

The Great Resignation: A Qualitative Study Examining Turnover During COVID-19

by

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Abstract

This study examined reasons behind The Great Resignation, a phenomenon that noted the mass quantity with which Americans left their job during the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to this phenomenon is employee turnover. Because COVID-19 was a natural disaster, which can be classified as a traumatic event, this research qualitatively analyzed turnover through the lens of posttraumatic growth theory. The posttraumatic theoretical framework serves as an explanatory mechanism through which employees came to the decision to leave their job. Following the phronetic iterative analysis approach, data from $n = 134$ participants were analyzed about the assumptive world, rumination, and shifts in priorities. Themes found centered on challenges to employees' basic assumptions about the world, repetitive thoughts about being an employee during the pandemic, and reasoning behind why they left their job. Implications include gaining insight on how the field can better understand voluntary turnover.

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The Great Resignation: A Qualitative Study Examining Turnover During COVID-19

Known as “the day everything changed,” March 11, 2020 marked the significance of the COVID-19 virus as the World Health Organization officially declared it a pandemic (Wamsley, 2021, title); WHO, 2020). COVID-19 cases at the time had been in the US for nearly two months (Wamsley, 2021) and employees had to engage in the new normal that was telecommuting. Telecommuting, which describes work performed remotely away from a central facility through technological communication, has existed since the 1970s (Andrade & Lousã, 2021). But widespread organizational closures due to the pandemic forced workers to engage telecommuting on a much larger scale (Wamsley, 2021).

The pandemic led to employees leaving their jobs in record numbers and the evidence of such was seen across the country (NPR, 2021; Penn & Nezamis, 2022). For example, small businesses, especially those in the food industry, began noticing labor shortages shortly after the vaccine rollout and also when businesses began reopening (Wayne, 2021). Gilbert (2021) noted the phenomena that followed such staffing issues. Signage across the country at businesses stating they were short-staffed led to the notion that suddenly employees no longer wanted to work. The idea behind this lack of work ethic stems from the assumption that people had been feeding off of government-issued stimulus checks and unemployment benefits. Discussions on popular cable news outlets also made comments stating that Americans could have made more money with government assistance than with a job, thus eliminating the need for people to seek employment. Non-working citizens, by society, were even labeled as lazy (Wayne, 2021). But far greater issues than sheer laziness might be the root of why people resigned from employment in such mass quantities. Health care workers, for example, were among the most impacted by the virus as they reported feelings of high stress and anxiety (Andrade & Lousã, 2021; Cole et al.,

2021). According to Nashwan et al. (2021) employees in this field reported significantly higher levels of stress during the pandemic in comparison to before. Nurses' experiences align with that of other working Americans as studies have shown that high stress and burnout influence turnover intention, which describes an employee's desire to leave a job even before going through with voluntary termination (Cole et al., 2021; Maurer, 2021).

The evidence presented reveals only snapshots of the country's workforce, but it suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic placed substantial stress on America's workers. This stress may lead workers to voluntarily terminate their employment, generally referred to as turnover (Belete, 2018). The Achievers Workforce Institute dispersed a survey to study turnover intentions in workers during 2021 (Achievers, 2021). In this study, 2,000 employed North Americans were asked about their intentions for staying with their organization during the pandemic. Responses showed that over half (52%) of workers planned to look for a new job in 2021. With great concern from workers about eldercare and childcare, a desire for an improved work-family balance (WFB) was the second highest reason, behind greater compensation and benefits, for their search for a new place to work. These reasons may have led to the alarming turnover rates during the pandemic. Such evidence is not surprising according to statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Penn & Nezamis, 2022) stating that there were 48.7 million quits alone in 2021, believed to have been sparked by the COVID-19 shutdown (Miller & Yamada, 2022).

The steady increase of Americans who voluntarily terminated their employment is known as The Great Resignation, a term coined by Anthony Klotz, a management scholar at Texas A&M University (NPR, 2021). The current study sought to help discover and explain why Americans resigned in such mass quantities, which contributed to employee turnover in the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic as a natural disaster can be classified as community trauma

(Maitlis, 2020). Thus, this research proposes that the posttraumatic growth (PTG) theory, which focuses on the positive results of experiencing trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), may help explain this phenomenon. With a PTG theoretical framework, this qualitative study intended to discover information about why workers decided to terminate their employment, through the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Turnover

