and examining experiences throughout the investigation process, I sought to uncover the emotional impact on, and subsequent perceptions of, employees who have received

an unsubstantiated determination on their case outcome. Specifically, I aimed to delve into their emotional states following their investigations and their perceptions of the organization's adherence to a just culture. By examining these aspects, I strove to provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of employees who took the brave step of speaking up and facing the consequences of their allegations. The best way to assign significance to their experiences was through a qualitative research study, which afforded a unique perspective by delving into the human experiences and recognizing the influence of the circumstances on individuals' lives. Cooper and Rice (2014) said, "Attaching meaning to interactions with others, reflecting upon lived experiences and critical events, or appreciating the impact of context and environment on the lives of individuals are important elements of human inquiry that can be satisfied through qualitative research" (p. 24).

Interpretive Phenomenological Methodology

Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, is a philosophical approach focusing on the study of human experiences created to gain a deep understanding of the world through examination and interpretation of the experiences of individuals: "An important component of Husserlian phenomenology is the belief that it is essential for the researcher to shed all prior personal knowledge to grasp the essential lived experiences of those being studied" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 727). Phenomenological research involves delving into the lived experiences of individuals, exploring their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations to uncover the underlying meanings and essences of those experiences. Through its emphasis on perspectives, phenomenology provides a valuable framework for investigation and comprehension of the intricate complexities of human existence.

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, departed from traditional phenomenology while still retaining some of Husserl's ideas. His concepts brought about a profound shift in phenomenological philosophy. Heidegger proposed that individuals do not passively observe the world but actively shape their experiences based on their unique realities. This viewpoint served as the basis for interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological research, which involves placing a strong emphasis on the role of interpretation and understanding in the exploration of human experience: "Therefore, it is not the pure content of human subjectivity that is the focus of a hermeneutic inquiry but, rather, what the individual's narratives imply about what he or she experiences every day" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 729).

Heidegger's departure from Husserl's phenomenology can be seen through the concept of *Dasein*, the idea of being-in-the-world. Heidegger believed human existence to be characterized by a process of interpretation and understanding through which individuals make sense of their lived experiences. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* are the factors that profoundly influence the way individuals perceive and interpret their reality: "There is no way to separate yourself from being within the world, and this state, this being the world, meaning *Dasein*, literally being there" (Peoples, 2021, p. 32). In interpretive phenomenology, researchers have recognized that human experiences depend on context and acknowledged that individuals bring unique perspectives, beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds to the meaning-making process. This approach to research encourages researchers to explore individuals' lived experiences and the broader cultural factors that shape those experiences.

Interpretive phenomenology includes an emphasis on the importance of understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. By using this approach, I was able to engage in in-depth interviews, make observations, and conduct analyses to uncover the complex

interpretations individuals constructed within their realities. By immersing myself in the participants' narratives and examining the underlying structures and patterns of meaning, I was able to gain insights into the subjective aspects of human experiences. Interpretive phenomenology acknowledges the significance of the researcher's own interpretive lens and subjectivity. Being fully aware that my preconceptions, biases, and assumptions could influence the interpretation of data, I engaged in reflexive practices that allowed for critical self-reflection and transparency throughout the research process. By acknowledging the significance of the lived experiences of the participants within the sociocultural frame, I gained a more nuanced understanding of the human phenomena involved.

The hermeneutic circle is a core concept in interpretive phenomenology as a description of the ongoing process of interpretation in which understanding the whole depends on understanding its parts, and vice versa. According to this idea, interpretation involves a circular movement between the parts and the whole, with each part contributing to the understanding of the whole, and the whole contributing to the interpretation of the parts. This circularity is important because fully grasping the meaning of an experience or phenomenon is impossible when looking at isolated elements alone; it requires ongoing interaction between parts and whole. This requirement means understanding is not a straightforward process but a continuous dialogue between an interpreter and what is being interpreted, a dialogue in which new insights emerge through the interaction of different elements. The hermeneutic circle challenges the idea that there is a fixed, and objective meaning that can be directly accessed. Instead, the circle represents recognition that interpretation is dynamic and influenced by preconceptions, biases, and historical and cultural context. The circle involves acknowledgment that interpretations are not final or absolute but constantly evolving and open to revision. The hermeneutic circle

encourages interpreters to engage in a reflective and iterative process, constantly refining their understanding by revisiting individual parts and reassessing their relationship to the whole. Through this circular movement of interpretation, the hermeneutic circle promotes a more nuanced and holistic understanding of texts, experiences, and phenomena and recognition of the interconnectedness of various elements in the shaping of meaning.

In this study, both phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives were employed to conduct the research. The research process involved following several steps used by other phenomenological researchers, including those used by Smith et al. (2022). The steps in the research process consisted of (a) planning the research study, (b) collecting the data, (c) analyzing the data, and (d) presenting the findings. Each of these steps had a comprehensive and systematic methodology, ensuring a rigorous and detailed approach to the research process. The sections that follow provide detailed explanations of every step involved in interpretive phenomenological research along with descriptions of my actions during each step.

Planning the Research Study

The planning of this research study began with selection of the methodology that best fit the study's goals. Research questions were then formulated to guide investigation of participants' subjective experiences. Participant criteria and selection procedures were defined to ensure valuable insights, and sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation. Ethical practices were implemented, including informed consent, confidentiality, and obtaining ethical approval.

Interpretative phenomenological research focuses on lived experiences with meaning in relation to context. For this study, interpretive phenomenological research was selected as the methodology with which to investigate the experiences and emotions of individuals whose EEO

allegations have been determined unsubstantiated. The aim of this approach was to delve into the subjective and lived experiences of participants, examining the meaning they ascribed to their encounters within the context of EEO allegations. By employing interpretive phenomenological research, I sought to uncover the rich and nuanced understanding of how individuals navigated and made sense of the outcomes of their allegations, shedding light on their personal perspectives, emotions, and the broader implications of these determinations. As Smith et al. (2009) explained, “in choosing IPA for a research project, we commit ourselves to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experience” (p. 40). Using IPA, I gained insights into the perspectives of the employees, shedding light on their subjective encounters and revealing ways in which organizational actions may have hindered their potential and contributed to a diminished sense of opportunity. This approach allowed for the exploration from the employees’ standpoint, facilitating a deeper understanding of the impact of the investigation process on their voices and overall experiences.

Development of Research Questions

First, a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach for the study was intentionally chosen in recognition of the value of exploring lived experiences and the interpretive nature of understanding. IPA is a qualitative research approach that focuses on examining the subjective perspectives of participants and delving into the meaning they attribute to their experiences within a specific context. IPA was chosen as the methodology for this study because of its suitability for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. In this study, the aim was to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and emotions of individuals whose EEO allegations had been determined unsubstantiated. By employing IPA, I sought to capture the richness and nuances of these individuals’ experiences. This decision set the foundation for the

research methodology and framework. To capture the subjective experiences of the participants and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning they attributed to those experiences within the given context, specific research questions were formulated for this study. These research questions played a crucial role in guiding the inquiry and shaping the overall focus of the study. Following the principles of IPA, “primary research questions in IPA are directed towards phenomenological material: they focus upon people’s understandings of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 41). The formulation of the research questions involved careful consideration of the study’s objectives and the specific context of exploring the meaning ascribed to the determination of unsubstantiated EEO allegations. The questions were crafted to elicit detailed responses from the participants, encouraging them to reflect on their experiences, emotions, and personal interpretations. By focusing on the participants’ understandings, the research questions aimed to uncover the multifaceted nature of the participants’ experiences and shed light on the significance they attributed to the outcomes of their allegations.

The research question formulation served as a compass, guiding the inquiry and shaping the study’s focus. By setting clear objectives and areas of investigation, the research questions helped to ensure the study remained focused and aligned with its purpose. Following the creation of the research questions, a deliberate and thoughtful approach was taken to select a sample of participants who would provide a diverse range of perspectives and experiences relevant to the research topic. Participant selection involved considering numerous factors to ensure depth and breadth of insights and the potential for capturing a diverse range of perspectives. This approach involved recognition of the importance of selecting participants able to provide rich and in-depth insights into the phenomenon under study. By seeking a homogenous sample, I was able to focus on a specific population with common characteristics, experiences, and contexts. This

homogeneity allowed for a deeper exploration and understanding of the shared meanings and experiences within this group of people.

IPA involves specifically designing research questions with which to explore and gain a richer understanding of participants' lived experiences and gain a deeper understanding of their subjective perspectives. The primary focus of IPA is exploration of the meanings and interpretations individuals attribute to their experiences. When formulating research questions in IPA, it is important to make them open ended and exploratory in nature, allowing for nuanced exploration of the concrete causes or consequences of events. As Smith et al. (2009) suggested, these questions should "focus on the meaning, or rather the concrete causes or consequences of events" (p. 47). The aim was to gain insight into the experiences of employees during and after internal corporate investigations of EEO allegations ultimately deemed unsubstantiated. The research questions were designed to capture the multifaceted dimensions of these experiences, including the challenges, emotions, and perceptions individuals encountered throughout the investigation processes and their aftermath. By employing IPA, I went beyond surface-level observations and delved into the deeper meanings and subjective interpretations employees ascribed to their experiences. This approach allowed for exploration of the complexities inherent in the investigation process, shedding light on the unique perspectives and insights of the participants.

The primary research question was as follows: What is the lived experience of an employee who spoke up about an EEO allegation and received notice the allegation was unsubstantiated"? The aim of this question was to promote exploration of the lived experience of an employee who spoke up about perceived ethical misconduct and subsequently received notice that the allegation was unsubstantiated. This purpose of the question looked to shed light on the

employee's perspective and understand their experiences throughout the process from raising the allegation to receiving the determination that it was unsubstantiated. By focusing on the lived experience, I aimed to uncover the emotional, psychological, and practical aspects of the employee's journey.

A subsidiary research question was as follows: How has the experience of an unsubstantiated case allegation affected the employee's relationship with the organization? The aim of this research question was to promote specific examination of how the experience of an unsubstantiated case allegation impacted the employee's relationship with their organization. The purpose of this question was to uncover the potential implications of the investigation process and determination on the employee's connection, trust, and sense of belonging within the organizational context. It sought to uncover the ways in which the unsubstantiated allegation may have influenced the employee's perception of fairness, support, and opportunities within the organization. By exploring the effects on the employee–organization relationship, this question yielded valuable insights into the broader consequences of an unsubstantiated determination and its impact on the employee's overall experience and engagement within the workplace.

Guided by the research questions, I obtained insightful perspectives on the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals assigned to their experiences. The results illuminate the intricate consequences of allegations being classified as unsubstantiated for employees and their relationships with their organizations. The findings highlight that such a determination can profoundly impact the employee–organization relationship, potentially resulting in eroded trust, reduced engagement, and feelings of exclusion. These findings underscore the importance of considering the emotional and psychological effects of the investigation process and subsequent determination on an employee's well-being and workplace experiences.

Epistemological Point of View

Smith et al. (2009) said, “Research questions will be grounded in an epistemological position. Implicit in the formulation of a question is an assumption about what the data can tell us” (p. 47). The objective of this research study was to gain insight into employees’ perceptions of their experiences during the corporate investigation process. Specifically, the study explored how employees construct meaning in their daily lives and navigated through various emotions within this context. By delving into the participants’ subjective interpretations and understanding of their worlds, I developed a comprehensive understanding of their experiences throughout the investigation process. Through this exploration, I shed light on the complex interplay between individuals’ lived experiences, emotions, and the corporate investigation process. Furthermore, I examined the development of perceptions of organizational justice resulting from these lived experiences. By delving into participants’ perspectives, I sought to uncover their subjective understanding of justice within the organizational context. Through this exploration, I shed light on how individuals perceived fairness, equity, and the overall treatment they received in relation to their experiences during the corporate investigation process. Understanding their perceptions of organizational justice provided valuable insights into the impact of such experiences on employees’ overall sense of fairness and satisfaction within organizations. Epistemological positions play a fundamental role in shaping understanding and acquisition of knowledge and in influencing beliefs, values, and actions. Understanding the diverse epistemological stances of employees who decide to voice their concerns can help organizations navigate and critically assess a variety of viewpoints. This, in turn, can aid in fostering a culture appreciative of diverse perspectives and promotes open communication.

Sampling Criteria

This research study included specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide the selection of participants. To achieve the goals of the study, every participant was a current or former employee who had lodged a complaint of discrimination, harassment, or retaliation through a formal organizational channel such as HR, an ethics department, the legal department, or management. Each participant's case was not substantiated by the organization, indicated either by a formal determination that the case was unsubstantiated or by the organization not moving forward with investigation of the case. Every participant had to be 21 years of age or older, reside in the United States, and work for an organization based in the United States, regardless of gender. The inclusion of English-speaking participants was a deliberate choice aimed at facilitating seamless communication and comprehension during the interview phase, enabling participants to vividly articulate their experiences, interpretations, and perspectives with clarity and accuracy. The minimum age requirement ensured participants were mature enough to understand the implications of speaking up about EEO-related topics. Focusing on participants residing in the United States and limiting participation to those employed in U.S. firms reflected an acknowledgment that the legal and organizational frameworks and cultural dynamics related to workplace discrimination and harassment may vary from country to country. Individuals employed by my employer were excluded to mitigate conflicts of interest. The study's scope was limited to matters that occurred more than 6 months before the data collection to safeguard the mental well-being of the participants.

Participant Selection

Participant selection encompasses various components, such as establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, determining sampling strategies, and implementing recruitment procedures.

To maintain the study's focus and relevance, I carefully defined the characteristics and attributes participants had to possess to be included in the study. These inclusion and exclusion criteria served as guidelines for selecting individuals who could provide valuable insights and contribute to meeting the research objectives. Once the sampling strategy was determined, I employed recruitment procedures to reach potential participants and invite them to participate in the study. These procedures included advertising and using existing networks to identify and approach eligible individuals. Careful attention to participant selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria, sampling strategies, and recruitment procedures was crucial to establishing a suitable and relevant participant sample that could provide meaningful insights and contribute to meeting the research objectives. In IPA, participants are chosen purposefully with the objective of obtaining specific perspectives rather than representing specific populations. Smith et al. (2009) stated, "participants are selected on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under the study" (p. 49). The aim of this deliberate selection process was to gather in-depth insights from individuals who possessed firsthand experience. Rather than seeking a broad representation of participants with diverse demographics, a researcher applying IPA prioritizes participants who can offer unique perspectives that contribute to deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

To recruit participants, I employed a combination of networking opportunities and snowball sampling. I used social media platforms to identify and establish connections with potential participants. A sample of my social media post can be found in Appendix A. Through these platforms, initial contacts were made, and the participant pool was expanded through referrals. I provided a brief description of the purpose and criteria of the study to avoid potential biases. The initial contacts were often gatekeepers, individuals who control initial access to

research participants. Gatekeepers play a critical role in facilitating researchers' access to potential participants or data sources, and they were a critical resource in this study. I recognized trust was a major factor in recruiting participants. Given that many potential participants had previously expressed concerns and faced negative consequences, ensuring their psychological safety during the research process was of the utmost importance. Psychological safety refers to the belief that one can speak freely without fear of negative consequences. By establishing trust, I aimed to alleviate any apprehensions or fears participants may have had regarding potential repercussions and foster a sense of psychological safety throughout their involvement in the study. I concluded that the most effective recruitment method involved leveraging preexisting relationships of trust between the participants and individuals with whom I had established close rapport. These intermediary individuals played a vital role in facilitating initial communication and building trust between me and the prospective participants. By engaging with an intermediary person first, I established a foundation of trust with the prospective participant and provided them with reassurance about the study's purpose and confidentiality. This approach allowed me to establish a level of trust with the participants before I made direct contact with them, enhancing their willingness to participate and fostering within them a sense of comfort and security about sharing their experiences.

Although the use of intermediaries plays a vital role in establishing trust, the use of intermediaries also brings with it potential limitations. One prominent concern is the potential for bias and subjectivity to seep into the decision-making process, predisposing potential participants to certain ideas or perspectives. To mitigate bias and subjectivity, I was careful to share only limited information about the study. This information protection provided both intermediaries and potential participants with foundational information about the study without unduly

influencing participants with preconceptions. By limiting the information shared with both the gatekeepers and the prospective participants, I aimed to ensure that participants approached the study with open minds and foster an environment in which participants could contribute their genuine thoughts and reactions, enhancing the authenticity of their responses.

Because of inherent power differentials between gatekeepers and participants, the use of gatekeepers may also cause recommended participants to tailor or censor their narratives to align with the perceived expectations of the gatekeepers. A gatekeeper's influence, whether perceived or real, can inadvertently and unintentionally skew a participant's narrative, thus undermining the authenticity of research. To address this concern, I implemented a strict confidentiality policy, and I communicated to all potential intermediaries and participants that any information they shared would remain confidential. Furthermore, I made it clear that I would disclose participant-provided information only to my dissertation committee, if requested to do so. To maintain confidentiality and minimize the potential for influence, I purposefully refrained from seeking additional input or feedback from intermediaries following their provision of contact details for potential participants.

In addition, I placed a strong emphasis on maintaining stringent ethical standards throughout the participant selection process. I ensured that gatekeepers were not directly involved in the alleged misconduct or investigation prior to contacting recommended participants. This measure was enacted to prevent potential conflicts of interest, uphold the integrity of the research study, and ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing insights without feeling undue influence stemming from relationships among involved parties.

Once a prospective participant was identified, I connected with them via text or email and verified their eligibility with a series of short screening questions. To gauge interest and

applicability during the initial contact, I shared with the potential participant the purpose of the study, the expected length of the interview, and a confidentiality statement.