The literature shows that turnover has been researched extensively (Belete, 2018; Price, 2001). Earlier research examining its determinants state that turnover, a withdrawal behavior, is the process of an employee moving beyond an organizational boundary (Price, 2001). This movement can be organized into two categories: voluntary and involuntary (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Price, 2001). The present study focuses on voluntary turnover, which is the act of leaving an organization at an individual's own will (Belete, 2018). Further, it is not a forced or suggested act from the employing organization, but is rather a willful choice made by an employee (Mobley et al., 1979). An employee leaving an organization causes a great level of concern for most all employing organizations as it affects vital factors needed for a company's success like productivity and profitability (Belete, 2018). Turnover for an organization can also be very costly. When an employee leaves an organization, that individual will likely be replaced. A company may have used invested resources on an employee that left and the process of hiring someone new would require repetitive efforts for recruitment, selection, and training. On the contrary, not all turnover poses a detriment to a company. In fact, a healthy rate of turnover is embraced as it presents an interesting set of benefits (Belete, 2018). Turnover can bring fresh people and new ideas into an organization. If turnover falls below a healthy rate, however, an

organization may find itself suffering. The workforce saw record numbers of employees leaving their job (Penn & Nezamis, 2022). Therefore, this study posits that turnover, in the context of the pandemic, is a negative trend. The current research examined reasoning behind The Great Resignation from the employee's perspective, which could be explained through a PTG theoretical framework.

PTG Theory

PTG can be defined as the “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). When an individual experiences a traumatic event, their assumptive world, or their general understanding of the world, is challenged (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These assumptions about the world serve to steer one's behaviors, help them comprehend reasoning for life's events, and form the individual's ideology for their life's meaning and purpose (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The assumptive world is thus composed of core, fundamental beliefs that formulate one's perception and understanding of the world (Cann et al., 2010a). Event-related trauma not only challenges the assumptive world, but disrupts it, and the severity with which the trauma affects an individual is a reflection of how challenged their assumptive world became (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015). That is, the more severe the trauma, “the more an individual is caused to question... their fundamental assumptions regarding safety, predictability, identity, and meaning” (Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015, p. 373; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Though often unintentional, the process of sensemaking and discovering meaningful benefits to life after trauma may result in PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

There are five parts to PTG theory that categorize these positive results (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Lindstrom et al. (2013) outlined these domains in research on PTG. The first,

and primary focus of this research is New Possibilities, which describes one's realization of new options not previously considered and even new directions for one's life. Personal Strength describes the perception of newfound strength in comparison to strength before the traumatic event. Appreciation of Life describes a reassessment and consequent adjustment of life priorities and a newfound realization toward the preciousness of life. This domain is the secondary focus of this research and will be discussed later. The fourth domain, Relating to Others, describes realizing the goodness and supportiveness of those around them and the perception of more close relationships. Finally, Spiritual Change describes an increased faith and spirituality toward a greater power. The current research seeks to discover how, if at all, descriptors of the New Possibilities and Appreciation of Life domains were involved in an employee's decision to terminate their employment.

PTG and Work

According to Maitlis (2020), trauma can show up at work in two ways: through inherently traumatic work for those who serve in emergency response positions, or through secondary trauma for those who hold such positions as therapists and counselors who constantly hear about others' traumatic events. PTG has not been studied extensively in the industrial-organizational psychology literature (Bowling & Schumm, 2021). What is published has largely focused on workers in the healthcare sector (Cui et al., 2021; Lyu et al., 2020), and newer discussion on the pandemic as a source of PTG (Bowling & Schumm, 2021). There is also a need for research on PTG in ordinary work, which is work that is not directly or indirectly related to trauma, but where trauma may still be experienced (Maitlis, 2020). COVID-19 as a global pandemic knowingly affected most, if not all, workers. Bowling and Schumm (2021) noted the lack of clarity toward understanding how employees in various jobs may have

experienced COVID-19-related stressors. By not limiting the scope of this research to one type of worker (such as healthcare workers), the current research may contribute to the discovery of how the pandemic affected those that perform ordinary work. Thus, this research defines ordinary work as work that is outside any inherently traumatic or secondarily traumatic job fields. According to a review of PTG at work, existing research has been related to unemployment either through an injury that resulted in an employee losing the ability to complete work or through involuntarily losing a job (Kira & Klehe, 2016; Maitlis, 2009, 2020). These, however, do not explain how growth from a traumatic event can trigger one to voluntarily terminate their employment. The current research addresses this gap.

Of the five domains of PTG theory, the current study focuses on New Possibilities and Appreciation of Life to help explain voluntary employee turnover during COVID-19. Here, PTG is discussed in the context of work. Therefore, this research argues that an openness to new possibilities or a newfound appreciation of life may manifest through employees seeking new employment opportunities, which may occur by voluntarily terminating their employment with one organization and joining a new one. This research also recognizes that not all participants may have terminated their employment by only getting a new job. Other options can include, but are not limited to, venturing into a new type of employment such as entrepreneurship, or leaving the workforce altogether.

The Assumptive World. Examining the process of PTG has revealed that it first begins with a challenge to the assumptive world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Knowing how this may have affected employees is significant toward understanding potential reasoning behind The Great Resignation. In order to understand if employees underwent this crucial experience, this research presents the following research question:

Research Question (RQ) 1: How did experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic challenge the core beliefs that construct the assumptive world, particularly in one's context as a working individual?

Reflection and Rumination. When one's assumptive world is challenged, it may propel them into constantly thinking about their experience with the situation (Lindstrom et al., 2013). With shelter-in-place orders, the pandemic provided an opportunity for a period of reflection, during which employees may have also engaged in rumination. Reflection and rumination are different constructs, but the two can jointly occur (van Seggelen-Damen & van Dam, 2016). In fact, those more often engaged in self-reflection are more prone to frequent rumination (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2003; van Seggelen-Damen & van Dam, 2016). Rumination has little presence in the field's literature as a source of turnover, but it is present in the context of PTG and the COVID-19 pandemic (Ikizer et al., 2021). The PTG theoretical framework describes rumination as the cognitive process that occurs as one tries "to understand the event and rebuild the assumptive world" (Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015, p. 373), and includes two types: deliberative and intrusive rumination. Deliberative rumination (which contains reflective elements, thus also known as reflective rumination) involves more purposeful thought processing about the situation and its implications (Cann et al., 2011). Intrusive rumination, on the contrary, is associated with negative, unwanted, uncontrollable thoughts about the event. Though intrusive rumination is associated with posttraumatic depreciation, the counter to PTG, both intrusive and deliberative rumination work in conjunction to help individuals make sense of their event-related situation (Cann et al., 2011). According to Cann et al. (2010a), how much one engages in deliberative rumination depends on how much they experience intrusive rumination, as it triggers individuals

to try to conceptualize their experience in a way that stimulates understanding, ultimately resulting in growth (Cann et al., 2010a).

New Possibilities. Similar to an openness to new possibilities posited by the PTG framework, self-reflection is also associated with an openness to experience (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). As reflection is involved in deliberative rumination, this study posits that rumination may be an underlying cognitive process in the decision for one to seek new employment. That is, as a result of engaging in meaningful, deliberative thought in relation to their employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, an individual may experience growth by acting on a newfound openness to new possibilities, sparking voluntary termination of their employment. This could manifest as seeking more satisfying employment or completely removing oneself from the traditional workforce. The cognitive processes of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic may reveal information about how working individuals decided to terminate their employment. To understand these processes, this study posed a second research question:

Research Question (RQ) 2: What thoughts did individuals have in order to make sense of the pandemic and how it affected them as employees, that resulted in PTG in the form of pursuing new work-related possibilities?

Appreciation of Life, Work-Family Conflict (WFC), and WFB. Gaining a newfound appreciation of life may help give those who have experienced trauma a sense of not only what, but who is important in their lives. This could also be compared to the Relating to Others domain of PTG, which involves trauma survivors' newfound cherishing of relationships with those around them (Lindstrom et al., 2013). As described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), an appreciation of life may indicate a change in one's priorities. It is this prioritization that

distinguishes Appreciation of Life from Relating to Others. This research argues that the pandemic opened the eyes of employees to the importance of avoiding WFC and achieving WFB and further, that part of one's decision to leave their job could be a way they demonstrated an appreciation of life in the context of trauma associated with the pandemic.

WFC has been described by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) as a type of interrole conflict that occurs when “pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible” (p. 77). This conflict is birthed through time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, or behavior-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). It can also be specifically discussed through WFC's two main categories. The first category, work-to-family conflict, is mostly associated with lay discussions, but it only presents one side of the coin. WFC refers to the ways in which one's role at work affects their family life. For example, if a father works overtime, he may be too tired to play with his children when he gets home. In the opposite direction, family-to-work conflict presents the ways in which one's role at home influences their life at work. This could look like a mother staying up late to help her child with a science project, which causes her to be groggy at work, not remembering important details for her meeting in the morning. These examples of interrole conflict explain how work and home life intersect (Jang & Zippay, 2011). This conflict could inspire workers to seek a better WFB.

Casper et al. (2018) state that part of WFB is “employees' evaluation of the favorability of their combination of work and nonwork roles” (p. 197). Thus, when an employee achieves balance, they will experience the positive consequences of both roles being more aligned with each other. Based on a literature review from Li and colleagues (2021) while studying police officers during the pandemic, this alignment could reveal itself as spending more time with loved ones or more ease with chores at home. An article by Andrade and Lousã (2021) discussed

conditions of work before the pandemic, stating that telework was used as a remedy to lower the impacts of WFC. When asking workers why they harbored turnover intentions, the Achievers Engagement and Retention Report (2021) found that a desire for better balance came second to pay and benefits. Such longing for balance could be the result of employees experiencing PTG in the form of a newfound appreciation of life. Such growth might have inspired workers to seek employment that aligns with their prioritization of family. The current research thus argues that the Appreciation of Life domain of PTG may also help explain why employees voluntarily left their jobs, thus contributing to The Great Resignation. In order to study this potential factor in The Great Resignation, this study posed a third research question:

Research Question (RQ) 3: How was part of an employee's decision to leave an organization due to PTG in that they discovered a newfound appreciation of life, which sparked their prioritization of WFB?

Method

Participants

Data were collected via a time lagged survey with data collected at Time 1 and Time 2, separated by approximately 30 days. Eligibility requirements for both waves included being at least 18 years of age and because this study examined the American labor force, it was also required that participants be located in the United States. Data for a total of $n = 519$ participants out of $n = 1,272$ were analyzed at Time 1, which screened for demographics and employment behavior. At Time 2, data for a total of $n = 134$ participants out of $n = 234$ were analyzed.