This study included a small and homogeneous sample of 10 participants. According to Smith et al. (2009), there is no specific recommended sample size for an IPA study; however, they recommend the sample be small enough to allow for in depth analysis of each individual's experience: "The issue is quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases" (p. 51). The emphasis on small samples in IPA studies reflects the recognition that quality, rather than quantity, is of paramount importance. By deliberately selecting a small and homogeneous sample of 10 participants, I aimed to ensure a comprehensive examination of the research topic. This approach enabled me to devote adequate time and attention to each participant, facilitating a thorough analysis of their experiences, their interpretations, and the meanings they attributed to their lived realities. The use of a small sample in this study aligned with the principles of IPA, emphasizing quality over quantity and highlighting the significance of a concentrated and meticulous exploration of participants' subjective experiences.

Ethical Reflection

In qualitative studies, the information provided by participants can be highly personal. A researcher must respect all ethical boundaries and work to ensure no harm occurs. This research study was designed to adhere to all ethical standards at every stage of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from research participants in writing before data collection began, and each participant received a disclaimer along with the consent form explaining that participation is voluntary and that participants had the right to leave the study during the data

collection process. The informed consent form in Appendix C was reviewed with each participant before their interview started.

Conflicts of interest were considered prior to sampling and recruitment to prevent blurred boundaries. Because I had no prior professional relationships with the participants, the potential for bias or familiarity was minimized. This helped to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives without concerns about my influence or preconceived notions. By maintaining a professional distance, I approached the study objectively and impartially, allowing unbiased analysis of the data. Participants were also not required to disclose the names of their work organizations. Maintaining anonymity in this respect encouraged participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences without fear of negative consequences. With this approach I aimed to create a safe environment that fostered open and honest responses, contributing to the overall integrity and validity of the study. To mitigate any potential conflicts or perceptions of bias, participants were not provided with compensation of any kind for their involvement in this study.

Confidentiality was the paramount ethical consideration in this study. Before each interview, I was transparent with the participant about the measures in place to protect their identity and maintain their anonymity. Through clear communication of the confidentiality protocols, participants were informed and reassured about the steps taken to safeguard their personal information and ensure their privacy. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and the pseudonyms were used throughout the study in place of names. All correspondence—including emails, transcripts, and recordings—were kept in a secured location accessible only to me.

I was cognizant of the sensitivity of the topic and did everything possible to ensure participants were emotionally comfortable during their interviews. Every interview was conducted with empathy and compassion, and participants received time to collect their thoughts when responding. I took care not to act in the role of adviser or therapist.

Data Collection

Data collection involved three distinct phases: preparing to gather the information, conducting the interviews, and transcribing the interviews. I formulated a comprehensive strategy for acquiring the necessary data from each participant. Once the interview questions and structure were determined, I collected the data using the designated methodology. The final phase involved documentation of each interview. This was done in a manner that allowed me to have a verbatim record of the interview.

Qualitative research is unique in that in order to gain the most insight, researchers must ask questions in a way that allows participants to describe their experiences in depth. Smith et al. (2022) explained that the aim of a qualitative interview is “largely to facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words, in depth and in detail” (p. 54). In preparation, I developed four interview questions to guide each interview. The interview questions were generated with the aim of gaining insight into the participants’ experiences of sharing their voices and their perceptions of justice and the associated impacts.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, allowing for the use of a combination of open-ended questions and predetermined questions that enabled me to gather in-depth information while ensuring consistency across participants. Each interview began with me establishing rapport during a 5–10-min introduction. During this time, I introduced myself and the study’s objectives. Establishing rapport is of utmost importance because it creates a

conducive environment in which an interviewed individual can feel at ease and willing to share their personal experiences. By building a connection and fostering trust with each participant, I created a safe and supportive space for open and honest dialogue. This rapport-building process involved active listening, demonstrating empathy, and showing genuine interest in the participant's perspectives. When individuals feel comfortable and understood, they are more likely to disclose sensitive information and provide deep insights into their lived experiences. Once rapport was established, the interview was conducted using open-ended, clarifying, probing, and follow-up questions as appropriate. During the interview, the participants answered the questions in their own words, and follow-up questions were asked to gather more detail and clarify ambiguous responses.

The first interview question was as follows: "Tell me about your experience of raising concerns and receiving the news your concerns were not validated." This question was designed to give participants an opportunity to share their experiences related to speaking up. It allowed them to speak freely without interruptions, helping them feel more at ease during their interviews. The question's open-ended nature sometimes led participants to jump around in the timeline of their stories. However, this phenomenon provided valuable insights into the aspects of the experiences that most significantly impacted them.

The second question asked how the participants felt "about raising their concerns before, during, and after the investigation." This question acted as a smooth transition back to the beginning of each participant's story. By reflecting on their emotions at each stage, the participants shared a deeper understanding of their thoughts and feelings beginning with the start of the conflict. Additional prompts included questions about how they felt about speaking up before the incident and how they felt speaking to the first person they reported to.

The third question explored how the experience “affected their relationships with the other party and their work group.” Because participants often mentioned these relationships in their initial accounts, they expanded further at this point on their interactions with various individuals involved in events. The question also encouraged each participant to consider the broader impacts on their team, yielding a more holistic perspective on how the conflict influenced others and how they responded to it. Additional prompts included questions related to emotions regarding the anticipated result and the fairness of the decision.

The fourth and final question asked each participant whether their experience had changed their relationship with their organization. Because this topic had often arisen earlier in a participant’s interview, I followed up with prompts about the participant’s current willingness to speak up about ethical misconduct and any advice they would offer someone in a similar situation. These follow-up questions encouraged deep and reflective responses, allowing participants to share insights into how their experiences had ultimately transformed them. For reference, the complete list of interview questions and prompts appears in Appendix B.

All interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ permission. Before each interview, I reviewed a consent form with the participant and went over each area orally, ensuring they understood all areas of the form and were comfortable with proceeding with the interview. The consent form appears in Appendix C. Nine of the 10 interviews took place via the Zoom online videotelephony software. The recordings were electronically transcribed by the software. One of the 10 interviews took place in person and was recorded and transcribed by the Dictation app. Each interview lasted 30–60 min. The original transcriptions from Zoom and Dictation were merged into a line-numbered Microsoft Word document with triple spacing and updated as

needed to reflect accuracy of the transcription. The original transcription and associated notes were completed directly after each interview to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data analysis process drew on the methodological framework proposed by Smith et al. (2022, pp. 75–108), who outlined a systematic approach for interpreting and analyzing collected data. The analysis took place in distinct steps and began with me intensively reading and rereading the transcripts, immersing myself in the participants' narratives, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. I crafted experiential statements to distill unique perspectives. I then identified common threads, named personal experiential themes, explored individual cases, and developed group themes to provide a comprehensive, collective understanding of the subject. Through this iterative and rigorous data analysis process, I aimed to unravel the rich tapestry of experiences and gain a nuanced understanding of the participants' narratives.

Each recorded interview was meticulously reviewed, with an average of three thorough listening sessions, to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The aim of this approach was to precisely capture the participants' words and expressions while paying attention to verbal and nonverbal cues. During this review process, linguistic observations and relevant notes were documented to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' communication patterns, nuances, and contextual elements that could enhance the analysis. These initial notations documented significant body language, such as eye-rolling, smirking, and smiling. By scrutinizing the recordings and transcripts, I aimed to maintain the integrity of the data and capture the richness of the participants' experiences. Smith et al. (2022) explained that "repeated readings also allow a model of the overall interview structure to develop and permits the analyst

to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together” (p. 78). After conducting each interview, I performed the initial review of the transcript within 24 hr. However, significant insights and novel information emerged when the subsequent reviews were conducted at intervals of days or weeks. The intentional spacing between the initial and subsequent reviews allowed me to gain fresh perspectives and notice subtle details that I may have missed initially. This iterative process of reviewing the transcripts over time proved valuable, unveiling new layers of information and enhancing my understanding of the data.

During the initial notation stage, I examined the collected data and made preliminary observations and annotations. These initial notations served as a starting point for further analysis and interpretation of the data. Making these notations involved capturing unique patterns and significant details that emerged from the data, laying the foundation for deeper analysis and coding in subsequent stages of the analysis process. Smith et al. (2022) suggested that

the analyst maintains an open mind and notes anything of interest within the transcript.

This process ensures a growing familiarity with the transcript, and moreover, it begins to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands, and thinks about an issue. (p. 79)

I thoroughly read the transcripts, carefully identifying and highlighting noteworthy comments, phrases, and ideas that caught my attention.

Step 2 consisted of building on these notations; in this step I constructed experiential statements, distilled the essence of the participants’ lived experiences, and captured their unique perspectives. By highlighting text and making marginal comments, I effectively captured and preserved initial impressions, observations, and interpretations, which would later inform my in-

depth data analysis. According to Smith and Nizza (2022), a researcher will in this step “be looking for similarities and differences between portions of text and magnifications or contradictions in the participant’s words, focusing on single words or sentences, questioning your response to them, and attempting to understand what they mean to the participant” (p. 33). The exploratory comments were then broken down into three categories: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. These comments were colored coded for easier reference.

Descriptive comments provided detailed information about the participants’ experiences, beliefs, opinions, or behaviors. These comments included vivid descriptions of events and experiences, personal anecdotes, and detailed explanations of thoughts and feelings. A specific example from a transcript read, “D: Harassment started right away, the first day on the job.” Descriptive notations were the first means I used to describe what participants said to capture the essence of their experiences. Each paragraph in a transcript was analyzed independently, and all descriptive notations were marked first.

Linguistic comments included observations and analysis of the language used by the interviewees, such as choice of words, tone, and style of speech. Linguistic notes can provide insight into an interviewee’s cultural background, personality traits, and communication styles: “Certain linguistic aspects are considered particularly interesting, such as the use of pronouns, verb tenses, pauses, laughter, repetitions, hesitations, and tone, so they are often used to inform the interpretation” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 36). An example of this type of notation was documented after a participant used the phrase “I was done” four times in row, emphasizing her frustration. Linguistic notes can reveal patterns in speech—such as hesitations, repetitions, and pauses—that indicate uncertainty or discomfort with a topic. The information in linguistic notes can help ensure data collected accurately represent interviewees’ perspectives. This information

can provide valuable insights into interviewees' communication styles and help contextualize their responses.

Conceptual comments highlighted areas requiring further exploration and prompted additional questions for a more comprehensive analysis. By engaging in this process, I aimed to uncover underlying patterns, connections, or implications within the data, fostering a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. This set of notations included observations and analysis of the participants' understandings, beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Conceptual notes can provide insights into how an interviewee perceives and understands a topic and how their perspectives differ from those of others. An example of this from a transcript is the following notation, which I made after the participant explained a company policy for the third time in her interview: "C: Focused again on the rules. Rules are important to her." Smith and Nizza (2022) said, "Conceptual comments typically shift away from the explicit claims of participants and instead consider their and your understanding of what is being discussed overall" (p. 38). Creating conceptual notations requires review of each interview from several different perspectives. The focus throughout conceptual analysis must be on making sense of participants rather than personal interpretations. Conceptual annotations look to ask questions about more profound meanings to answers. It considers the participant's point of view in various terms, such as time, location, and state of mind.

Individual cases were further explored to ensure comprehensive analysis by delving deeper into each participant's unique narrative and uncovering additional nuances and insights. These insights yielded experiential statements. One transcript included these lines:

I guess what really got to me was the fact that after he got done berating me and everybody left the room, the family came up to me, and they were like, the way that he

talked to you was completely unacceptable. We really appreciate everything that you've done. You've done such a great job.

One of the experiential statements arising from this analysis was as follows: "External confirmation provided validation of concerns. This validation was significant to her choosing to speak up." This analysis process continued with the naming of personal experiential themes that captured the core aspects of the participants' experiences and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences.

The next phase of analysis involved searching for connections across experiential statements, which encompassed identification of common threads, recurring ideas, and interrelationships between different statements. Annotations were listed in a bulleted format, facilitating the grouping of similar statements and ideas, thus initiating the development of a comprehensive framework for the categorization of related concepts. These similar statements were named to form the beginning of a comprehensive framework for categorizing similar ideas and connections. As similar statements were grouped together, their overall essences were shaped by the entire text. As Smith et al. (2022) highlighted, "the focus is on capturing what is crucial at this point in the text, but inevitability will be influenced by the whole text" (p. 87). The hermeneutic circle, a circular process of understanding a phenomenon, involves moving back and forth between the individual elements and the overall meaning. This circular process is an essential part of IPA research. In the conceptual stage, I was involved in double hermeneutic analysis, in which I worked to interpret the meanings ascribed to the behavior by the participants.

Once the experiential statements and supporting comments were identified, I sought to draw together these themes and establish a structural framework that accentuated the most significant aspects of participants' accounts. I was guided by the advice of Smith et al. (2009):

“Effectively, however, you are looking for a means of drawing together the emergent themes and producing a structure which allows you to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of your participant’s account” (p. 96).

The analysis process was executed electronically; next to the experiential statements I created a separate column containing more concise descriptors of the statements, such as “received backlash by peers,” and a third column of keywords, such as “response.” These columns allowed me to sort by keyword or descriptor to facilitate the creation of connections. Each case was treated individually by reviewing comments and creating a table of personal experiential themes for each participant.

Once each case was documented and analyzed to uncover emerging connections, the underlying patterns and connections were examined collectively. This involved conducting a thorough review of the identified patterns across multiple cases to identify recurring tendencies and features shared among them. Once every case had been scrutinized individually, it became evident that these commonalities and recurring tendencies transcended individual cases. For example, Participant 3 yielded four experiential statements categorized as “response.” However, after analyzing all cases, the “response” category consisted of 110 experiential statements contributed by all 10 participants. To further enhance my understanding, I created subcategories such as “lack of response by HR” and “lack of support and empathy from management” to cluster related responses for deeper analysis. Using this analytical approach, I identified more extensive patterns—notably, the absence of a response from HR and the ensuing feelings of hopelessness. This pattern ultimately resulted in emergence of the theme “feelings of hopelessness and helplessness result from lack of support by the organization, ostracization from peers, and lack of resolution.”

This scrutiny of themes at a higher level allowed deeper understanding of the overall findings and provided valuable insights. The transition toward a more theoretical perspective proved pivotal, because it facilitated the realization that themes associated with individual cases also embodied higher level concepts common across all cases, as articulated by Smith et al. (2009):

Often it helps the analysis to move to a more theoretical level as one recognizes, for example, that themes or super-ordinate themes which are particular to an individual case also represent instances of higher order concepts which the cases, therefore, share.

(p. 101)

Reflexivity and Practical Considerations

Reflexivity is acknowledgment by a researcher of their role in the research process, and it was a crucial part of this research project. Guba and Lincoln (1998, as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2008) asserted that “researchers bring to the research situation their particular paradigm including perspectives, training, knowledge, and biases; these aspects of self then become woven into all aspects of the research process” (p. 32). I continually reflected on my mood, biases, and emotions throughout the research process and adjusted as needed. As a manager working in the ethics organization of a large corporation, I have frequently encountered unsubstantiated case investigations. Through these experiences, I have become aware that lack of substantiation does not automatically resolve underlying conflict. Personal observation provided understanding of how unaddressed conflicts stemming from unsubstantiated cases have escalated and contributed to heightened tension within an organization. According to Geanellos (2000, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004), “personal knowledge, according to hermeneutic scholars, is both useful and necessary to phenomenological research” (p. 730).

Although my firsthand involvement had provided me with a deep understanding of the subject matter, I acknowledged the potential influence of unconscious bias when collecting and analyzing data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) asserted that “background, knowledge, and experience not only enable us to be more sensitive to concepts in data, but they also enable us to see connections between concepts” (p. 32). Drawing on my professional experience of examining organizational case details, I could leverage this expertise to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of the case processes described by the participants.

Although this personal experience aided understanding, personal experience can also cause biases in research. It was therefore imperative that I remained highly conscious of any biases and approached the data collection and analysis process with impartiality and without preconceived notions. Reflexivity played a vital role in mitigating biases; this involved the documentation of personal thoughts and feelings that arose during interviews through reflexive journaling. This self-reflective practice helped ensure the research findings’ integrity and objectivity.

Bracketing is an underlying technique that informs the entire process of descriptive phenomenological research. In descriptive phenomenological research, bracketing involves suspending personal assumptions, values, and judgments to allow the meanings and perspectives of participants to emerge authentically. Bracketing occurs throughout research from initial engagement with participants through data collection, analysis, and interpretation. However, according to Annells (1996) and LeVasseur (2003), “the technique of bracketing, as described by descriptive phenomenologists, is inconsistent and questionable within a hermeneutic approach, although making preconceptions explicit and explaining how they are being used in the inquiry is part of the hermeneutic tradition” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730). I strove to adopt an open and

receptive mindset, acknowledging biases and preconceptions, to genuinely understand and interpret participants' lived experiences. By acknowledging preconceived notions, I approached the data with openness and sensitivity, aiming to understand the phenomena experienced by the participants.

During the phenomenological study, I actively worked to ensure genuine understanding of participants' experiences. First, I acknowledged personal preconceptions and biases regarding the research topic through detailed journaling prior to the interviews, consciously setting aside any assumptions I may have held and approaching the study with an open mind ready to embrace the participants' unique perspectives. I actively engaged in reflexivity by continuously examining my positionality, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process. I maintained a reflexive journal, documenting my thoughts, emotions, and reflections on the research journey throughout the process. Journaling provided a private space in which I could explore reactions, challenges, and evolving insights, fostering a deeper understanding of how my experiences and perspectives shaped the study. By regularly reviewing and analyzing journal entries, I could critically assess the potential impact of my subjectivity on data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring transparency and rigor in the study. This reflexive practice enhanced my awareness of my role and influence, enabling a more nuanced and comprehensive examination of the studied phenomenon while maintaining methodological integrity. Through active listening and empathetic engagement, I allowed the participants' accounts to unfold without filtering them through my lenses. This commitment fostered an environment of trust and encouraged participants to express their lived experiences freely, ensuring the integrity and authenticity of the study.

During the data analysis and interpretation phase, I approached the analysis process with openness and curiosity, avoiding premature conclusions or hasty interpretations. Setting aside preconceived notions, I focused on identifying patterns, themes, and meanings inherent in the participants' narratives. This allowed me to remain receptive to the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences, facilitating the discovery of deep insights and generating meaningful interpretations that reflected the participants' perspectives. Reflecting on my own experiences and potential biases helped to ensure the authenticity, integrity, and depth of the study, enabling a genuine understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Significance of the Study

I found limited existing literature regarding unsubstantiated allegations of employee misconduct. The majority of researchers working in this area have examined the factors influencing employees' decisions to speak up or remain silent; however, few have studied the experiences of employees who choose to voice their concerns but receive no resolution. Existing literature did not capture the experiences of employees who report EEO allegations but whose claims are determined to be unsubstantiated, nor did it address the potential impacts of such determinations on employees. This research had the potential to yield significant data that could reduce organizational risk and increase conflict resolution through understanding of data regarding unsubstantiated cases. Gaining insight into the lived experiences of employees who have received determinations that their EEO allegations are unsubstantiated can provide valuable knowledge for both organizations and researchers. This understanding can help inform the development of actionable strategies aimed at comprehending diverse employee perspectives that contribute to the perception of EEO conflict. By doing so, organizations can mitigate organizational risk and minimize potential employee harm.

The findings derived from this study have the potential to serve as valuable contributions to future case studies, providing organizations with deeper understanding of the potential risks associated with inaction in response to conflicts that may not meet an organization's defined criteria for wrongdoing. Furthermore, future studies focusing on unsubstantiated cases could offer valuable insights to organizations regarding how to effectively support employees to manage and reduce workplace conflicts. This knowledge could inform the development of strategies and interventions aimed at fostering more harmonious and productive work environments.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter documents the findings that emerged from detailed analysis of the data collected through interviews and observations of participants, which scrutinize the underlying structures and patterns present in the participants' lived experiences. These findings demonstrate the significance of the experience of the participants, who chose to speak up about perceived wrongdoings within their workplaces.

Interview Participants

This section provides a brief description of each participant, including the type of allegation they made and the response they received from their organization. Each participant received a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Two significant aspects marked the makeup of the sample. First, eight of the 10 participants were women. Although little documentation has appeared regarding the gender differentials of employees speaking up about workplace harassment, discrimination, and retaliation, Sull and Sull (2023) reported that “women are 41% more likely to experience toxic workplace culture than men” (para. 1). LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company (2022) asserted:

Many women experiences bias not only because of their gender, but also because of their race, sexual orientation, a disability, or other aspects of their identity and the compounded discrimination can be much greater than the sum of its parts. As a result, these groups of women often experience more microaggressions and face more barriers to advancement. (Pt. 2, para. 1)

Although I found no specific research regarding gender differences in substantiation rates, it is important to acknowledge the significant biases women often experience in the workplace. These biases may have influenced women's willingness to speak up about unsubstantiated allegations,

potentially leading them to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. Furthermore, the fact that the female participants and I shared the same gender may have improved their sense of comfort and trust, encouraging them to openly discuss their perspectives.

The second significant aspect of the research sample makeup was the level of each participant within their organization. Only two of the 10 participants were of managerial level; the other eight were independent contributors. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) found nonmanagers were more likely to report that their corporate ethics and compliance programs were ineffective: “In addition to the relatively low rates of program effectiveness, non-management employees continue to lack confidence in the reporting processes at their organizations” (p. 20). I could find no research indicating a difference in the rate of substantiation between management and nonmanagement; however, the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) found that retaliation against managers was higher than against nonmanagers:

Retaliation is at an all-time high across all management levels, with top managers and middle managers driving much of this increase in recent years. Between 2013 and 2020, rates of retaliation among top managers and middle managers increased by 62 and 67 percentage points, respectively. (p. 22)

Fear of retaliation may have influenced managerial participants’ willingness to participate in a research study about unsubstantiated cases.

Participant 1: Rachael

Rachael contacted HR and senior leaders about sexual harassment/contact. During the ensuing meeting, HR dismissed her concerns as “friendly” behavior. No follow-up or offer to remediate her concerns took place after the initial conversation. Rachael left the company within

weeks of the discussion with HR because of the organization's lack of response and the significant mental health effects of the ongoing harassment and lack of response from HR.

Participant 2: Amelia

Amelia contacted HR about harassment (nonsexual) and retaliation by a senior member of the organization. HR organized a meeting with Amelia, an HR representative, and multiple senior managers, including the other party. The other party said there was no wrongdoing on their part, and HR closed the case without further investigation or an offer of assistance after the meeting. Amelia left the company following an additional incident of harassment and after receiving explicit advice from her manager not to engage with the HR department.

Participant 3: Carmen

Carmen contacted HR to report instances of nonsexual harassment and gender discrimination directed by another party at both her and other women within her organization. She also reported a physical altercation she witnessed involving the same party. Carmen and her colleagues provided written documentation, as requested by the HR department. HR never followed up with any of the individuals who reported the incidents. This lack of response, combined with ongoing harassment, led Carmen to decide to leave the organization after 4 months.

Participant 4: Alex

Alex contacted HR, the office of inclusion, the ethics office, and senior management about ongoing harassment (nonsexual) by a senior member of the organization. Alex received an email notice from HR that the allegations were unsubstantiated. No additional follow-up took place. Shortly afterward, after experiencing emotional distress and mental health effects, Alex left his role in the department.

Participant 5: Denny

Denny contacted senior management, HR, the ethics office, and external reporting organizations about retaliation resulting from a substantiated case he reported. Both internal and external organizations dismissed the allegations of retaliation. However, the organization offered the participant a more senior role. Denny left the organization soon after because of extreme physical and emotional health effects resulting from the ongoing retaliation from managers and peers.

Participant 6: Eleanor

Eleanor spoke to managers and HR about a peer sexually harassing and sexually assaulting her. HR mandated therapy for both parties while the case was investigated. After the month-long investigation, HR sent a letter to Eleanor recommending that she and the other party be separated at work, declined to investigate further, and closed the case as unsubstantiated. No additional follow-up took place. Eleanor left the organization within 1 year of the incident following a significant mental health episode resulting from the organization's response to her allegations.

Participant 7: Stacey

Stacey submitted a formal email to HR about gender harassment and retaliation by a senior colleague within her organization. HR called Stacey after 3 months to apologize for the other party's behavior. However, Stacey never received a response from HR about her harassment and retaliation claim, and she had witnessed the harassment continuing with other colleagues. Stacey planned to leave the organization as soon as she was eligible for retirement.

Participant 8: Nicole

At the request of a colleague, Nicole and the colleague submitted a formal allegation of sexual harassment to HR against their manager. The colleague requested that they speak up about their experiences to ensure HR would believe them. The offending party resigned from the company and went to work for a similar company within the industry shortly after the claim was filed. HR never followed up with either woman about their claim. Nicole left the company shortly thereafter.

Participant 9: Sarah

After experiencing perceived retaliation from managers following time off work after an illness, Sarah contacted HR to submit a formal allegation of retaliation. HR orchestrated a mediation attempt and followed up the conversation with an email documenting only the perspective of the manager and closing the investigation. Sarah left the company within weeks following mental health effects of the experience and the lack of response from the organization.

Participant 10: Beth

Beth contacted HR, senior leaders, and the EEO office within her organization after experiencing retaliation for speaking about sexual harassment of an employee who had reached out to her for help. After nearly a year without a response from the organization, the victim reached out to external parties, who substantiated the claim of sexual harassment and penalized the organization for failing to investigate and report the issue. The organization never followed up with Beth about her claims of retaliation. Beth switched career paths within months to escape her department and the ongoing retaliation. Beth experienced physical and mental health effects of the retaliation and speaking up.

Themes

In this section, comprehensive analysis of the interviewees' responses reveals emerging patterns and provides detailed explanations of the interviewees' experiences of seeking help to handle workplace conflicts. Through meticulous organization and analysis of the data, connections among the participants' accounts became evident, revealing five significant themes. I established themes through detailed exploration and documentation as discussed in Chapter 3. Many of the themes include subthemes corresponding to more detailed and nuanced analysis of the data. By breaking down those main themes into subthemes, I gained a deeper understanding of each main theme, capturing variations and complexities and ensuring all relevant aspects received adequate consideration. The subthemes also enhanced the clarity and coherence of the research findings by allowing a more granular and detailed account of the research participants' experiences or perspectives. The themes and subthemes discussed capture noteworthy commonalities among the experiences of the participants. A thematic cross-case analysis was developed (Appendix D) to identify common themes or patterns across multiple participants. It was developed to compare the data from all cases and reveal recurring themes or relationships across the cases.

The first theme (inadequate response to complaints impacts organizational culture by normalizing poor behavior and fostering perceptions that unethical behavior is tolerated) highlights participants' beliefs that insufficient action was taken after they reported their concerns, leading to normalization of misconduct and perceptions of acceptance of unethical behavior within the cultures of their organizations. The second theme (perceived gender and hierarchical disparities and the normalization of misconduct in organizational cultures) corresponds to gender and hierarchical disparities relating to sexual harassment often being

dismissed and employees' voices being devalued, particularly with regard to those in positions of high authority. The third theme (disillusionment with the system when seeking resolution—erosion of support and the burden of documented proof) relates to deterioration of trust in organizational justice after participants spoke up, with participants feeling vulnerable and unsupported because of the requirement for documented proof. The fourth theme (feelings of hopelessness and helplessness result from lack of support by the organization, ostracization from peers, and lack of resolution) corresponds to emergence of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among participants because they experienced lack of support from their organizations, peer ostracization, and unresolved conflicts. These emotions stemmed from perceived inability to address and overcome challenges, further impacting their well-being. The fifth theme (long-lasting effects) relates to the diverse impacts experienced by the participants, including mental and physical health effects and the expressed desire to leave their organizations following unresolved issues.

Theme 1

Theme 1 was as follows: Inadequate response to complaints impacts organizational culture by normalizing poor behavior and fostering perceptions that unethical behavior is tolerated. The way an organization handles employee complaints plays a critical role in shaping the culture and fostering an environment that either supports or undermines the organization's commitment to ethical behavior. Findings from the data analysis highlighted the repercussions of dismissing complaints without providing adequate support, contributing to perceived lack of accountability. Furthermore, the analysis revealed how organizational response could normalize poor conduct and foster an atmosphere of toleration of harassment, discrimination, and

retaliation. These perceptions within an organization created a climate of fear among employees, hindering their willingness to speak up.

The experiences shared by the study participants consistently indicated that an organization's failure to deliver an acceptable response cultivates a culture characterized by lack of accountability. Employees consequently perceived an environment that dismissed their concerns, thereby exacerbating the negative impact on ethical behavior. Several participants spoke about their companies' initiatives to influence the culture of speaking up; however, they said that lack of response and pervasive dismissal of concerns raised diminished the effects of corporate training and messaging encouraging employees to speak up. After speaking up about harassment in her workplace and not receiving any response, Carmen felt angry and annoyed when she later heard leaders asking teammates to speak up and bring issues forward. I found that the way an organization handles employee complaints can play a critical role in shaping the culture and fostering an environment that either supports or undermines the organization's commitment to ethical behavior. This theme indicates that the repercussions of dismissing complaints without providing adequate help contribute to perceived lack of accountability.

Furthermore, the theme indicates how an organization's responses can cause perceptions of normalization of poor conduct and foster an atmosphere of toleration of harassment, discrimination, and retaliation. These perceptions created a climate of fear among the participants, hindering their willingness to speak up. For example, Carmen said:

For me it was more like, why speak up It's not going to do anything. She would ask for our opinion, we would always have these culture meetings, and she would ask for our opinion, we would share our opinion, and then nothing would happen. So, we stopped sharing our opinion.

Denny shared his story of speaking up after feeling he was experiencing severe retaliation, which resulted in significant emotional and physical health effects after he spoke up. He said that when others observed the dismissiveness of the organization in relation to unethical behavior, people on his team became fearful about speaking up and suggested he also ignore the issues:

I know what happens when you speak up. For the most part nothing ever happens, and you just end up ruining your life pretty much, and that's kind of what happened to me.

So, you just deal with it. You suck it up, and you deal with it. (Denny)

Participants said that lack of consequences for inappropriate behavior sends a message that an organization tolerates discrimination, harassment, and retaliation and, which in turn normalizes poor conduct, perpetuating inappropriate behavior and contributing to a belief that expressing concerns leads to inaction or reprisal.

Theme 2

Theme 2 related to perceived gender and hierarchical disparities and the normalization of misconduct in organizational cultures. Within the context of perceived normalization of misconduct, I identified two prominent areas of disparity: gender and hierarchy. Gender disparities were evident in participants' accounts, which highlighted instances of colleagues dismissing sexual harassment. Hierarchical disparities emerged from the prevailing perception that employees' voices were devalued relative to the voices of those in positions of high authority.

The experiences recounted by the participants revealed trends of inappropriate behavior being trivialized or regarded as inconsequential, particularly when perpetrated by individuals in positions of power. Participants shed light on hierarchical disparities, noting a lack of accountability for senior members within organizations. Several participants expressed the belief

that seniority and organizational longevity diminish the likelihood of accountability and fair corrective action. Such perceptions contributed to environments in which employees questioned the fairness and effectiveness of complaint resolution processes, leading to reduced trust in organizations and increased reluctance to report incidents.

The excerpts below highlight the pervasiveness of harassment, fear of being disbelieved, dismissive responses from HR and managers, and potential negative repercussions for those who speak up; these factors collectively underscore the urgent need for organizations to prioritize the creation of supportive, accountable environments that encourage reporting and address concerns effectively. Emerging from these stories were common ideas regarding the normalization of harassing behavior (especially toward women and employees in lower power differentials), fear of being accused of fabrication, lack of support from HR and managers, and systemic patterns of inaction. According to Nicole, the frequency of harassment had desensitized her, and she highlighted how it becomes ingrained in women's lives from an early age. Her previous experience of being accused of fabricating complaints led to fear of being disbelieved, discouraging her from reporting incidents in her professional environment. She said:

It happens so frequently that you almost get numb to it, and you just think, you know, here we are again. ... It almost just gets bred into a woman from early on that this is what they do. ... When I spoke up about it at a young age, I was accused of making it up. She's making it up. She's telling a story. I never want people to think that again. So, when you're in a professional environment, and this continues to happen, and you think about what happened previously, you're less likely to go to HR and management and say, this is what's happening, because you're afraid you're going to be accused of making it up. (Nicole)

Rachael's story demonstrates the dismissive attitude displayed by HR, a representative of which downplayed inappropriate sexual touching as mere friendliness and urged her not to let it bother her. This lack of acknowledgment and validation reinforced her notion that her complaints would not be taken seriously:

He asks me lots of personal questions that I don't think are appropriate. You know he's touched me. ... And she [HR] was like, well, you know, he's just really friendly, and so, I wouldn't really think anything about it. ... I wouldn't really read anything into it. You know you don't have to go to dinner if you don't want to, but part of the job is going to these sites. I just I wouldn't let it bother you. And I was like, what is happening right now! (Rachael)

Stacey shared her story of years-long patterns of inaction by her organization with respect to addressing such complaints—specifically, complaints made by female team members, indicating a systemic problem with the way the organization handled harassment cases:

I know they're not going to do anything, and in this case they didn't right. In fact, they ignored it, which is bad when you ignore a complaint from a manager, and it's bad when your complaint is from a woman who is being harassed by man, who is not the first woman harassed by this man. So, I'm not surprised, but it's upsetting because it makes you wonder how many other complaints have gone forward, and nothing is done, or they're not handled appropriately.

Stories shared by Denny and Amelia characterized the perceived power dynamic when a person in power acts unethically and their organization's inaction exacerbates the situation. This dynamic discourages others from coming forward, because they have witnessed the organization disregarding others' attempts to report such individuals. Denny said:

It wasn't so severe right off the bat, but once this person that replaced the supervisor became more comfortable in her position and realized what you can really get away with. The power definitely went to this person's head. It just got worse and worse and worse. And this person would literally say, there's nothing anyone can do, and would tell me I am the most powerful person in this hospital, nobody can touch me. And this is what you're dealing with.

Amelia's experience revealed the unequal treatment of long-standing employees, suggesting that senior members within her organization could act with impunity:

And so, after she left, my boss came back, and I was like, hey, I think I'm going to go to HR about this person because that was totally inappropriate, and I felt that I was only professional with her. My boss looked at me, and she said, I wouldn't recommend going to HR about this person, because other people have brought this person to HR, and they have been turned away and told that she is an institution because she's been there a long time. They just let her do whatever she wants because she has knowledge. If it's somebody's word against hers, it's not going to go anywhere.

Amelia began seeking new employment because of concerns that the instigator's position as a vice president would enable retaliation against her, leaving her, without managerial authority, at a disadvantage. Despite having documentation of her claims, she believed the company's reputation for supporting managers might hinder her case, resulting in a credibility conflict:

I immediately started applying for other jobs, because I was worried with his position that he would be able to [retaliate], and then I would be stuck because he's a VP [vice president], and I am not even a manager. So, it's going to be his word against mine, even

if I have documentation. This company is, I think, well known for supporting its management. (Amelia)

The analysis of participants' experiences within organizations revealed their perceptions of the organizational consequences of dismissing complaints without providing adequate assistance. These organizational responses contributed to perception of a lack of accountability and fostered perceptions that the system itself normalized poor conduct and tolerated harassment, discrimination, and retaliation. Moreover, gender and hierarchical disparities compounded these perceptions, further undermining the participants' feelings of safety as they determined the potential repercussions of speaking up. Recognizing the detrimental effects of such practices, organizations must prioritize creation of environments that value and address employee concerns to foster cultures of accountability, respect, and well-being.