Demographics collected included age ($M = 38.2$, $SD = 10.6$), race (64.9% White/Caucasian, 18.7% Black or African American, 10.4% Asian, 1.5% Native American or Alaska Native, 3.7% selected "Other," 0.7% selected "Prefer not to say"), ethnicity (84.4% not Hispanic, 14.9%

Hispanic, 0.7% selected “Prefer not to say”), and gender (50.7% women, 47.8% men, 1.5% selected “Prefer not to say”). Additional demographics were collected about participants’ employment behavior. We asked for a description of their employment change for which options included “I was employed before and joined another company/organization” (66.4%), “I was employed before and have chosen to no longer work” (17.2%), and “I was employed before and am now self-employed” (16.4%).

Information for job sector, remote work status, and essential worker status in regards to the organization from which participants terminated their employment was also collected. The top five most represented job sectors included Education and Training (12.7%), both Information Technology and Retail (11.2%), Manufacturing (10.4%), Marketing and Sales (8.2%), and Finance (7.5%). Regarding remote work, responses showed that 50.7% of respondents worked at least one day of the week, while 37.3% were not allowed to work remotely, and 11.9% did not work in-person at all. Lastly, 57.5% reported that they were considered as an essential worker in the organization from which they terminated employment, while 42.5% responded that they were not. We also collected the same information for their position after they left the initial organization. The top 5 most represented job sectors included Information Technology (11.9%), Education and Training (10.4%), Marketing and Sales (9%), Business Management, and Administration (7.5%), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) (6%). Remote work items showed that 39.6% worked in-person at least one day of the week, 21.6% were not allowed to work remotely, and 20.9% did not work in-person at all. 41.8% reported that they were essential workers, while 40.3% reported that they were not. 17.9% stated they had chosen to no longer work.

Procedure

Potential participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants at Time 1 were asked to complete a small questionnaire about their employment behavior in 2021 and demographics. Respondents must have responded “yes” to an item asking if they voluntarily terminated their employment and joined another organization, joined the nontraditional workforce (for example via entrepreneurship), or left the workforce anytime during 2021. We asked participants about an employment change specifically for the year 2021 as that was the year of record-breaking voluntary terminations in the labor force (Penn & Nezamis, 2022). This is believed to have been induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, thus causing The Great Resignation (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). Of the 1,272 individuals that responded to the MTurk HIT, 701 potential participants were eliminated due to eligibility criteria and 571 participants were deemed eligible to be invited back for Time 2. Following data cleaning, data for $n = 519$ participants were analyzed. Participants were compensated \$0.50 upon completion of the Time 1 screening survey.

The survey at Time 2 consisted of 10 open-ended response questions, which were constructed based on the research questions of the presented theoretical framework. If the participant desired to add additional information outside of responses to the main questions, they were able to do so by answering one additional question at the end of the survey. Responding “yes” to that question presented an additional space for them to enter more information. Thus, the survey consisted of 11 possible open-ended text response questions (see Appendix) in addition to demographic items that were reassessed from Time 1 to rule-out fake responses. To ensure a representative sample, 300 participants were invited back to complete Time 2. Criteria for invitation to Time 2 included having reported membership in an ethnic or racial minority group or reported to have voluntarily left the workforce (a perspective this study made sure to

include as it was not a decision that most employees had reported making). Of the 300 invitees, a total of $n = 234$ participants responded to complete Time 2. Missing data and other eliminations resulted in the removal of 100 participant responses. Criteria for elimination included participants admitting through qualitative responses that their separation from their job was involuntary instead of voluntary, duplicate responses discovered during coding, or incomprehensible responses. As a result, a total of $n = 134$ were analyzed. Participants who completed Time 2 received an additional \$5.00. Thus, participants who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 were compensated a total of \$5.50.

Coding and Analysis

To code the responses from Time 2 data collection, this study adopted the phronetic iterative coding and analysis approach as outlined by Tracy (2020) and adopted parts of the phenomenological methodology and techniques as outlined by Creswell et al. (2007). In phenomenology, the aim is to study participants that have all been through a common event or phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007; Tracy, 2020). In this research that common experience was living through the COVID-19 pandemic as an employee who voluntarily terminated their employment. This research studied the pandemic as an event. Therefore, parts of the phenomenological methodology applied as I sought to discover and subsequently code for examples of lived experiences that participants shared in relation to terminating their employment during COVID-19 (Creswell et al., 2007).

The phronetic iterative approach to analyzing qualitative data asks the researcher to assess and revisit the data as many times as needed. The purpose of this stems from the openness of this approach that simultaneously acknowledges existing theory, research questions, and emerging data (Tracy, 2020). Therefore, I visited and revisited the data several times,

synthesizing example codes that were in line with the PTG theoretical framework as outlined in this paper as well as other significant, emergent codes. I coded primary, or first-level codes through line-by-line coding. This was followed by secondary, or second-level coding where I merged codes, creating a hierarchical coding structure with umbrella terms.