Theme 3

Theme 3 related to disillusionment with the system when seeking resolution—the erosion of support and the burden of documented proof. This theme corresponds to gradual transformation of an initial belief in HR's supportive role into disillusionment as organizational interests override employee well-being. Participants experienced shifts from hope to distrust as they perceived HR prioritizing company interests. Requirements to provide documented proof also created significant obstacles to resolution, leading to hesitation and reluctance to speak up in the future. When participants did speak up, they were generally hopeful they would receive help with resolving their issues. Most often, the first person a participant spoke up to responded positively; however, as the process continued, the participant would find the process hard to navigate, especially because they were required to provide documentation and evidence. After speaking up, participants felt they had to defend their concerns through documented evidence

and felt they did not have advocates within the company to help them navigate the process. Many of the participants indicated they would not be believed without documented evidence. Following the act of speaking up, a participant would often reach the disheartening realization that they were expected to substantiate their concerns with documented evidence. They felt immense pressure to gather proof, which placed an additional burden of stress on them. Moreover, participants felt isolated because they lacked advocates within their companies to support them throughout the process. This lack of support further exacerbated their feelings of frustration and vulnerability. An alarming observation was that a significant number of participants indicated they thought their claims would not be taken seriously or believed unless there was concrete documented evidence to support their claims. This requirement for documented evidence not only added an unfair obstacle to the process but also contributed to a climate that undermined the credibility and trust of those who came forward with valid concerns. Participants shared experiences of peers and managers distancing themselves from reporting parties. When HR stopped responding, extended periods of silence often ensued, during which feelings of isolation set in and fear that speaking up was the wrong choice became stronger.

Most participants said they felt anxiety about speaking up, followed by initial positive responses resulting in hope for change, followed by significant feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Participants described losing trust in their organizations, skepticism about the effectiveness of speaking up, and believing the system prioritizes companies over human beings. Many participants said they felt anxious as they decided when and how to speak up. Some participants said they spoke up immediately; however, most said they tried to resolve their issues on their own first and hoped the issues would resolve themselves without intervention. All participants reported encountering bureaucratic barriers that hindered effective resolution of their

concerns. These barriers included convoluted reporting procedures, excessive paperwork, and lengthy investigations. Such barriers not only added to the emotional burden of the participants but also undermined their confidence in the commitment of their organizations to resolving issues in a timely and fair manner. Many participants spoke about feeling anxious that they would not be believed if they spoke up. Also, almost every participant said that when they first raised their concern, they received initial positive responses, resulting in the belief that change may occur and instilling within them feelings of hope. This initial optimism was unfortunately short lived and gave way to overwhelming frustration and a sense of hopelessness, especially for participants who experienced either no response from their organizations or long periods without help resolving their issues. Multiple statements from participants expressed frustration with HR's handling of their situations, lack of support by organizations, and a perception that those in authority dismissed the concerns of employees. Statements made during the interviews indicated deep-seated loss of trust in organizations, skepticism regarding the effectiveness of speaking up, and the perception that the system places more value on career advancement than on the well-being of individuals.

Subtheme 1

Subtheme 1 of Theme 3 related to initial belief in the supportive role of HR being followed by disillusionment and a perception that organizational interests took precedence over employee well-being. The participants consistently described the stress and frustration they experienced after speaking up about their concerns within their organizations. Upon initially raising their issues, participants held hopeful expectations of receiving help and resolving their problems. The first person a participant confided in typically responded positively, providing an initial glimmer of optimism. However, as the process unfolded, the participant would encounter a

complex and challenging path that they had to navigate. They found themselves required to provide extensive documentation and evidence to support their claims, and they felt compelled to defend their allegations. Participants described initial expectations of support from HR; however, their experiences included disappointment, lack of responsiveness, and a perception that HR prioritized the company interests over the well-being of employees. Numerous statements expressed dissatisfaction with HR's handling of participants' situations, lack of support from organizations, and a perception that authority figures dismissed employee concerns. These sentiments indicated profound loss of trust in organizations, doubts about the effectiveness of speaking up, and a belief that the system prioritized career advancement over the well-being of individuals.

The following narratives illustrate the lack of support participants received after speaking up. Carmen sought assistance from HR, received initial support, and provided a detailed complaint, only to be met with silence and no resolution. Carmen also felt frustrated after HR asked her to convince her peers to write supporting statements:

I went down to HR, and I said I wanted to file a complaint. The lady that does the complaints came up and spoke with me, she was very supportive. She was like, yeah, we've heard a lot of things about that person. We are trying to figure out what to do. And then she was like, write your statement in a letter. She gave me her business card, she said, email me your statement, and then I will follow up with you. And then she said to me that if I could get other people to write a statement that would be helpful too. So, I had a couple of other [colleagues] that I knew felt comfortable enough to write a statement. ... I wrote a letter, and I am still waiting for a response. Six months later I left

that job because nothing came out of the letter I wrote. No response at all. Not even a response from HR, like we got your letter.

Beth also encountered a friendly HR representative who eventually stopped responding, leaving her feeling abandoned:

[HR says] I promise I'm going to help you. And then she did nothing. I emailed her and she wouldn't respond to any of my emails. She was so nice. And then she just fell off the face of the earth and wouldn't respond to anything.

Amelia's perceptions that HR primarily served the company and had limited availability led her to seek support elsewhere after she spoke up and her concerns were dismissed without any offer further assistance:

HR is supposed to be a person that's supposed to be there for me. We share one [HR] person with three facilities so the HR person is only there part time. So, number one, she's not there geographically all the time for me, but number two, I've learned throughout this process that HR is there for the company and not for me. So, my experience beforehand was like, okay, let me go to this person, they're supposed to be here for me. They should know what I need to do, and what my next step is. But afterwards I don't go to her for anything. If I can handle it myself, I'll handle it myself. If not, I'll go to someone else that has been at the at this company for a while, and maybe knows the type of situation that I'm dealing with.

Sarah's experience with HR began with hope and an expectation of support with conflict resolution, but her hopes for assistance and justice were dashed, leading to feelings of disappointment, vulnerability, and frustration:

I felt like I could use HR as a service essentially to deal with conflict resolution and get help essentially for being misrepresented and misunderstood by my manager. So that's where I was at. I was like I need help. ... I was feeling desperate, confused and in need of help. So, kind of vulnerable. I was in a position where I needed help, which is always a vulnerable position for most people. At first, I felt supported, understood, hopeful. But then once things started, they continued to derail, and I wasn't necessarily being represented or supported. I felt hopeless. I felt gaslit. I felt anxious. ... I was also surprised that as a group of leaders; a person with a manager as a title, a person with a VP [vice president] as a title, my manager was a VP, the HR person I met with was a VP; I was shocked that they just kind of let it land where it was. It was almost as though they were more concerned with protecting themselves as a company than caring about me as an employee.

The subtheme that emerged from the participants stories revolves around the participants' initial belief in the supportive role of HR, which was followed by disillusionment and a perception that organizational interests took precedence over employee well-being. The participants' journeys included a recurring pattern: initial anxiety about speaking up followed by a brief period of hope when they received positive responses, deterioration of trust as they encountered obstacles and receive little to no support, and, eventually, overwhelming frustration and hopelessness. These experiences led loss of trust in the participants' organizations, skepticism regarding the efficacy of speaking up, and the perception that companies prioritized their interests over the well-being of individuals. Participants faced bureaucratic barriers, such as convoluted reporting procedures, excessive paperwork, and lengthy investigations, which not

only burdened them emotionally but also undermined their confidence in the commitment of their organizations to addressing issues promptly and fairly.

Subtheme 2

Subtheme 2 of Theme 3 was as follows: The requirement to produce documented proof creates obstacles to resolution and impacts future willingness to speak up. The expectation that participants had to substantiate their experiences through documented evidence left participants feeling vulnerable and unsupported, because they lacked advocates within their organizations to guide them through the relevant processes. Because participants received consistent messages from their companies encouraging them to speak up about unethical behavior, participants were taken aback by the expectations placed on them once they raised concerns. The dissonance between initial messaging and the reality they encountered both surprised and disheartened them. Participants found themselves required to gather evidence and defend their claims, which added an additional layer of complexity and difficulty to the processes involved. The participants emphasized that these experiences were particularly excruciating because of the emotional stress caused by the unethical behavior they had witnessed. The burden of collecting evidence and defending their claims intensified the already significant emotional toll on the participants derived from the impact of the misconduct itself. The expectation to substantiate their allegations further compounded their distress, creating challenging environments that left them feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. The inconsistency between company messaging and subsequent requirements for evidence not only undermined the confidence of participants in reporting processes but also raised questions about the commitment of organizations to addressing unethical behavior. This disconnect between rhetoric and practice contributed to the participants' disillusionment and further strained their emotional well-being throughout their reporting

experiences. A significant number of participants expressed a deep-seated belief that their claims would not be taken seriously or believed without concrete documented evidence. The requirement for documented proof not only created an unfair obstacle to resolution but also eroded the credibility and trust of those coming forward with valid concerns.

The narratives below illustrate the challenges participants faced when reporting workplace misconduct. Alex diligently followed the proper channels, collecting evidence and quantifying incidents of harassment. Alex believed his claims were taken seriously, but ultimately received an email stating that nothing had occurred, leaving him without resolution:

I went through all the proper channels. I spoke to the individual's superior manager, I spoke to the ethics office, both the office of inclusion and as well as the folks that handle harassment. I spoke to all of them. The individual's superior manager told me to go ahead and file a claim, and they'll do an investigation. So, I spent time quantifying the events where I felt that the harassment occurred. It was more so verbal, through one-on-one interactions and through messages, I collected what I could, I quantified everything. I spent a considerable amount of time talking to my coworkers. I was afraid, but I went ahead and submitted it. And I felt like, for a brief moment in time it was cathartic to submit that and that I was doing the right thing and that, finally, something would come of it, because when I was talking to the coordinator, the individual responsible for performing the investigation, they seem to corroborate that a lot of the things I was telling them were justified accounts of what would constitute as harassing, bullying behaviors. So, I felt like someone is hearing me out, someone believes that what I'm saying is not right. You know a lot of the times, the way individuals conduct themselves, in one-on meetings versus how they are around others, it can be different. But when you are in one-

on-one, or two-on-one meetings folks act differently. I think that was one of the things that I didn't have, I didn't have recorded instances, I'm sure that if I did, someone would have said, something is wrong there. So yeah, they came back to me, and they said, nothing occurred, and there was no there's no resolution after that. That was basically it. Just that email.

Sarah went to HR for help but was refused assistance when it came down to her word against that of her managers:

I thought that HR would meet with my manager separately, which they did, meet, but then, once, like nothing was able to be corroborated, which was like the HR term that they used. It was kind of like. I was just left alone, so at first, I felt hopeful like I was going to be supported, and things were going to be resolved, and I would be validated at the very least. But once nothing that I had told HR initially was able to be corroborated, then it was basically like you're on your own. So, I thought I was going to be helped, and that I just felt, really just ignored.

Denny emphasized the importance of having tangible evidence, such as written documentation, to validate claims. He felt powerless in the face of mistreatment, because the lack of tangible evidence made it difficult to prove his allegation of retaliation:

If it's not in an email, or it's not something tangible, it never happened. So that's exactly what you have to do, and you have to definitely collect your information for a long period of time because it needs to be shown as a pattern. ... I could go to the director and talk about what was going on, but if I didn't write it down, the conversation didn't happen. So, to write it down. That's on like a whole other level, because then you're like putting it in stone, and then it gets to that person, and that person is going to read it, and then

you're left knowing that nothing will probably happen. You have to think, what is this person going to do to me now because there's nothing that I can do to stop it. You just feel powerless like there's nothing you can do. (Denny)

Amelia's story reflects the frustrations and limitations faced by individuals attempting to report misconduct in the workplace, especially when power differentials are in play. Amelia shared her concerns that she would not be believed, even with documentation, and would face retaliation for speaking up:

I immediately started applying for other jobs, because I was worried with his position that he would be able to [retaliate] and then I would be stuck because he's a VP [vice president], and I am not even a manager. So, it's going to be his word against mine, even if I have documentation. This company is, I think, well known for supporting its management.

These stories highlight the struggles faced by individuals seeking resolution and support in the workplace and reflect the challenges individuals face when seeking justice and raising questions about the effectiveness of existing processes and the support offered by organizations. The stories of Alex, Sarah, Denny, and Amelia underscore the obstacles faced by individuals with regard to providing tangible evidence to substantiate their claims. The burden of proof not only added pressure and prolonged processes but also created a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. Participants said their fear of not having recorded instances or written documentation would deter them from speaking up or reporting future incidents, knowing that without concrete evidence their claims could be dismissed. This impact on the willingness of individuals to come forward and share their experiences perpetuates a culture of silence and continues the cycle of harassment.

Theme 4

Theme 4 was as follows: Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness result from lack of support by organizations, ostracization from peers, and lack of resolution. All participants described frustration with the handling of their situations by their organizations, lack of support from their organizations, and a perception that those in authority dismissed the concerns of employees. Most participants expected to receive some form of help because of the training provided by their organizations. Many participants received no response or follow-up to their concerns, resulting in feelings of lack of dignity and respect. The lack of response included limited offerings of adequate conflict resolution and a lack of explanation of protocols for reporting and resolving issues. These feelings of frustration resulted in feelings of hopelessness and lack of trust in organizational authority. In the workplace, employees depend on their organizations for support, guidance, and resolution when facing challenging situations. However, when individuals encounter difficulties, such as harassment or conflict, absence of support can lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. This theme relates to how lack of organizational support, coupled with ostracization from peers and lack of resolution, contributes to these emotions. Examining Subtheme 1, which corresponds to the feeling of hopelessness resulting from lack of support for finding a resolution, and Subtheme 2, which corresponds to the feeling of ostracization resulting from lack of support from others in an organization, provided insight into the profound impact of lack of support on employees' well-being and organizational dynamics.

Subtheme 1

Subtheme 1 of Theme 4 was as follows: Feelings of hopelessness result from lack of support for finding a resolution. Participants expressed frustration and disappointment with the

lack of resources and support provided by their organizations with respect to addressing their concerns or navigating difficult situations. The inadequacy of the support provided included limited access to counseling or therapy, inadequate assistance with conflict resolution, and lack of clear protocols for reporting and resolving issues. Most of the participants described scenarios in which they asked for help through formal reporting channels and received either no follow-up or emails telling them their claims were unsubstantiated and that no further help was available.

When parties cannot find a mutually agreeable solution, conflict can escalate and lead to irreparable damage. Without access to alternative methods of resolution, such as mediation or facilitation, parties must try to figure out how to function. This can be particularly problematic when parties experience significant mental and emotional health effects resulting from ongoing conflict. Ultimately, the lack of alternative conflict resolution measures creates barriers to resolution of disputes in a fair and equitable manner. The cases described below provide evidence of how feelings of despair and hopelessness set in once participants realized they would receive no help to resolve their conflicts.

Rachael's story reflects a sense of profound disappointment and a feeling of being abandoned within her organization. After seeking support and finding no one to look out for her, she reached a breaking point when she realized she had to face the problem alone or make the difficult decision to leave. The lack of support, realization that no resolution was in sight, and ongoing sexual harassment became overwhelming, leading her to conclude that leaving her job, even without having found a new job, was better than staying with her organization. As a result, Rachael chose to leave the organization, prioritizing her own well-being over remaining in an unsupportive and unsustainable environment:

Then after it was just like complete disappointment, completely like I was on my own. No one's going to look out for me. If there was a problem, I was either going to have to deal with it or leave. And I got to a point where I was like, I can't deal with it anymore. So I'm going to leave.

Carmen's story includes a sense of defeat and a profound feeling of insignificance within her organization. The lack of response and support she received validated her belief that the organization considered her and other employees to be insignificant and unimportant. Her experience left her and her colleagues feeling defeated and reinforced the notion that the organization saw them merely as "peons." The absence of meaningful acknowledgment or action further solidified the belief that their concerns and well-being were unvalued, ultimately deepening the sense of disillusionment and resignation: "[I felt] defeated, and it kind of validated the fact that we didn't matter ... and that we're just the peons. [Receiving no response] really validated, to all of us that we didn't matter" (Carmen).

Sarah's story similarly captures a profound sense of feeling ignored and invalidated, despite her expectation of receiving assistance and having her conflict resolved. Instead of being understood and validated, she felt her concerns were treated as mere tasks to be checked off on a list. This lack of meaningful support left her feeling disillusioned and emotionally detached, eventually leading her to shut down and adopt a robotic approach to her work. This deep sense of numbness stemmed from the belief that her voice and well-being did not matter within the organization, exacerbating her feelings of insignificance and hopelessness:

I thought I was going to be helped, and then I just felt really ignored. Like I was just a series of emails that they had to get through so that they could do something else. I felt like it didn't help at all. Meanwhile my expectation again was to be helped, have the

conflict resolved. Primarily be understood, minimally, like minimally, be understood. My perspective to be understood and validated as not being wrong or unprofessional, or disengaged, because that couldn't have been farer from the truth ... so. I shut down. I gave up. I became a robot every day at work. ... I felt completely numb because I felt like I didn't matter. (Sarah)

Denny's account illustrated a profound transformation from a confident and capable individual into someone who felt completely beaten down and stripped of their self-assurance. As a go-to person who was knowledgeable and reliable, Denny's sense of identity and worth was eroded over time. This change in demeanor seemed intended, as if the aim were to diminish Denny's confidence and silence his voice. The experience left Denny feeling fearful and apprehensive about the people around him, creating a reluctance to speak up. The psychological impact of this transformation highlighted the destructive power differentials at play within the organization, where individuals would be systematically stripped of their confidence and courage, ultimately instilling within them fear and hindering their willingness to raise concerns. Denny said:

I went from somebody who was super confident and brave. I knew what I was doing at all times. I was the go-to person. And over a period of time, I was just like beat down to like nothing, where I didn't feel anything like that anymore. So, and I guess that was the point, because somebody who was like that isn't going to speak up right. So, you become fearful of the people.