Results

Following analyses, several themes pertaining to the overarching arguments in the current PTG theoretical framework were identified. These themes reflect the lived experiences of employees as they discussed their realizations, thoughts, and sentiments and how they were linked to their decision to leave their job. The following examples show deepening levels of first-hand accounts of challenges to the assumptive world (*RQ1*) with additional examples of the New Possibilities (*RQ2*) and Appreciation of Life (*RQ3*) domains of the PTG theory in the context of work.

Research Question 1: The Assumptive World

Theme 1: Challenges to the Assumptive World

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), a challenge to the assumptive world is the first occurrence which signals PTG. In answering the first research question of this study, which sought to discover how employees' experience during the pandemic challenged core beliefs about the assumptive world, it appeared that many participants did feel challenged as a result of the pandemic. Whether they were challenged as employees, or if their experience challenged their meaning or purpose in life, it had an effect on the decision to leave their job. These challenges are reflected in the following subthemes:

1.1: Challenging Meaning and Purpose in Work. Some participants documented feeling as though their meaning, specifically as an employee, was challenged and discussed how

that affected their decision to leave their job. This excerpt provides an example of one employee who decided to completely leave the workforce. This participant stated:

It challenged my meaning in life because I thought it was to go to a full-time job and earn a full-time income, and the pandemic showed me that there was more to life than a full-time job and that I could experience life in a different way. (Former Finance employee, now no longer working)

The way it affected this participant in the decision to leave their job and no longer work was documented in a follow-up question and stated, “I was affected by this because I felt a sense of freedom once I realized there were other options and I didn't have to be a slave to a full-time in person job my whole life” (Former Finance employee, now no longer working).

1.2: Challenging Predictability. The PTG theory helps us fundamentally break down how the assumptive world is challenged. As the assumptive world is challenged, it may counter our previous notions of predictability (Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015). When we dig deeper, participants’ lived experiences reveal to us how employees dealt with such challenges. One participant decided to take advantage of the opportunity for change that COVID-19 brought as a result of their experience with a challenged sense of predictability. They shared, “I felt to myself that this unprecedented time (for my lifetime) was very impactful and it was a perfect time to make a change, because so much in life was up in the air anyway” (An employee previously and currently working in Education and Training). Because this participant felt challenged by the uncertainty of the pandemic, they made the decision to leave their job.

Research Question 2: Reflection, Rumination, and New Possibilities

Theme 2: Reflection and Rumination

Additional evidence of a challenged assumptive world is engagement in reflection and rumination (Lindstrom et al., 2013). To satisfy RQ2, we explicitly asked participants about any repetitive thoughts they had about the pandemic and how it affected them as an employee. These findings link us to insight participants provided on their decision-making process toward terminating their employment with one organization and pursuing a new possibility. The many examples of reflection, rumination, and factors that went into their decision are revealed here in Theme 2 as well as in Theme 3.

2.1: Thoughts About Employees' Treatment. Participants reported several shifts in their perspective toward being an employee during the pandemic. Some of those thoughts included new perspectives on how they wanted to be treated, especially during a global emergency where workers were risking their lives to work. One participant shared their sentiments on this very topic stating, “The pandemic made me more aware of how I was being treated. I often thought that if I'm risking my health to work for others I deserve somethings [sic] in return. Most importantly respect,” and went on to later state how this directly affected their decision: “This was one o [sic] the main reasons that I had to terminate my employment. The stress wasn't worth my time” (Former Business Management and Administration employee, now working in Education and Training).

2.2: Thoughts About Being Valued (Or the Lack Thereof). Similar to employees wanting fair treatment in the workplace, they also wanted to feel valued. Fair treatment may be the bare minimum, suggesting that value from the organization toward employees should be demonstrated consistently. One participant shared their reflective thoughts: “My thoughts include the willingness to find someone who values my work and would stand behind me to offer support no matter what situation” (An employee previously and currently working in Education

and Training). Not only did participants express such desire to be valued, but also presented thoughts on not feeling valued at work during the pandemic. In response to an item about their possible recurring thoughts, one participant stated, “That as a worker, my value to the company was strictly numeric and any evaluation beyond that was arbitrary” (Former Manufacturing employee, now working in Information Technology). This demonstrated that not only were participants expressing their desire to feel valued by their organization, but also their feelings on when that value had been reduced to something that felt impersonal.

2.3: Thoughts About Job Security. There is no doubt that the pandemic created uncertain times. This uncertainty applied to the status of many participants’ jobs. Several times over, participants stated that their voluntary termination of employment was out of fear that they were going to be fired and that they should leave before the organization had a chance to do so. For example, one participant shared the following:

The recurring thoughts that came to me in terms of the pandemic were that I should 100% look for some new work opportunities. Because the current one at the time would definitely be gone at some point. The signs were all in front of me and while I lost a bunch of hours I regularly had, I still had work at the time so it was a good idea to search for new work opportunities while I can (Former Retail employee, now working in Hospitality and Tourism).