These stories share a common theme of individuals experiencing disappointment, feeling their insignificance validated, being ignored, and feeling beaten down by lack of support in their organizations. Rachael felt completely on her own and reached a breaking point at which leaving

seemed the only option. Carmen felt defeated and validated in her belief that she and her colleagues were insignificant to the organization. Sarah anticipated receiving help but instead felt ignored and reduced to a series of emails, causing her to shut down emotionally. Denny's confidence and bravery eroded over time, leaving him feeling fearful and silenced. These accounts collectively illustrate the profound impact of lack of support which can lead to feelings of disillusionment, insignificance, numbness, and fear among employees.

Subtheme 2

Subtheme 2 of Theme 4 related to feelings of ostracization resulting from lack of support from others in an organization. Feeling ostracized within an organization after speaking up because of lack of support from others can have a profound impact on an individual's well-being and sense of belonging. When an individual takes the courageous step to raise their concerns or voice their opinions, they hope for understanding, empathy, and support from others in the organization, including their direct managers and colleagues. Lack of such support can lead to a sense of exclusion and alienation. The participants shared stories of feeling ignored, invalidated, and left to navigate their challenges alone. This lack of support not only undermined their confidence in their organizations but also eroded their sense of belonging, making them question their place within their work communities.

The excerpts below illustrate the detrimental consequences of such experiences. Both Denny and Alex noted that others in their organizations were experiencing treatment similar to their own, but when they spoke up, their relationships with managers and peers deteriorated. Denny's experience of speaking up within his organization resulted in a significant shift in his relationships with his colleagues. Although almost everyone on Denny's team faced some level of harassment, Denny bore the brunt of it. This created an environment in which fear permeated

the workplace, and others hesitated to speak up. When Denny voiced his concerns, he faced increasing anger and hostility from his colleagues. His relationship with his supervisor deteriorated to the point that strict measures were imposed to limit their interactions. Denny was not allowed to be alone with his supervisor, and his access to certain areas and resources was restricted without justification. When employees speak up, this type of retaliation is common, and often organizations themselves encourage employees engaged in conflict to limit interactions to avoid escalation of conflicts or interference with ongoing investigations. This isolation and mistreatment further intensified the sense of ostracization that Denny experienced within the organization:

As I spoke up, my relationship with everybody changed. Everybody to some extent was being harassed, but I was getting the majority of it, 80% or more. No one wanted to speak up because everybody was afraid. Once I started speaking up everyone started getting mad at me, and of course my relationship with my supervisor deteriorated even worse. It deteriorated to the point where I was the only employee who was not allowed to be, I wasn't allowed to be in the same room as her alone. There always had to be witnesses. I couldn't be in the same area, like in in certain areas of the department where you have access. She cut my access off for no reason at all, just like little things like that, and eventually it became where she would no longer speak to me, and if I wanted to have communication with her, it had to be through someone else.

When asked whether and how his relationship with his organization had changed, Alex reflected on the possibility that speaking up might have altered how others perceived him. Observing the experiences of other colleagues who had voiced their concerns and subsequently left the organization, Alex noticed a pattern of mistreatment and dismissive attitudes from

managers. This realization led Alex to understand that many individuals prioritize their own well-being and that of their families, avoiding hardship by distancing themselves from those who speak up. Although Alex recognized the understandable reasons behind this behavior, it still caused deep hurt and disappointment, because the lack of support from others emphasized the isolation and negative consequences of speaking up:

Maybe it changed others' perceptions of me. I've known others in the past who have spoken up, and actually left the organization to go to other groups, I saw them being treated similarly, being dismissed by management ... at the end of the day I realize a lot of folks are just doing what's best for them and their families. They don't want to be subjected to what I went through as well. I guess they don't want to have an association with me, which is, I guess, understandable, but also deeply, deeply hurtful.

Rachael expressed a complete loss of respect for the individuals in her organization. Their actions and behaviors had deeply disappointed her, to the point that she questioned her willingness to remain in a company with leaders she had no respect for. She actively avoided engaging with them, feeling disgusted by their behavior and finding it difficult to have any meaningful conversations with them. The lack of respect she felt toward the leader exacerbated her desire to distance herself from the organization:

I had zero respect for any of those people anymore. And I was like, even if I could bring myself to stay here, I don't want to stay at a company where I don't respect any of the leadership. I tried to minimize my interactions with them because I was like, I can't even I can't even talk to you like I'm disgusted by your behaviors. (Rachael)

Rachael lost respect for leaders and chose to disengage, but Eleanor described a culture of caution and avoidance that perpetuated ostracization: “It was like tiptoeing around. It was hard because nobody else wanted to get stuck in a situation. Nobody wanted to take sides.”

Overall, these stories highlighted the common thread of participants feeling ostracized and isolated within their organizations after speaking up, reinforcing feelings of helplessness and disillusionment. This sense of ostracization can lead to emotional detachment and loss of motivation, ultimately affecting an employee’s overall engagement and productivity.

Lack of support from peers, supervisors, and leaders created a sense of abandonment, mistrust, and disillusionment. The resulting isolation further exacerbated feelings of helplessness, making it difficult for individuals to navigate the challenges they faced after speaking up. The impact of ostracization went beyond immediate feelings of exclusion and in many instances had a lasting impact on the well-being of individuals. The emotional toll of feeling isolated and unsupported resulted in increased stress, anxiety, and even depression for some participants. The absence of supportive networks within their organizations left some participants feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their futures with the organizations. Many of the participants described loss of trust in their colleagues and in the overall cultures of their organizations. In some instances, these negative emotions seeped into other aspects of participants’ lives, affecting their relationships, self-esteem, and overall mental health.

Theme 5

Theme 5 related to long-lasting effects. The lingering effects of the participants’ experiences—such as changes in perspective, distrust in others, and caution regarding future actions—suggest that speaking up can have lasting consequences. All participants indicated enduring consequences that profoundly shaped their lives. These impacts went beyond

immediate impacts, as evinced by lingering effects on perspectives, trust in others, and cautiousness regarding future actions. This theme indicates that the repercussions of speaking up extend far beyond the initial incident, leaving a lasting imprint on an individual's life. Three subthemes emerged in the data analysis: impact on mental health, emotional toll and personal consequences, and effects on job retention.

The significant impact on mental health was evident across the stories shared by the participants. Their experiences of harassment, lack of support, and subsequent aftermath led to emotional distress, anxiety, and even depression. Participants reported daily crying, loss of sleep, weight changes, and high levels of stress that persisted long after the incidents occurred. These profound effects on mental well-being highlight the importance of addressing workplace issues effectively to safeguard the psychological health of employees.

Furthermore, the emotional toll and personal consequences experienced by the participants were far-reaching. Their stories revealed feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and being disregarded and invalidated by their organizations. These feelings resulted in a loss of trust not only in their colleagues and superiors but also in their organizations as a whole. The impact on personal relationships, such as strained relationships with family members, highlighted the deep emotional scars left by these experiences.

Effects on job retention were also evident in the narratives shared. Every participant mentioned having contemplated leaving their position because of the lack of resolution and support and the toxic work environment. Fear of retaliation, fear of negative consequences for career advancement, and perceived lack of opportunities for growth within their organizations were major factors influencing their decisions to consider alternative employment. This finding highlights the potential long-term consequences of mishandling workplace issues: Talented

individuals may feel compelled to leave their jobs, resulting in loss of valuable talent and expertise.

Subtheme 1

Subtheme 1 related to impact on mental health. The participants' descriptions of emotional distress, anxiety, weight loss, and the need for therapy indicated the significant negative impact their situations had on their mental health. Participants vividly described the detrimental effects their situations had on their mental well-being. The emotional distress they experienced was apparent in their accounts of fear, worry, and need for ongoing therapy.

Rachael had reached a breaking point in her situation and decided to quit her job without having another job lined up. The experience had taken a toll on her mental and physical health, leading to daily crying, weight loss, and debilitating anxiety. Rachael revealed that she had not shared her story of sexual harassment with anyone outside her family because of feelings of shame, resulting in additional feelings of isolation:

Probably a month later I just quit, and I didn't have another job lined up. I didn't, but I was like, "I can't do this." I cried every day. I lost a bunch of weight. I would get so anxious on trips that I just felt like I couldn't function. I can't do this! I'm done, I'm done. I'm quitting. So, I quit, moved to another state, and worked with a therapist after that.

Like Rachael, Eleanor revealed that she did not tell anyone about her experiences of sexual harassment, including her husband. She shared feelings of shame that grew when her employer ultimately closed her case as unsubstantiated. Eleanor's experiences deeply affected her trust in people, to the point that it strained her marriage. Following closure of her case, Eleanor had a severe emotional breakdown, leading to a visit to a behavioral center to seek support:

I trust people, but I lost that trust for a long time. And it even affected my marriage. I would jump at everything, and, like I said, that morning [my husband] just said some things and I lost it big time. ... I lost it. I lost it big time. I cried and cried and cried and said I didn't want to see anybody except for my daughter, and she had to stop what she was doing and come over. They took me over to the behavioral center. The lady asked, "Are you going to harm yourself?" and I said, "No." She asked, "Do you want to harm him?" I said, "No." "Do you want to harm anybody else?" and I said, "No, I just want this to be over with."

Both Rachael's and Eleanor's stories highlight the profound impact of their experiences on their well-being, which led them to make significant changes and seek professional help to recover. These descriptions emphasize the profound negative impact that speaking up can have on an individual's mental health, underscoring the importance of providing appropriate support and resources to those who come forward.

Subtheme 2

Subtheme 2 related to emotional toll and personal consequences. The participants' stories highlighted the personal toll of their experiences, including feelings of being devalued, destroyed, and powerless. Many participants reported impacts on both business and personal relationships. Furthermore, the impacts extended beyond their professional lives, affecting their personal relationships as well. This subtheme corresponds to the far-reaching effects of speaking up, shedding light on the emotional turmoil and personal consequences individuals endure when they find the courage to address their concerns. The stories below of Beth, Stacey, and Denny emphasized the significant toll workplace issues took on their emotional and mental well-being. Beth described experiencing constant anxiety and deep mistrust of leaders. The erosion of trust

permeated every aspect of her life, making her question the reliability of others. This emotional turmoil had a profound impact on her, leading to a decision to prioritize her health and leave the job:

It took a major toll on my emotional health, like constant anxiety. Anytime I would have to go to work. ... And then, honestly, there's probably some deep, major leadership wounds of not being able to trust leaders, and wondering, "Do you really have my back? Are you really trustworthy?" When I look at the effects on trust, that is something that I see bleed into every other area of my life. I'm always thinking, "Can I trust you, if I come to you, will you actually do what you're going to do?" So, I feel like that's the biggest damage done to me. The anxiety died down, which was terrible. My blood pressure was through the roof, but all that died down. But, when you look at the emotional turmoil that it took on me, that was the biggest thing for me. It did a number on me. Which is why I was like, "I'm just going to quit. ... This is not worth it." I realized what it was doing to my health, my emotional health, and my physical health, and I'm like, "This is not worth it. No job is worth this! I'll work at Starbucks and make coffee and sell a kidney if I have to!" (Beth)

Stacey discussed how such experiences can demoralize an employee and hinder their ability to perform well, feel connected to their team, or align with their organization's vision.:

I think it's demoralizing. and I think that it definitely doesn't want to make you do a good job. It definitely doesn't want to make you obviously come to work, it definitely doesn't help you be, or want to be, part of the team or part of the vision.

Denny's story stood out as one of the most distressing accounts. The harassment he faced pushed him to the point of having a severe panic attack in his department, resulting in a rush to the

emergency room. This incident shattered his confidence and self-perception, leaving him feeling weak and fundamentally changed. The emotional impact lingered, leaving him forever altered and unable to regain the same sense of self:

So, this whole, this whole situation really was probably the worst experience I've ever had in my life. It's something that kind of destroyed me, to be honest. It took a very confident strong person, and it pushed me into having this really severe, severe panic attack in my department, in front of everybody, being rushed to the ER [emergency room]. I had never had a panic attack before, I don't have any mental illness issues, and I thought I was having a heart attack. But that whole experience to me was really upsetting because I felt like she won, like she got me. She finally got me and I'm the weak one. I'm no longer someone who people can look at the same way. So, I never felt the same after that, ever, not even with myself. (Denny)

These stories collectively illustrate the lasting emotional scars inflicted by workplace issues. Anxiety, mistrust, demoralization, and severe panic attacks are just a few of the repercussions faced by the participants in this study. The impacts went beyond their workplaces, affecting their overall well-being and the way they viewed themselves.

Subtheme 3

Subtheme 3 related to effects on job retention. The emotional distress caused by the situations described affected work performance, leading to feelings of disengagement, disassociation, and inability to function. The emotional distress caused by their situations significantly impacted the ability of participants to perform their jobs effectively. The feelings of disengagement, dissociation, and inability to function described by the participants indicate a negative link between such experiences and job retention. Every participant interviewed reported

leaving their job in some way because of the adverse effects of reporting their concerns and the lack of support received from their organizations. This subtheme highlights the profound impact that speaking up can have on individuals' professional lives, ultimately leading to job loss and further reinforcing the need for organizations to address these issues seriously and provide necessary support.

Carmen reached a point of complete disillusionment and frustration with her company. Although she had spoken up about the issues she faced, nothing happened to address them. Feeling unsupported and unheard, she made the decision to leave the organization. Although initially hesitant, Carmen ultimately accepted another job offer, realizing that staying was no longer an option for her. Even when offered the opportunity to stay on a limited basis, she firmly decided to move on, determined to leave the negative environment behind and seek a fresh start elsewhere:

I was done. Yeah, after nothing happened, and like, I just, I was done. I had been offered another job, and I was not going to take it, but then I went ahead and took it because I was done with that company, and I didn't want to be there anymore, and they had asked me to stay and just work holidays and go back every now and then. But I was done.

(Carmen)

Several participants described the detrimental impacts their negative work environments were having on their professional identities and behavior. Each of these participants also described the realization that to continue to uphold their own personal values of integrity, they had to leave their organization. Sarah understood that if she stayed in her work environment, it would likely shape her actions and habits in ways that did not align with her long-term goals and values. Realizing the importance of maintaining her integrity and professional growth, Sarah

made the difficult decision to quit her job. By doing so, she severed her ties with the organization, without having any other work lined up. Sarah prioritized her own well-being and remaining true to her values and ethics:

It can alter the way that you show up professionally, and that's kind of what it was doing for me, and I didn't want to start to adopt habits that I didn't want to carry for the rest of my life. So, I just quit. So, it definitely changed the relationship with my organization because I'm not there anymore.

Overall, the three subthemes under the theme of long-lasting effects provide insight into the enduring impact of speaking up. They shed light on the deep-seated emotional and psychological consequences, the personal toll, and the detrimental effects on job retention. Recognizing and addressing these long-lasting effects is crucial for organizations creating safe and supportive environments in which individuals can come forward and advocate for change.

Thematic Summary

In this study I explored the lived experiences of employees who decided to speak up about incidents of perceived harassment, discrimination, or retaliation and had their allegations deemed unsubstantiated. Fully understanding and interpreting the experiences of the participants was central to obtaining an enhanced understanding of the complexities surrounding employee voice and the impact of investigation outcomes on individuals who raise concerns.

The primary objective of this study was to gain insight into the lived experience of employees who made an EEO allegation and received notice the allegation was unsubstantiated. Another objective was to explore how these experiences affected the employees' relationships with their organizations. This chapter presented a conceptual framework that encapsulated the lived experiences of the 10 interviewed participants, highlighting five overarching themes and

seven subthemes that emerged from the analysis. These thematic findings illuminate the common experiences of the participants.

The first theme uncovered the impacts of inadequate responses to complaints on organizational culture, which included the normalization of poor behavior and the perception that unethical conduct is tolerated, and highlighting the lack of accountability and dismissive cultures that were perceived by the participants.

The second theme related to gender and hierarchical disparities. Participants highlighted instances of sexual harassment being dismissed, perceptions of employee voices being devalued relative to those of high authorities, and lack of accountability for senior member of organizations.

The third theme showed the erosion of trust and the obstacles encountered when seeking resolution. Participants described initial belief in the supportive role of HR, which turned to disillusionment and a perception that organizational interests took precedence over employee well-being. The requirement to produce documented proof was identified as a significant barrier to seeking resolution and had implications for future willingness to speak up.

The fourth theme revealed feelings of hopelessness and helplessness experienced by participants due to the lack of support from their organizations and subsequent ostracization by peers. The subthemes within this theme highlighted the emotional toll resulting from the lack of support in finding a resolution and the impact on mental health.

The fifth and final theme showed the long-lasting effects of the experiences. Participants described changes in perspective, distrust in others, and caution with regard to future actions, indicating that the impact of speaking up can be enduring and have significant personal and

professional consequences. The subthemes explored effects on mental health, emotional toll and personal consequences, and impact on job retention.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of employees who speak up about perceived wrongdoing and face the outcomes of their unsubstantiated allegations. The findings highlight the need for organizations to address the issues raised and provide supportive and just environments for employees. By recognizing the lingering effects of such experiences, organizations can work toward creating cultures that value employee voice, foster trust, and effectively address concerns to benefit both individuals and the organization as a whole.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The participants in this study shared a diverse range of workplace-conflict experiences, including harassment and retaliation. For some participants, their organizations immediately refused to investigate, and other participants waited months to receive notice from their organizations that their cases were unsubstantiated; still others never received any response. Despite the variation in context and situation, certain common themes emerged from participants' accounts. This chapter delves into the themes identified across the individual experiences of the participants, as well as the study's focus on voice, perceptions of justice, and impacts of speaking up about workplace conflict, and discusses how the themes correlate with existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Synergy of Theoretical Framework and Research Findings

The theoretical framework employed in this study encompassed three key theories: standpoint theory, organization justice theory, and structural violence theory. These theories were selected as valuable analytical frameworks with which to examine and interpret the participants' experiences. Interview questions were designed to gain a fuller understanding of the participants' experiences related to the topics addressed by the three theories. The purpose of the interview questions was to uncover participants' perspectives on fairness, decision-making processes, and the impact of social structures on their lived experiences. By aligning the interview questions with the theoretical framework, I sought to deepen the analysis and generate nuanced insights into the complex interplay among individuals, organizations, and broader societal dynamics.

Standpoint theory serves as a foundational lens with which to examine how individuals' social positions and lived experiences shape their knowledge and understanding of the world.

Standpoint theory includes a recognition that individuals' social positions and lived experiences shape their knowledge and understanding of the world. By considering the unique perspectives and standpoints of the participants, I aimed to gain insights into how their backgrounds, identities, and positions within their organizations influenced their perceptions of, and responses to, various issues. The observations made during the interview process reflected the principles of standpoint theory. Participants' past experiences of discrimination, harassment, and speaking up were pivotal in determining their standpoints. Participants spoke about their encounters with discrimination and harassment and the instances they had witnessed to form their understanding of organizational dynamics. These experiences served as lenses through which they viewed their interactions within their organizations, influencing their choices of whom to approach and how they expected their concerns to be addressed.

Furthermore, participants considered their social ranks or positions within their organizations, believing their status would determine the outcomes of their grievances. This consideration aligns with standpoint theory, according to which individuals from different social positions hold unique perspectives shaped by their relative power, privilege, and access to resources. Participants with higher organizational ranks anticipated more favorable outcomes because of their perceived influence, and those in lower positions were fearful and uncertain about how speaking up could negatively affect them in the future. However, an intriguing point arose when participants expressed surprise at female members of their organizations disregarding their concerns about sexual harassment. This element challenges traditional assumptions associated with standpoint theory, suggesting that individuals sharing similar social identities may better understand and empathize with each other's experiences. The participants' expectations were rooted in the belief that speaking with someone who could relate to their

experiences, such as a female colleague, would yield greater understanding and support. The participants' exasperation and frustration arose when their encounters with these individuals did not align with their expectations. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of standpoint theory and indicates that factors beyond shared social identities can influence individuals' perspectives and responses to issues such as sexual harassment. The participants' reflections on past experiences, consideration of social rank, and unexpected responses encountered provide insights into how standpoint theory operates within the context of discrimination, harassment, and speaking up within organizations. These insights underscore the multifaceted nature of individuals' perspectives and the complex interplay among social positions, experiences, and expectations in shaping their understanding and response to these issues.

Applying organizational justice theory provided a valuable framework for examining the participants' experiences. The focus of this theory consists of the concepts of fairness and equity in organizational contexts, particularly in relation to decision-making processes and outcomes. By employing organizational justice theory, I aimed to investigate how the participants perceived the fairness of their treatment, the procedures in place for addressing their concerns, and the overall sense of justice within their organizations. The participants expressed concerns regarding procedural justice both before and after speaking up, indicating that they believed their organizational positions would adversely impact decision-making processes. They felt that individuals in higher positions received preferential treatment and those in lower positions would not receive the same priority and justice. From an interactional justice perspective, many participants initially had positive experiences when they spoke up. They reported being treated with dignity and respect, and appropriate questions were asked. However, lack of subsequent communication from their organizations marred their positive impressions. They were left

uninformed about the processes, the expected duration of investigations, and the availability of short-term conflict resolution options. I found that most participants found distributive justice lacking. They perceived the outcomes, or the lack thereof, as diminishing organizational accountability. Additionally, the rationale behind the outcomes was not adequately explained to any of the participants, leaving them feeling dissatisfied and disillusioned. The application of organizational justice theory sheds light on the participants' experiences. The participants expressed concerns about procedural justice, experienced mixed interactional justice, and perceived distributive justice as inadequate. These findings highlight the need for organizations to address issues of fairness and equity in their decision-making processes, communicate effectively with individuals who speak up, and provide transparent explanations of outcomes.

The application of structural violence theory provided a valuable framework with which to analyze the participants' experiences within broader social and power structures. This theory focuses on the underlying and often hidden forms of violence within societal systems, such as discrimination and unequal power dynamics. By adopting this theoretical perspective, I aimed to uncover how structural factors—including organizational hierarchies, power imbalances, and cultural norms—contributed to the participants' encounters with adversity and injustice. The findings strongly support the existence of structural violence. Participants reported experiencing significant physical and psychological effects after speaking up, with their organizations' reactions amplifying their distress. These adverse conditions prevented participants from realizing their full potential and undermined their overall well-being. By examining the participants' experiences through the lens of structural violence theory, I illuminated the detrimental impact of systemic factors on individuals who choose to speak up. Unequal

distribution of power, lack of interactional and distributive justice, and reinforcement of harmful cultural norms all played roles in perpetuating the participants' experiences of violence.

The application of structural violence theory allowed a comprehensive examination of the participants' experiences within the broader social and power structures. The findings indicated the profound effects of speaking up and highlighted the presence of structural factors that hindered the participants' potential and well-being. These findings underscore the importance of addressing and eradicating structural violence within organizations and fostering more just and inclusive environments for all individuals involved.

Synergy of Literature Review and Research Findings

In the literature review I examined the factors influencing employees' willingness to speak up in organizations, emphasizing the importance of organizational culture and psychological safety in the promotion of open communication and reporting of misconduct as described by the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2022). Detert and Treviño (2010) highlighted the role of immediate supervisors in shaping employees' perceptions of corporate climate and their inclination to escalate concerns. Fear of retaliation emerged as a primary barrier to speaking up, emphasizing the need for trust within an organization to ensure employees feel safe reporting misconduct.

I also explored in the literature review the occurrence of unsubstantiated cases, in which employees' concerns are acknowledged but not acted on. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include lack of structured mechanisms for voicing concerns, inadequate responsiveness of managers, and limited accessibility of effective voice systems (Wilkinson et al., 2018). In the literature review I introduced the concept of deaf ear syndrome, created by Harlos

(2021), and highlighted by Wilkinson et al. (2018), which corresponds to situations in which managers disregard grievances.

Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) called for further research on failed voices and advocated challenging cultural norms that discourage open communication while fostering a culture of voice between employees and supervisors. Following Soltes (2020), I delved in the literature review into the reasons behind unsubstantiated allegations of misconduct, including lack of evidence, subjective interpretation, and false accusations. Highlighting the significance of procedural fairness in the reporting process, Gartner (2022) underscored the crucial role of employee trust in the reporting process, emphasizing the importance for decisions of transparency and justification.

The findings of this study align with findings reported by Rollmann et al. (2021) demonstrating the impact of organizational culture on employees' willingness to speak up. Participants with supportive managers were more likely to voice their concerns than those perceiving unfair and retaliatory cultures. Fear of retaliation and trust in their organizations were significant factors affecting employees' decisions to report misconduct, also found by Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) and Gartner (2022). The study's findings also captured instances in which participants' concerns received inadequate responses or were ignored, echoing findings reported by the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021).

Overall, I found the emphasis in existing literature to be on the significance of creating cultures of psychological safety, trust, and procedural fairness in organizations to encourage employees to speak up and ensure their voices are heard. This study's findings reinforce these principles and shed light on the repercussions that occur when such principles are lacking, further indicating that organizations need to address issues such as fear of retaliation, bias in

investigations, and lack of transparency to foster environments in which employees feel comfortable reporting misconduct and have confidence in reporting processes.

Impacts of Inadequate Response to Complaints

The first theme that emerged from the interviews revealed the detrimental impact of inadequate response to complaints on organizational culture. Normalization of poor behavior and the perception that unethical conduct is tolerated were prevalent issues. The findings highlighted lack of accountability and dismissive culture, emphasizing the need for organizations to establish clear mechanisms for addressing complaints and holding individuals accountable for their actions.

Organizational justice theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the impact of lack of accountability and dismissive workplace culture on employees' willingness to speak up. According to this theory, individuals' perceptions of fairness in the workplace influence their attitudes, behaviors, and overall satisfaction. In the context of speaking up, organizational justice plays a critical role in determining whether employees believe their concerns will be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. A dismissive workplace culture undermines employees' perceptions of procedural justice, the fairness of the procedures used to address concerns. When employees perceive that their complaints will be dismissed or not thoroughly investigated, they view the reporting process as unfair and biased. This perception erodes their trust in the system and reduces their motivation to raise concerns, because they doubt the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organizational response. Furthermore, lack of accountability and dismissive workplace culture can lead employees to perceive lack of distributive justice, the fairness of outcomes. They may believe that their complaints will not lead to tangible actions or consequences for the wrongdoers. This perception discourages

employees from speaking up, because they feel their efforts will be futile. Lack of accountability and dismissive workplace culture also contribute to a climate of relational injustice, the fairness of interpersonal treatment. When employees perceive that unethical behavior has gone unaddressed and that wrongdoers have faced no consequences, it sends a message that unethical conduct is tolerated and even rewarded. This normalization of poor behavior creates a toxic work environment in which employees feel undervalued, disrespected, and vulnerable. As a result, they are reluctant to speak up, fearing retaliation or social isolation from their peers.

Many participants described initial hesitancy about speaking up because of a prevailing perception of inaction from managers and leaders responsible for ensuring justice. However, the majority of participants remained hopeful that the process would yield positive results. Although they were more concerned about finding resolution than punishment, they emphasized the importance of fair distributive justice measures throughout their organizations. After they spoke up and received no justice, all participants experienced apprehension about voicing concerns in the future, fearing potential retaliation and doubting whether future concerns would be taken seriously. These experiences fostered cynicism and skepticism regarding the likelihood of a fair outcome and organizational commitment to integrity. The insights from the participants shed light on the far-reaching impacts of inadequate organizational response on employees' attitudes and behaviors. These findings support the findings of Turner (2022) regarding lack of trust in reporting processes and fear retaliation, which reduce individuals' willingness to report future concerns. The findings of this study also support the finding of Detert and Treviño (2010) that immediate supervisors have a significant impact on how employees perceive their ability to speak up and play a crucial role in shaping employees' willingness to speak up.

The stories shared by participants, and their apprehension, reflect the deep-rooted distrust that can develop within workplaces characterized by lack of accountability and dismissive culture. Apprehension about speaking up in the future illustrates the long-term effects on an individual's willingness to raise concerns and contribute to a culture of silence. The shared cynicism and skepticism of the participants further highlight the disillusionment experienced by employees who have sought help but encountered dismissive or ineffective responses, leading to loss of faith in organizational commitment to addressing misconduct.

Perceived Gender and Hierarchical Disparities

Standpoint theory is a sociological and philosophical framework that includes recognition of how an individual's social position and lived experiences shape their knowledge, understanding, and perspectives on the world. The theory suggests that gender, race, social class, and other aspects of an individual's identity influence their perspectives, providing them with unique insights and understandings different from those of people in more privileged positions. According to standpoint theory, individuals who occupy marginalized or oppressed positions within society have distinct standpoints that offer critical insights into power dynamics, social inequality, and the ways in which knowledge and truth are constructed.

According to standpoint theory, marginalized individuals, by virtue of their social position and experiences, may have a more comprehensive understanding of social structures and systemic injustices than other individuals. Their perspectives challenge dominant narratives and provide valuable insights that can contribute to social change. This theory specifies that knowledge is not value neutral and that acknowledging and centering the perspectives of marginalized groups is essential to achieving a more just and inclusive society. By encouraging recognition and amplification of the standpoints of marginalized individuals, standpoint theory

challenges existing power structures and promotes more equitable and inclusive knowledge systems.

In this study, eight of the 10 participants belonged to a protected class based on the criteria set forth by the U.S. EEO Commission. These protected classes encompass individuals who face various forms of social disadvantage and systemic oppression, such as discrimination and harassment based on race, gender, disability, age, or sexual orientation. Many participants described experiences that directly corresponded to gender harassment and shared stories of systemic gender discrimination and harassment.

Many of the female study participants expressed frustration and disappointment with their male counterparts who dismissed their claims as overreactions, undermining the validity of their concerns. This dismissal not only invalidated the participants' experiences but also perpetuated gender disparities within their workplaces. This phenomenon highlights lack of understanding of, and empathy for, challenges faced by women in the workplace. However, adding to the participants' sense of outrage and disbelief were instances in which they shared their concerns with female managers and HR representatives who also dismissed or ignored their claims. These experiences were particularly frustrating for the participants because they had hoped for support and understanding from individuals who shared their gender. Instead, they encountered dismissive responses, deepening their frustration, undermining their trust in the system, and creating a sense of alienation and lack of respect for dominant members of their organizations. As expressed by Fuller and Gerloff (2008),

dignity involves respect, respect for oneself and for others. It has to do with worthiness- a sense that we and others are worthy. While it is true, we can maintain our dignity even when others treat us with indignity, treating ourselves and others with dignity means

treating everyone as if they matter and are worthy of our respect. Dignity can also involve our right to belong. In this sense, dignity is knowing there is a place for us. Then dignity and recognition are two sides of a coin. Dignity is a sense of belonging, inclusion, being valued, that comes when we know we have contributed something to a group and that our place in it is secure. We experience dignity and belonging as threats of exclusion and banishment are removed. (p. 12)

Physicist, educator, and author Fuller (2001) coined the term “rankism” to shed light on the harmful dynamics that occur when one individual or group asserts power and control over others based solely on their position of authority or privilege. Rankism consists of abuse, discrimination, or exploitation of individuals based on their perceived rank or hierarchical position in a social, organizational, or institutional context: “By analogy with racism and sexism, rankism is abuse or discrimination based on a difference of rank. Nest-feathering, cronyism, anonymous ‘peer review,’ corruption, and nepotism are some of the names given in the past to specific kinds of rankism” (Fuller, 2001, p. 2).

According to Fuller and Gerloff (2008), rankism can manifest in various forms, such as bullying, harassment, humiliation, and exploitation of individuals based on social status, job title, age, race, gender, or any other characteristic that establishes a hierarchy (p. 134). Rankism can occur in any setting, including workplaces. Countering rankism involves recognizing and interrupting the abuse of power dynamics to foster a more equitable society by promoting dignity, respect, and equal treatment for all individuals, regardless of position or social standing.

Rankism and standpoint theory are distinct but related concepts and provide insights into power dynamics and social inequalities. Rankism refers to abuse or exploitation of individuals based on their perceived ranks or hierarchical positions. It encompasses acts of discrimination,

oppression, and mistreatment directed toward individuals considered lower in the social or organizational hierarchy.

The focus of standpoint theory is the idea that individuals' social positions and lived experiences shape their knowledge and understanding of the world, and the theory incorporates recognition that people from marginalized groups have unique perspectives and insights that stem from their positions within society. Standpoint theory emphasizes that these marginalized perspectives can challenge and broaden dominant narratives, offering valuable insights into social structures and power dynamics.

The relationship between rankism and standpoint theory lies in how power imbalances and hierarchies intersect with individuals' perspectives and experiences. Rankism often operates within existing power structures, where individuals in higher ranks wield authority and may abuse their power over those in lower ranks. Standpoint theory reflects an acknowledgment that individuals in marginalized positions, who are more likely to experience rankism, may possess critical insights into the dynamics of power and oppression. Standpoint theory encourages consideration of the perspectives and experiences of marginalized individuals to better understand and address social inequalities, including rankism. Those who value and amplify these perspectives can challenge oppressive systems, promote social justice, and work toward creating more equitable environments.

Every participant in the study described feeling a profound sense of vulnerability as they navigated the power dynamics inherent in voicing their concerns within their organization. Participants who considered themselves lower ranking shared feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread and encountered power imbalances. However, participants who considered themselves higher ranking said they experienced less fear of retaliation. All participants shared experiences of

perceived abuse of power based on hierarchical position; however, lower ranking participants were less likely than higher ranking participants to experience surprise at the actions of those in decision-making positions.

The study's findings align with those of Fernando and Prasad (2019) regarding dominant discourse and reluctant acquiescence. The participants mentioned that dominant discourse reflected the perspectives of those in power, suppressing alternative viewpoints. This narrative shapes how employees perceive workplace issues, including harassment, and influences the actions and behaviors considered acceptable and unacceptable. Silence then results from individuals feeling emotionally disadvantaged in discursive interactions, leading to feelings of shame and fear. Third parties—such as managers, HR personnel, and colleagues—discouraged participants from speaking up. These actors used various strategies to invalidate participants' experiences, downplay their concerns, and uphold existing power dynamics and norms, ultimately perpetuating silence. Within each organization reluctant acquiescence contributed to maintenance of the status quo, hindered open discussions of mistreatment, prevented resolution, and perpetuated a culture of silence.

Disillusionment With the System

The third theme illuminated disillusionment with the system, including erosion of trust and obstacles encountered to resolution. Participants said they initially believed in the supportive role of HR, only to be disillusioned by perceived prioritization of organizational interests over employee well-being. The requirement to produce documented proof was a significant barrier hindering the ability of employees to seek resolution and undermining their future willingness to speak up. This situation highlights the need for organizations to create processes that prioritize

employee well-being and ensure employees feel supported and empowered when raising concerns.