2.4: Thoughts in the Form of Questioning Work. While an employee assesses the degree to which their assumptive world was challenged, they may find themselves questioning their fundamental beliefs. The frame of work into which the PTG theory has been placed for this research calls upon such examples to demonstrate how participants engaged in questioning during their experience as an employee during the pandemic. For example, one participant

previously working in Education and Training, now working in the Arts industry stated, “The pandemic left me wondering if my current job was where I wanted to be. I did so=me [sic] soul searching and decided NOW is the time to make a change to follow one of my many passions.” Another participant noted a prolonging of questioning because of their experience during the pandemic that may not have been there before. They shared, “i [sic] question everything now when it comes to employment,” (Former Retail employee, now working in Information Technology). This goes to the significance of the thoughts that employees were having. It lead to an interrogation within themselves about work.

Theme 3: New Possibilities

New Possibilities, as the primary domain of focus for this paper, is framed in a way that explores how reflection and rumination explained the thought processes with which employees justified their desire to pursue a new possibility. Further answering RQ2, this newfound openness may have inspired employees to terminate their employment for a new opportunity as a result. Accounts of participants’ experiences that demonstrate this openness are as follows:

3.1: Opportunities Not Considered Before. PTG theory explains New Possibilities as a newfound openness to opportunities that specifically were not considered before the traumatic event (Lindstrom et al., 2013). For example, a participant shared, “It made me look outside the box to see if any other opportunitites [sic] were avaiiable [sic] and to take a risk I may have not otherwise did before” (An employee previously and currently working in Finance). This participant shared their openness to a new experience through taking a risk, which might not have occurred had it not been for their experience with the pandemic.

3.2: Opportunity to Pursue More Meaningful Work. Participants might have not only considered opportunities that would not have been considered before the pandemic, but they also

might have taken the opportunity to pursue something that was actually meaningful to them, or perhaps even more meaningful than the position they held initially. One participant stated, “I found myself seeking work that is more fulfilling to my life purpose as well as finding work that is more enjoyable to me” (An employee previously and currently working in Information Technology). They went on to discuss how this desire did indeed lead them to forfeit employment with their initial organization.

3.3: COVID-19 As A Motivator. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic may have inspired some employees to make a change, suggesting that if it weren’t for the pandemic, they may not have had the motivation to do so. For example, one participant shared their experience, documenting how the pandemic, in addition to the hardships faced at their job, created the appropriate environment for them to leave stating,

However, once the pandemic had taken place and office closures slowly worked their way into our city, I noticed that my management team grew to be more wicked towards its staff than I could handle, so I give some credit to the pandemic in motivating my move to being more happy working from home in a new field once I decided to retire my position from my previous workplace (An employee previously and currently working in Information Technology).

Research Question 3: Appreciation of Life and Balance

Theme 4: Appreciation

RQ3 of this study explored how demonstrating the Appreciation of Life domain could be linked to employees’ familial priorities. The data showed that individuals discovered a newfound appreciation of life that included appreciating the people in their lives like family, friends, and even colleagues. Participants shared their lived experiences in relation to the pandemic and

elaborated on how this new appreciation was linked to their decision to terminate their employment.

4.1: Appreciating Life and Loved Ones. Participants discussed healthier approaches to life during the pandemic. Often discussed in conjunction with one another was not only an appreciation for those in their life, but for their own life as well. For example, one participant shared their take stating, “Life during the pandemic was like a 3D movie. So many things were revealed to me and made me have a different perspective of life. I learned to appreciate the small things that I took for granted. I valued my relationship with family and friends” (An employee previously and currently working in Medicine).

4.2: Work-Life Balance (WLB). One of the arguments in this paper is that due to a newfound appreciation of life, employees may have achieved a positive WFB. Many participants took a larger scope and discussed an overall WLB, suggesting that not only were they prioritizing time with their family, but also themselves. For example, one participant stated,

I became more focused on work-life balance. Before the pandemic, I often worked long hours and didn't take enough time for myself. During the pandemic, I learned the importance of taking breaks and spending time with my family and friends. I also made an effort to set boundaries between my work and personal life. (Former Hospitality and Tourism employee, now working in Government and Public Administration). This speaks to the new boundaries employees had set as a result of their experience during the pandemic.

The sentiments described by this participant paint an interesting picture of their priorities for and outside of work. Pointing out the importance of family, in addition to prioritizing friendships and setting personal boundaries shows a holistic approach to balance, rather than solely focusing on

family. This highlights the emphasis that employees are placing on balancing the multiple roles they might have outside of family member and worker.