The participants consistently described the stress and frustration they faced when voicing their concerns within their companies. They initially held optimistic expectations of receiving assistance and resolving their problems by speaking up. The first person each participant approached to listen to their concerns generally responded positively, giving them a sense of hope. However, as the process progressed, the participant would encounter a complex and challenging path, which they had to navigate. The experiences described by participants align with the principles of organizational justice theory. Organizational justice theory emphasizes fairness and equity within organizations, particularly in relation to decision-making processes and outcomes. The participants' initial hopeful expectations of receiving help and resolving their issues reflected their belief in procedural justice. When each participant received a positive response from the first person they confided in, they felt an initial sense of procedural justice as their concerns were taken seriously. However, as the participant progressed through the process, they encountered challenges that undermined their perception of procedural justice. The complex path they had to navigate suggested a lack of a clear process or inconsistent application of procedures within the organization. Requirements set forth that reporters must gather evidence created a sense of unfairness and frustration, because participants felt their concerns were not handled in a consistent and unbiased manner.

The participants' experiences also relate to interactional justice, the focus of which is the treatment individuals receive during decision-making processes. The initial positive response each participant received from the first person they confided in indicated a degree of interactional justice, because they received respectful and empathetic treatment. However, as

participants' processes continued, many described feeling ignored or not receiving updates or explanations about investigations. This lack of communication and transparency eroded trust and contributed to a sense of injustice.

Deaf ear syndrome, introduced by Harlos (2021), is a phenomenon in which managers acknowledge employees' grievances and concerns but ultimately ignore or disregard them. Such a situation indicates a significant breakdown in organizational responsiveness and accountability with respect to addressing employee issues. In cases of deaf ear syndrome, an employee may experience frustration and helplessness, which have detrimental effects on their motivation, well-being, and trust in their organization. Deaf ear syndrome reflects a failure in communication and decision-making processes that stops employees' voices from receiving due consideration or action. Addressing and overcoming deaf ear syndrome requires a cultural shift that promotes open communication, active listening, and genuine responsiveness to employee concerns that includes ensuring employees' voices are both heard and acted on to foster more inclusive and supportive work environments. Deaf ear syndrome can significantly impact psychological safety within an organization. Employees experiencing deaf ear syndrome have their sense of psychological safety undermined. They may hesitate to speak up or share their concerns, fearing their voices will be ignored or dismissed. Unwillingness of an organization's employees to speak up about ethical misconduct out of fear can have detrimental effects on the organization and employee well-being, engagement, and performance. The perception by an organization's employees that their concerns are not taken seriously or addressed erodes their trust in the organization and diminishes their psychological safety.

Many study participants shared a common concern about the lack of credibility and trust they felt they would receive when reporting their claims without concrete documented evidence

to support their assertions. This requirement for tangible evidence posed a significant obstacle for participants in their reporting processes, further burdening employees already navigating challenging situations. The participants who experienced perceived sexual harassment particularly emphasized the difficulty of meeting this requirement: They felt the need to substantiate their allegations and gather proof to validate their claims. The perceived need to gather evidence and seek external validation not only placed undue burden on an individual reporting misconduct but also created a climate that undermined their credibility and trust. The barrier to reporting posed by the need for irrefutable proof contributed to a culture of skepticism and disbelief within the individual's organization, which discouraged employees from coming forward with valid concerns and perpetuated a sense of injustice within the organization. These findings align with the findings of Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) that

employees who experience harassment fail to report the behavior or to file a complaint because they anticipate and fear a number of reactions—disbelief of their claim; inaction on their claim; receipt of blame for causing the offending actions; social retaliation (including humiliation and ostracism); and professional retaliation, such as damage to their career and reputation. (pp. 22–23)

The experiences described by the study participants regarding the requirement for documented evidence and the challenges faced when reporting misconduct align with the structural violence and organizational justice theories. From the perspective of structural violence theory, the requirement for concrete evidence is a form of unequal power dynamics within an organization. Requiring reporting parties to document and gather evidence may pose barriers to employees, especially those who have experienced sexual harassment, and escalates the power imbalance between organization and employee. This imbalance perpetuates structural

violence by limiting the ability of employees to access justice and fair treatment in an organizational context. In terms of organizational justice theory, the insistence on concrete evidence is a violation of procedural justice. Procedural justice emphasizes fairness and equity in the procedures and processes of an organization. By requiring documented evidence as a prerequisite for taking allegations seriously, an organization creates a procedural barrier that undermines the perception of fairness. Employees may feel their concerns are not handled fairly, or their voices are not heard, without concrete evidence. This lack of procedural fairness erodes trust and credibility within the organization, contributing to a climate of injustice and diminished psychological safety.

Overall, the requirement for documented evidence and the challenges faced providing such evidence relate to structural violence theory by highlighting unequal power dynamics and to organizational justice theory by demonstrating violation of procedural fairness. Both theories underscore the importance of addressing these issues to create more just and equitable organizational environments in which employees feel safe to come forward with their concerns without facing undue barriers or skepticism.

Feelings of Hopelessness and Helplessness From Lack of Support

The fourth theme that emerged related to the profound feelings of hopelessness and helplessness experienced by participants because of the lack of support they received from their organizations and subsequent ostracization by peers. The emotional toll resulting from the lack of support in finding a resolution and the impact on mental health were prominent subthemes within this theme. The interviews revealed a critical need for organizations to provide comprehensive support systems, including mental health resources and avenues for emotional support, to alleviate the distress experienced by employees who choose to speak up.

Retaliation is not confined to situations marked by power differentials; it also manifests in peer-to-peer interactions. Several participants in the study reported instances of peer exclusion, a manifestation of retaliation. This observation aligns with the Ethics and Compliance Initiative's (2022) statement that retaliation encompasses actions such as demotion, removal of work responsibilities, negative performance evaluations, and exclusion, whether perpetrated by managers or peers (p. 16). Moreover, the research findings corroborate the work of Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), who found that reluctance of employees to report harassment arises from their well-founded apprehensions regarding the potential reactions they may encounter. Foremost among these concerns is fear of their claims being disbelieved and their experiences being dismissed or invalidated (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 6). Furthermore, individuals anticipate little or no action being taken to address their claims, leaving them feeling helpless and unheard. These findings also resonate with the conclusions drawn by Weiss et al. (1999), who emphasized that perceptions of unfair treatment and biased decision-making processes can intensify negative emotional responses, amplifying feelings of anger and frustration (p. 792). Employees who believe their interests have been disregarded or that processes are biased against them are more likely to harbor a profound sense of injustice and resentment (Weiss et al., 1999, p. 792).

From a standpoint theory perspective, the participants' feelings of hopelessness and helplessness can be understood as a result of their marginalized standpoint within the organization. Standpoint theory emphasizes the significance of individuals' social positions and their experiences of power and privilege in shaping their perspectives and understanding of the world. In these cases, the participants' marginalized standpoints as employees who spoke up about their concerns led them to feel disempowered and believe they were not valued members of their organizations. The resulting adverse feelings highlight the importance of recognizing and

addressing power differentials within organizations to ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities to be heard and supported, regardless of standpoint.

Organizational justice theory is also relevant to understanding the lack of support experienced by the participants. The participant's perceptions of a lack of support and subsequent ostracization by peers suggests a violation of interpersonal justice, the fairness of interpersonal treatment and relationships within an organization. Absence of conflict resolution support and failure to provide comprehensive support systems, including mental health resources, represents a breach of interpersonal justice. This breach highlights the importance of organizations fostering supportive and inclusive environments that values employees' well-being and provide the resources necessary for emotional support.

Furthermore, applying structural violence theory allows deeper analysis of the consequences of lack of support for the participants' mental health. Structural violence theory explains how organizational structure and policy imbalances can cause harm. In this context, the participants' experiences of distress and the subsequent impacts on their mental health are manifestations of indirect or structural violence. The organizational structures and systems that failed to provide support necessary to help participants resolve their conflicts perpetuated environments that fostered ongoing conflict. The participants described experiencing feelings of disconnection, insecurity, and hopelessness as they sought assistance from their organizations and were met with lack of support. Absence of adequate support systems failed to address their concerns and consequently resulted in ostracization by peers and coworkers. This isolation and rejection reinforced their feelings of despair and helplessness. The participants' experiences align with the notion of structural violence, because imbalances within organizational structures and lack of support contributed to their continued suffering and detrimentally impacted their mental

health. It is essential to recognize that the harmful effects of structural violence extend beyond physical acts of violence and encompass social and psychological dimensions. In these cases, absence of support systems within organizations created environments that perpetuated conflict and further exacerbated participants' distress. The feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and lack of support experienced by the participants relate to standpoint theory by highlighting the marginalized standpoints of employees. These feelings also highlight aspects of organizational justice theory by emphasizing the importance of fairness and shedding light on the harmful impact of imbalances in organizational structures. Addressing these issues requires an approach that takes into account the power dynamics within organizations and fosters supportive and inclusive environments, prioritizing the well-being of employees.

Long-Lasting Effects

The fifth and final theme related to long-lasting effects of speaking up. Participants described changes in how they viewed their organizations, increased distrust of others, and heightened caution with respect to future actions. The impact of speaking up extended beyond their immediate situations, affecting personal and professional aspects of their lives. The subthemes—effects on mental health, emotional toll and personal consequences, and impact on job retention—emphasize the need for organizations to acknowledge these long-term effects.

The detailed accounts the participants provided vividly illustrate the profound negative impact their situations had on their mental health. The descriptions of emotional distress, anxiety, and physical manifestation of distress (such as loss of sleep and inability to perform job duties) highlight the significant toll their experiences took on their overall well-being. These firsthand narratives emphasize the profound emotional turmoil resulting from organizational conflict.

The participants' experiences paint a picture of fear and worry that permeated their daily lives. Their distress extended beyond specific incidents and had lasting effects on their mental states. The need for ongoing therapy, mentioned by several participants, further underscores the severity of the emotional impacts they endured. The participants' accounts of seeking therapy indicate that they recognized the need to address and cope with the emotional burdens they carried. The emotional distress experienced by the participants reflects the adverse psychological consequences of their involvement in the situations studied. Participants described feeling devalued, destroyed, and powerless, highlighting the profound impact on their well-being. Feeling devalued can profoundly affect individuals, impacting their overall well-being and sense of self-worth. Someone experiencing a persistent sense of being devalued can consequently experience sadness, frustration, and despair: "Several interpersonal emotions reflect reactions to real, anticipated, remembered, or imagined rejection. Hurt feelings, jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, and embarrassment occur when people perceive that their relational value to other people is low or in potential jeopardy" (Leary, 2015, p. 440). The emotional toll of feeling devalued can heighten stress and anxiety, which the participants experienced.

The adverse consequences of feeling devalued can create work environments in which individuals constantly feel on edge or fearful of making mistakes. This chronic stress can lead to physical symptoms such as weight loss, anxiety, and panic attacks, described by many of the participants. The emotional toll can extend beyond the workplace, affecting personal relationships and overall life satisfaction. Participants shared stories of social withdrawal, self-isolation, and loss of motivation and passion for work. The consequences extended beyond their professional lives to their personal relationships. This subtheme underscores the far-reaching consequences of speaking up, exposing the emotional turmoil and personal sacrifices individuals

endure when they choose to address their concerns. Emotional distress resulting from their situations profoundly impacted the participants' work performance, leading to a range of negative feelings and reduced ability to function effectively. The overwhelming nature of the emotions of disengagement, disassociation, and feeling unable to function suggest a negative connection between such emotions and job retention. These emotions created significant barriers that hindered participants' productivity and motivation, making it increasingly challenging for them to fulfill their job duties to the best of their abilities. Lack of support from their organizations further compounded the participants' experiences, exacerbating their emotional distress and contributing to their decisions to leave their jobs. The absence of understanding and assistance from their colleagues left them feeling isolated and unsupported. This lack of support not only heightened their emotional distress but also eroded their trust and confidence in their organizations. The adverse effects they experienced from the initial problem, coupled with the perceived lack of support for resolving the problem, led each participant interviewed to decide to leave their job in one way or another. The findings underscore the significant impact of emotional distress on employees' job satisfaction and retention after they speak up and do not receive necessary assistance from their organizations.

The long-term effects reported by the participants in the study align with the findings of Feldblum and Lipnic (2016), who documented the significant personal harm inflicted on victims of workplace harassment, particularly sexual harassment. The documented consequences include mental and physical impacts such as depression, stress, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and impaired psychological functioning. Victims often experience physical health issues such as headaches, sleep problems, gastric problems, weight changes, and cardiovascular problems (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, pp. 26–27). These findings underscore the severity and wide-ranging

effects of workplace harassment on individuals. In addition to the personal toll, workplace mistreatment has detrimental effects on work environments:

It can result in decreased productivity, as employees who experience mistreatment may become disengaged, withdraw from their work, experience distractions, exhibit absenteeism, and contribute to interpersonal tension within the workplace. The cumulative impact of lost time due to harassment is substantial and can lead to costly employee turnover, as individuals may choose to leave their jobs to escape the toxic environment. (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016, p. 28)

In the cases studied, these effects persisted even when participants' claims were deemed unsubstantiated, highlighting the impact of perceived mistreatment on individuals' well-being and job satisfaction.

The lens of structural violence theory can guide analysis of these experiences and findings. The study participants' accounts illustrate how workplace environments that include toleration or neglect of harassment perpetuate structural violence. By failing to offer resolution and support, these environments also exacerbate conflict experienced by individuals. Power dynamics between employees and those in positions of power, along with lack of support from organizations, create environments in which individuals feel devalued, powerless, and unsupported. This situation reflects the structural violence perpetuated by hierarchical systems and organizational cultures prioritizing power over employee well-being. The long-lasting effects of workplace conflict—including effects on physical, emotional, and mental health—affect individuals' personal and professional lives. These effects not only result from individual actions but are deeply rooted in systemic organizational issues.

Moreover, documentation of the mental and physical consequences of workplace harassment aligns with the concept of structural violence. The emotional distress, mental health issues, and physical symptoms experienced by victims highlight how systemic factors contribute to harm inflicted on individuals. The power imbalances and norms within organizations that perpetuate harassment create environments in which individuals experience ongoing stress, anxiety, and trauma. Structural violence theory emphasizes that these systemic factors, rather than isolated incidents, are at the core of the emotional toll and long-term effects experienced by individuals. Analyzing the emotional toll of speaking up and the lasting effects of workplace harassment through the lens of structural violence theory underscores the systemic nature of the issue and reveals how power imbalances, organizational structures, and cultural norms contribute to harmful impacts on employees.

Recommendations

Research findings highlight the importance of organizations establishing cultures of psychological safety, trust, and procedural fairness. Doing so entails addressing concerns about fear of retaliation, investigation bias, and lack of transparency to create environments in which employees feel empowered and comfortable speaking up. The findings of this study underscore the importance of these aspects and highlight the profound effects that occur when psychological safety, trust, and procedural fairness are perceived as missing. By promoting open communication, recognition of disparities, and restorative justice, organizations can encourage employees to raise concerns, build trust, and foster healthier, more ethical work environments.

Improving Conflict Resolution in the Workplace Through Transparent Communication

Addressing workplace conflicts can often be challenging for a variety of reasons, such as fear of retaliation and deep-rooted cultural and historical issues within organizations. Although

many corporate organizations have developed internal reporting programs for handling ethical concerns, conflict resolution programs have remained scarce at the grassroots level. Absence of such support prevents employees addressing issues before they escalate to serious misconduct. Formal investigations can be stressful and unsatisfying for both parties involved, and employees often lack avenues for seeking advice without filing formal allegations. Moreover, disconnects between HR and other departments—such as ethics, diversity, and inclusion departments—create confusion about how to effectively assist employees with conflict-related issues. Managers, who are responsible for managing workplace conflicts and cultural changes, also often lack the time and skills needed for effective conflict resolution. Empowering employees with resources to allow them to directly share their concerns with conflicting parties can have a dual effect. First, this approach helps employees feel empowered to voice their opinions, fostering a sense of agency and confidence. Second, the direct approach can reduce feelings of disparity between the parties involved, because it facilitates open and constructive communication.

To enhance conflict resolution processes, a recommended first step is to provide mediation services for all employees, enabling rapid and efficient conflict resolution at the lowest level. Mediation provides a collaborative platform for resolution of disagreements and reconstruction of trust between parties. Employees often seek help to discuss issues with their managers or peers rather than to seek punitive actions or rewards. Informal mediation can identify necessary changes and aid retention of valuable employees, and its relatively quick process allows for resolution within hours while equipping employees with valuable conflict-resolution skills for the future.

Mediation in the workplace, although rooted in ancient practices, gained prominence in the mid-20th century as a way to resolve labor relation disputes and, since the 1990s, has become

a common practice in various U.S. industries. Mediation comes in various forms, including formal and informal mediation. The aim of informal mediation, facilitated by trained mediators such as HR professionals or organizational ombudsmen, is to improve working relationships and create problem-solving dialogues and mutually satisfactory agreements between parties without involving formal legal processes.

Trained neutral third parties, such as HR professionals, organizational ombuds, or impartial managers, should facilitate informal mediation. The purpose is to promote meaningful dialogue, recognize each party's strengths, and work toward relationship building. A mediator's role is to guide opposing parties toward their own decision without making binding choices or pressuring them into an agreement. Zelizer and Chiochetti (2017) asserted, "The mediator, while maintaining neutrality, helps to facilitate a participatory process in which the stakeholders or parties that are in dispute will find a mutually satisfactory and beneficial outcome" (p. 10).

Mediation provides employees with a way to resolve conflicts at the lowest level, empowering them and reducing the stigma of speaking up. By offering this option, organizations can increase trust, reduce anxiety, and enhance employee satisfaction with reporting processes. Informal mediation also leads to transformative relationship building, repairing connections and improving communications to prevent future misunderstandings and conflicts:

Success in mediation is not solely determined by settlements. Transformative relationship-building through mediation can result in numerous positive outcomes, such as empowerment, recognition, constructive conflict, improved interactions, restorative relationships, authentic understanding, new narratives, new realities, forgiveness, transcendental experiences, and spiritual growth. Often mediation results in valuable action plan development or non-materialistic outcomes, so the yardstick of success for

mediation is undetermined if it rests solely on settlement. Possible positive outcomes include transformation, empowerment, recognition, constructive conflict, improved interactions, restorative relationships, authentic understanding, new narratives, new realities, forgiveness, transcendental experiences, and spiritual growth, to name a few possibilities of this effective and largely magical form of conflict management.

(Georgeakopoulos et al., 2017, pp. 154–155)

Implementing informal mediation in the workplace can significantly improve conflict resolution processes, providing a platform for employees to address issues at the lowest level before those issues escalate. This ability can increase trust, reduce the number of formal allegations and investigations, and transform relationships between parties. The practice of mediation, with its numerous positive outcomes, can create more harmonious and productive work environments.

Recognition of Disparities

Ensuring employees are aware of the resources available to address their concerns is crucial for establishing procedural justice in the workplace. When an employee seeks formal help, they should receive an offer of an advocate who can guide them through the process. This advocate would play a significant role in ensuring fair and prompt conduct of the investigation. They can also offer valuable help documenting the concern and providing access to external resources if needed. In cases involving discrimination, harassment, or retaliation, advocates become even more critical. The advocate should be well-informed about the process and have the authority to escalate concerns if necessary. By offering support and guidance, an advocate can reduce adverse effects, such as feelings of shame, isolation, and negative mental health impacts.

Advocates can play a crucial role in the reduction of gender and hierarchical disparities when employees decide to speak up. Advocates can bridge the gap between employees and managers, providing neutral and supportive voices for individuals facing conflict. When gender or hierarchical imbalances exist, employees may hesitate to express their concerns directly to higher ranking or influential individuals. An advocate can act as an intermediary, ensuring that the concerns of all parties equal weight, regardless of the gender or position of the parties in an organization. This support empowers employees to speak up without fear of reprisal or discrimination, fostering more inclusive and equitable work environments. By actively addressing power imbalances and promoting open communication, advocates can help dismantle barriers that prevent marginalized voices from being heard and contribute to more harmonious and fairer workplaces for all.

Consistent communication and transparency with the investigating party is vital throughout the process of an investigation. An organization should thoroughly explain its investigation process and establish a clear timeline for each investigation so that employees understand its expected duration. Maintaining weekly communication with an employee who has raised a concern, through either the investigation team or an advocate, is essential so that the employee can receive updates on the investigation's progress and timelines. Maintaining communication ensures employees are not left in distressing situations in which they may experience physical, mental, or emotional harm. When the investigating party reaches a final decision, the investigating party should provide an out brief to the reporting party to thoroughly explain the findings and reasoning behind the outcome. The parties should be able to ask questions with their advocates present and understand the alternatives available to resolve the

conflict. If the employee has previously declined mediation, they should receive another offer of mediation as a way to promote communication between the parties.

Holding managers and senior leaders accountable is particularly important for promotion of organizational justice. Showing employees that their concerns are taken seriously and addressed appropriately fosters safe and supportive work environments. Psychologically safe environments encourage employees to speak up, leading to improved ethical standards and a more positive overall workplace atmosphere. By prioritizing fairness and accountability, organizations can create cultures in which employees feel valued, supported, and empowered to voice their concerns without fear of reprisal. Feldblum and Lipnic (2016) suggested, “Employers should devote sufficient resources to harassment prevention efforts, both to ensure that such efforts are effective, and to reinforce the credibility of leadership’s commitment to creating a workplace free of harassment” (p. 73).

Restorative Justice

Addressing concerns requires organizations to actively rebuild trust, demonstrate genuine commitment to organizational justice, and foster environments in which employees feel safe and supported when speaking up. By acknowledging past failures and taking concrete actions to improve accountability, organizations can rebuild employees’ confidence in their reporting processes and foster cultures of integrity and fairness.

Restorative justice offers an alternative approach to addressing harm and conflicts by emphasizing healing, accountability, and repair of relationships. This approach involves all stakeholders in a collaborative process to address the harm caused by an offense, focusing on understanding underlying causes and meeting the needs of those affected. Restorative justice includes encouraging offenders to take responsibility, make amends, and actively participate in

trust restoration and healing. The approach also provides opportunities for victims to express their needs, be heard, and play a role in determining resolution of their issues. The aim of this transformative approach is to promote healing, prevent future harm, and restore relationships and well-being.

To address systemic barriers and biases, organizations must foster cultures of inclusivity and gender equality by providing training and education and promoting active listening, empathy, and fair treatment of all employees, regardless of gender. Achieving these goals may involve creating transparent and unbiased channels for reporting and addressing of concerns. By addressing gender disparities and biases, organizations can cultivate supportive and inclusive environments in which all employees feel heard, respected, and empowered to raise concerns without fear of dismissal or invalidation.

The findings of this study underscore the need for organizations to address structural violence and promote inclusivity and equity. Achieving these goals entails dismantling oppressive systems, promoting transparency and accountability, and actively challenging discriminatory practices. By doing so, organizations can foster environments that incorporate respect for the potential and well-being of all individuals, mitigating the harmful effects of structural violence.

Limitations

In this study I focused on the experiences and perceptions of the participants, who had reported harassment, discrimination, and retaliation. I did not gather information or acknowledge the lived experiences of other parties involved, such as alleged offenders or representatives of organizations. The absence of multiple perspectives may have limited the breadth and depth of the analysis, leading to failure to capture the full complexity of the situations investigated.

The study was conducted within specific contextual and time constraints, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other settings or periods.

As discussed in Chapter 3, participant selection involved the use of intermediaries, or gatekeepers; this approach was instrumental for establishing trust between me and the participants, but it also introduced potential limitations. One major concern with the use of gatekeepers is the risk of bias and subjectivity influencing the decision-making process, potentially predisposing participants to certain ideas. To mitigate this, I carefully limited the information shared about the study to ensure that participants approached the study with open minds, enhancing the authenticity of their responses. The use of gatekeepers can also lead participants to tailor or censor their narratives based on perceived expectations, potentially undermining research authenticity. To address this problem, a strict confidentiality policy was implemented, assuring participants that their information would remain confidential. Furthermore, I maintained stringent ethical standards by ensuring gatekeepers had no prior involvement in alleged misconduct or investigations, preventing conflicts of interest and preserving research integrity.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Recommendations for future case studies include exploration of the effects of unsubstantiated allegations on accused individuals. Future researchers could focus on conducting quantitative research to examine the effects of unsubstantiated allegations on the physical and mental health of individuals involved. By analyzing the impacts on individuals involved in unsubstantiated allegations, researchers could provide empirical data on the potential impact of such allegations on overall well-being.

Researchers could also conduct case studies of the effects of harassment, discrimination, or retaliation allegations on the individuals accused. Those researchers would aim to explore the psychological, social, and professional consequences experienced by individuals accused of such misconduct as a result of claims that remained unsubstantiated.

In addition to studying the effects on individuals, future researchers could investigate the impacts of unsubstantiated allegations on organizations. Those researchers would aim to provide insights into organizational dynamics and reputation in the aftermath of such allegations. They would assess how unsubstantiated allegations influence overall climate and culture within an affected organization. The researchers would also examine whether such allegations lead to perceptions of mistrust, fear, or tension among employees and the impacts on employee job satisfaction, morale, and engagement. Analysis of employee perceptions and experiences would shed light on shifts in organizational climate and identify potential areas for improvement.

By conducting future research, organizations could better understand the broader impacts of unsubstantiated allegations on their internal and external dynamics and on the individuals involved. The findings from these studies could inform the development and implementation of strategies to effectively mitigate the consequences of such allegations.

Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the profound effects that unsubstantiated case allegations can have on individuals within the workplace. By examining the experiences of employees involved in unsubstantiated case allegations, I revealed the associated emotional toll, psychological distress, and overall negative impact on their well-being.

The study findings highlight the immense impacts individuals endure when their allegations are left unresolved. The sense of uncertainty, frustration, and helplessness that arises

from lack of resolution exacerbates an already challenging situation. The study findings draw attention to the long-lasting effects of unresolved conflicts, which can extend beyond immediate situations and impact various aspects of individuals' lives. These effects include changes in perspective, increased distrust of others, and heightened caution with respect to future actions. The findings emphasize the need for organizations to address these long-term effects and establish cultures of psychological safety, trust, and procedural fairness.

Furthermore, the study findings highlight the potential negative impacts of unsubstantiated allegations on organizations. The findings draw attention to the increased likelihood of workplace conflict resulting from ongoing tension and strained relationships with colleagues experienced by employees involved in unsubstantiated allegations. Unresolved conflict can create a hostile work environment, impacting productivity, collaboration, and overall organizational effectiveness. The findings also suggest that potential cultural issues may arise, because lack of resolution can perpetuate cultures of mistrust, fear, and injustice. Moreover, the findings raise concerns about job retention, because employees affected by unresolved issues may feel compelled to leave their organizations in search of healthier and more supportive work environments.

The implications of this study are significant for both employees and organizations. The findings emphasize the urgent need for organizations to prioritize conflict resolution, provide adequate support to all parties involved, and ensure the availability of fair and equitable processes to all employees. By doing so, organizations can promote healthier work environments that value fairness, accountability, and employee well-being. The study's insights can inform the development and implementation of strategies that effectively manage and mitigate the organizational consequences of unsubstantiated allegations. Ultimately, this study can contribute

to the creation of healthier and more resilient organizations that prioritize fairness, justice, and the overall well-being of their employees.

Contributions to Corporate Investigation

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of corporate investigation by addressing the specific issue of unsubstantiated allegations and their impact on investigative processes. By focusing on the experiences of individuals involved in these cases, I shed light on the potential impacts corporate investigators have on both employees and their organizations when dealing with such allegations.

The study's findings emphasize the importance of procedural fairness and transparency in corporate investigations. By examining the impacts of unresolved issues on employees and organizations, I underscored the significance of establishing a thorough and unbiased investigative process. This observation contributes to the field by emphasizing the need for investigators to adopt transparent processes, ensure equal treatment of all parties involved, and provide clear communication throughout investigations. Even if an investigative process is meticulous and produces results that exonerate the organization, failure to resolve conflicts among employees can result in persistent organizational issues, leading to systemic problems.

The study findings also highlight the potential negative consequences for organizations of allegations remaining unsubstantiated. By documenting the impacts on employee morale, job satisfaction, and organizational culture, I underscored the importance of addressing and resolving allegations promptly and fairly. This contribution to the field of corporate investigation highlights the need for organizations to proactively manage and respond to unsubstantiated allegations, considering their potential ramifications on employee well-being and overall organizational health.

Contributions to Conflict Analysis and Resolution

The findings of this study significantly contribute to the field of conflict resolution by shedding light on the impacts of unsubstantiated allegations and lack of resolution of workplace conflicts. By exploring the experiences of employees involved in unsubstantiated allegations, I provided valuable insights into the challenges and consequences of unresolved conflicts. This research expands understanding of the complexities involved in organizational conflict resolution and highlights the need for effective strategies to address allegations deemed both perceived and real.

One of the key contributions of this study is the outcome of my exploration of the emotional and psychological toll on individuals resulting from conflicts remaining unresolved. By documenting the profound impact on employee well-being, I underscored the importance of timely and fair conflict resolution processes. This finding contributes to the conflict resolution field through its emphasis of the significance of addressing conflicts in a sensitive and supportive manner to mitigate negative effects on individuals involved.

This study also draws attention to potential negative impacts on organizations resulting from unresolved conflicts. By highlighting the increased likelihood of ongoing conflict, strained relationships, and hostile work environments, I underscored the organizational costs of neglecting conflict resolution. This contribution will help practitioners and leaders of organizations recognize the importance of proactive conflict resolution strategies to the maintenance of healthy and productive work environments.

Furthermore, the study's findings can inform the development of best practices and guidelines for the resolution of conflicts involving unsubstantiated allegations. By understanding the challenges faced by individuals in these situations and the long-term consequences they

experience, practitioners can improve the tailoring of their approaches to conflict resolution. This can include creating fair and transparent processes for addressing allegations, providing adequate support to all parties involved, and promoting cultures of accountability and psychological safety within organizations. The study's insights contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the conflict resolution field and provide valuable guidance for practitioners seeking to effectively address cases based on unsubstantiated allegations.

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Appendix A: Social Media Post

The below social media post was listed on the researcher's Facebook and Instagram pages. This was not listed on the researcher's LinkedIn page to avoid confusion about potential conflicts of interest due to the professional role of the researcher.

Social Media Post

I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation with Nova Southeastern University. The study attempts to understand employee experiences of internal corporate investigations of an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) allegation that yielded an unsubstantiated determination. Criteria for participants is listed below:

1. Participants experienced perceived harassment, discrimination or retaliation and spoke to someone of authority in their organization about this concern.
2. Participants received notice from the organization that their claim was not substantiated.
3. Participants were residing in the U.S. and working for a U.S.-based firm.

Interview will be conducted online via Zoom. If interested please contact, Scottie Visser, for more information at sv701@mynsu.nova.edu.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Question 1: Tell me about your experience of raising concerns and receiving the news your concerns were not validated?

Voice

Question 2: How did you feel about raising your concerns before, during, and after the investigation into your claim?

Additional Prompts:

- What were your feelings about speaking up prior to this incident?
- How did you feel about speaking up while you were talking to your manager/HR/ Ethics?

Justice

Question 3: How did the experience of hearing your concerns not validated affect your relationship with the other party? How did it affect your relationship with other members of your work group?

Additional Prompts:

- Were you surprised by the outcome?
- Did you feel like the treatment you received was fair?

Impacts

Question 4: Has this experience changed your relationship with your organization? If so, how?

Additional Prompts:

- Would you be willing to speak up about ethical misconduct now?
- If someone came to you for advice about the same situation, what advice would you give them?

Appendix C: Consent Form

General Informed Consent Form NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled When Speaking Up Fails: Experiences of Unsubstantiated EEO Allegations on the Workforce

Who is doing this research study?

College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution of Nova Southeastern University

Principal Investigator: Scottie Slater Visser, BS, MBA, LLPC

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Ismael Muvingi, LLB, PhD

Site Information: Study performed via virtual electronic website (Zoom)

Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?

This research study examines the lived experiences and perspectives of an employee with an unsubstantiated organizational Equal Employment Opportunity allegation. The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of people who have gone through the corporate investigation process within their company and been told their case was not substantiated. By better understanding employees' perspectives, organizations can attempt to reduce risk by helping the employees resolve conflict regardless of whether the conflict has breached a policy or violated of law.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this research study because you have an experience to share about speaking up to your organization about a perceived wrongdoing and received feedback from the organization that your claim was not validated. This study will include between 5 and 12 people.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in one interview session lasting approximately one hour.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

- Upon notification the researcher will contact you to set up a phone conversation to verify eligibility and set up a mutually agreed upon time to conduct the interview.
- Eligibility for this study includes a sample of English-speaking participants over the age of 18 of any gender, who were residing in the U.S. and working for a U.S.-based firm where they experienced perceived harassment or discrimination and provided notice to the organization about the perceived wrongdoing. Participants ultimately received notice from the organization that their claim was not substantiated.

- You agree to participate in a one-hour interview sharing your experience and feelings associated with speaking up to your organization about a harassment or discrimination issue and the subsequent effects on your relationship with the other party and your organization.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life. You may find some questions we ask you (or some things we ask you to do) to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can refer you to someone who may be able to help you with these feelings.

You will not be asked to name your organization, or any parties involved during the interview process, nor will you be asked to disclose any details of the allegation. If this information is disclosed in the research interview this information will either be removed from the transcript to avoid any privacy or legal risks to you or the researcher.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study, but you may request that it not be used.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help organizations recognize that conflict does not stop simply because corporate investigations determined the case unsubstantial. Additionally, we hope the information will encourage organizations to assist employees in resolving conflict even if the case is deemed unsubstantiated. We hope that the participants of this study feel empowerment that their story has the potential to change the narrative for others going forward.

Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

How will you keep my information private?

The information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this

information. The researcher will be the only person who has access to names and contact information of participants. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely on a personal computer only accessible to the researcher. Personal information will not be shared, nor will it be uploaded to an electronic cloud source. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by permanent electronic data deletion.

Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?

This research study involves audio and/or video recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Scottie Visser can be reached at sv701@mynsu.nova.edu

Research Participants Rights

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
 Nova Southeastern University
 (954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790
IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent and Authorization

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &
Authorization

Date

Appendix D: Thematic Cross-Case Analysis

Theme and subtheme	Participant									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Inadequate response to complaints impacts organizational culture by normalizing poor behavior and fostering perceptions that unethical behavior is tolerated.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. Perceived gender and hierarchical disparities and the normalization of misconduct in organizational cultures	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Disillusionment with the system when seeking resolution—the erosion of support and the burden of documented proof	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1. Initial belief in the supportive role of human resources is followed by disillusionment and a perception that organizational interests take precedence over employee well-being.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. The requirement to produce documented proof creates obstacles to resolution and impacts future willingness to speak up.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness result from lack of support by organizations, ostracization by peers, and lack of resolution.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1. Feelings of hopelessness resulting from lack of support for finding a resolution	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
2. Feelings of ostracization resulting from lack of support from others in an organization	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Long-lasting effects—such as changes in perspective, distrust of others, and caution regarding future actions—suggest the impact of speaking up can be long lasting and have lasting consequences.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1. Impact on mental health	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
2. Emotional toll and personal consequences	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Effects on job retention	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note. Y = yes; N = no.