Discussion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that many things would not go back to what American society considered normal. Work is included in that. One signal of this lack of normalcy was the occurrence of The Great Resignation, a mass movement of people across organizational employment boundaries at their own will (NPR, 2021). The current research sought to discover why this occurred. Previous research by Bowling and Schumm (2021) has discussed the pandemic as a source of PTG, a theory arguing the numerous positive effects that occur following one's sense making of a traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic as a natural disaster, can be considered a traumatic event (Maitlis, 2020). This research extended that ideology by qualitatively researching potential positive effects employees may have experienced as a result of the pandemic. Popular press articles have discussed reasons behind The Great Resignation (Parker & Horowitz, 2022) that at least on the individual's level, could be alleviated by finding another job. In other words, if an employee finds in another organization what a previous organization did not provide, outcomes could be beneficial.

The data helped answer this study's research questions in several themes and subthemes. First, I asked how participants' assumptive world was challenged (*RQ1*). That is, how did experiencing the pandemic challenge how one sees the world, how did it challenge their meaning or purpose in life, or how did it challenge their understanding of why things happen? I then further questioned how these challenges affected them as someone who worked. While responses varied depending on the severity with which their assumptive world was challenged, participants

shared experiences on how they felt their meaning or purpose in work was challenged.

Participants also experienced challenges to their notions of predictability. For example, the suddenness of the pandemic forced them to put things into perspective and make a decision.

Two domains of PTG theory, namely New Possibilities and Appreciation of Life, placed in the context of work, helped explain the behaviors of employees during the pandemic. The New Possibilities domain, examined by *RQ2*, argues that individuals may experience an openness to new possibilities following trauma (Lindstrom et al., 2013). Such evidence was revealed in the findings of this research. For example, participants cited their reasoning for leaving their job as wanting to pursue a better opportunity, perhaps not considered before, or work that was more meaningful and being motivated by the pandemic to do so. To understand the decision-making processes behind said openness to new possibilities, I also asked about any repetitive thoughts participants might have had in relation to experiencing the pandemic as an employee. Interestingly, that is where participants expressed what they expected from their organizations and subsequent disappointment when their organization failed to rise to those expectations. For example, participants expressed their desire for the organization to show them that they were valued and that the organization would have treated them better during a global emergency. Additionally, participants stated how the pandemic introduced doubt into their previously held notions about job security, suggesting that participants had thoughts about potential job *insecurity*. This led employees to seek new opportunities elsewhere.

In response to *RQ3*, participants discovered a newfound appreciation of loved ones and what's important, as described by the Appreciation of Life domain (Lindstrom et al., 2013). The heightened appreciation employees had with their loved ones also stretched to areas outside of family such as boundaries between personal life and work, suggesting an emphasis on WLB

rather than just WFB. The data support that it is indeed *what* is important in addition to *who*. This is an interesting finding as it follows the literature's recent attention on broadening what we understand about how employees juggle work and nonwork roles.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By extending the arguments of Bowling and Schumm (2021), this paper contributes to PTG theory by increasing its visibility in the industrial-organizational psychology literature. Work's presence in the PTG theoretical literature has also been scarce (Bowling & Schumm, 2021). This research not only adds to these literatures, but also includes employees in fields that were not typically thought to have experienced trauma relating to work. For example, research thus far on trauma in the workplace has been on individuals employed in the healthcare sector (Cui et al., 2021; Lyu et al., 2020). The top represented sectors in this research were Education and Training, Information Technology, Retail, Manufacturing, Finance, Marketing and Sales, Business Management and Administration, and STEM. This research is evidence that employees in fields not typically thought of as traumatic still experienced the positive effects of trauma in relation to work.

This research also contributes to qualitative methodological literature. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) stated that PTG will need qualitative research to help propel the theory. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the research on PTG in the workplace by adding rich, qualitative findings that might inspire future research in this area. The purpose of collecting data quantitatively was to assess The Great Resignation in a way that quantitative scales and analyses may not have been able to assess. Furthermore, The Great Resignation is such a new phenomenon that in order to learn as much as we can, its research must have the depth that

qualitative research provides. This research contributes not only to the research on PTG in employees, but also to the pool of inductive research on employee turnover.

The negative effects of employee turnover could be detrimental as it is costly to an organization (Belete, 2018). This research gives managers and industrial-organizational psychology practitioners insight to some of the reasons why employees choose to leave organizations. Though some turnover is healthy, if it becomes too common, employing organizations may find the negative effects to be too great. Part of the purpose of this research was to inform organizations of what employees are thinking with first-hand accounts. With the knowledge of such thought, organizations may heed these sentiments and reevaluate what they could be doing to alleviate unhealthy turnover. Instead of using resources, time, and money to deal with turnover, like constantly hiring and rehiring, organizations could examine the root of the issue themselves. The findings from this research can provide organizations with a chance to be proactive instead of reactive.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this research. First, trauma presents itself very differently to each person who experiences it. Though we can classify the pandemic as a natural disaster, and thus a traumatic event, whether a person views their experience with the pandemic as traumatic is entirely based on their perception of the severity of the event. Not everybody was affected by COVID-19 in the same manner, and it has been argued that what matters is more focused on how the person experienced the trauma rather than the event itself (Maitlis, 2020). Several participants when asked about challenges to their assumptive world reported not being challenged at all, even though they still thought of work differently than before the onset of pandemic. For this reason, future research could be done to assess how individuals interpreted

the pandemic prior to assessing for PTG. With this, there is also an opportunity to research individual differences in trauma relating to work.

The current research largely focused on the positive outcomes of trauma, which is a limitation. Posttraumatic depreciation describes changes opposite those in PTG in the same five domains (Baker et al., 2008; Cann et al., 2010b). Baker and colleagues (2008) published research addressing this limitation by adding response options to the PTG Inventory in the opposite direction to allow participants to report growth and depreciation simultaneously. Because this research follows a framework that solely focuses on the positive outcomes of trauma, there may be a significant amount of missing information about the behaviors of employees during the pandemic. Future research should be conducted to see if such behaviors are present. PTG and posttraumatic depreciation, thus, could be compared.

Posttraumatic constructs often are discussed in relation to each other (Maitlis, 2020), meaning PTG may be easily confused with other, similar constructs. PTG can be distinguished from another popular growth-related construct, resilience. Resilience is described as “an ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity, or to continue living a purposeful life after experiencing hardship and adversity” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4). This definition assumes that those who have experienced trauma were strong enough to continue at baseline performance pre-trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). That is, individuals maintain the same level of stability or outlook on life as before the trauma happened. Though PTG differentiates from resilience in that it goes beyond the state a person was in before the traumatic event occurred, future research could be done to further distinguish PTG from other constructs.

Gaining a newfound appreciation of life may help those who have experienced trauma a sense of not only what, but who is important in their lives, meaning employees might have

started to prioritize loved ones greater than they did prior to the traumatic event. The Relating to Others domain of PTG theory involves trauma survivors' newfound cherishing of relationships with those around them (Lindstrom et al., 2013). Based on these definitions, the two might overlap. Though participants did share the ways in which their life changed as a result of experiencing the pandemic as an employee, they also discussed specific relationships with their family. The manner in which this research formulated Appreciation of Life, may have spilled over into Relating to Others. Further research should explore the differences between these two domains.

Further, this research questioned how the PTG theory, specifically the Appreciation of Life domain, explained employees' prioritization of WFB. However, much of the data reflected that participants changed their job not only to be in a better position to balance family and work, but also to balance parts of their non-working lives that were outside of the family. The literature is showing attention to the more inclusive term of WLB, as opposed to WFB (Keeney et al., 2013; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021). WLB is "an individual's perceptions of how well his or her life roles are balanced" (Haar et al., 2014, p. 362). Noting this, it is important to briefly discuss the contrary: work interference with life (WIL), which is defined as "difficulty participating in nonwork domains by virtue of participation in the work domain" (Keeney et al., 2013, p. 222). In comparison to WFC, it is a term that goes beyond the presence of conflict between an employee and only their family (Keeney et al., 2013). Though the data reflect employees' emphasis on balancing roles outside of their family, we did not directly ask participants if their prioritization of WLB was due to an already present conflict, and thus cannot with full certainty, conclude that employees changed their job because of WIL. Future research should further explore work-life topics to expand the field's understanding of an employee's full life outside of work.

There are many ways to collect qualitative data. Though surveys are an option, it does not grant the researcher all the benefits of being able to interview participants. There is no opportunity to clarify responses with participants or ask more follow up questions. However, the tradeoff is being able to collect more data at a time. Future research might parse pieces of this research into projects that could be more intensely examined with traditional qualitative methods.

Conclusion

This research sought to discover the reasoning behind The Great Resignation through a qualitative phonetic iterative analysis approach. The foundational theoretical frameworks that guided this research including those of employee turnover and PTG helped explain employees' behaviors as they shared their lived experiences as employees during the pandemic through an open-ended response survey. This research has shown how employees think of work and what they require in exchange for what an organization can provide. The rich data collected not only will contribute to the literature of iterative research in industrial-organizational psychology, but may also encourage managers to think about how they might prevent, rather than simply handle voluntary turnover.

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Appendix

The Great Resignation Survey Questions

1. Please explain in as much detail as possible why you made this specific employment change.
2. How if, at all, did your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic challenge your understanding of why certain things happen in life?
3. How, if at all, do you feel this affected you as someone who works or has worked?
4. How, at all, did your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic challenge your overall meaning and/or purpose in life?
5. How, if at all, do you feel this affected you as someone who works or has worked?
6. What, if any, recurring thoughts did you have about how the pandemic affected you as someone who works or has worked?
7. How, if at all, did this play a part in you deciding to terminate your employment with the company/organization?
8. How, if at all, did your personal priorities change during the COVID-19 pandemic as someone who works or has worked?
9. How, if at all, did your professional priorities change during the COVID-19 pandemic as someone who works or has worked?
10. Regarding your responses to the last 2 questions: How, if at all, did this play a part in deciding to terminate your employment with the company/organization?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding why you made this particular employment change? (Closed response: Y/N)

Optional Question

12. Please explain your response in detail.