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Strategies to Handle Complaints or Incidents of Suspected Workplace Misconduct

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Strayer University 2014

BS, Strayer University, 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Business leaders often fail to investigate cases of workplace misconduct effectively, costing organizations millions of dollars in losses each year. Effective investigation of cases of workplace misconduct is essential to avoid costly lawsuits. Grounded in Adams' equity theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The participants were three business leaders from three different organizations in Georgia, United States, with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, organizational documents, and artifacts. Yin's five-step process guided the data analysis. Two themes emerged from analyses: improved process for handling workplace misconduct investigations and decreased employee perceptions of favoritism. A key recommendation is to build relationships with employees to avoid employee perception of unfair treatment and favoritism and provide leaders with proper investigation training to reduce bias. The implications for positive social change include the potential for effective investigation of workplace misconduct that leads to a positive workplace, which is critical to the behaviors of the employees at work, at home, and in their communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate my doctoral study to my family, friends, and human resource leaders. To my parents, Charles and Lillie Ford, who never gave up on me and continued with positive words of encouragement during my doctoral journey. My brother, Charles Ford Jr., who passed on June 17, 2011, but did not have a chance to be part of my doctoral journey. I remember when he was fighting for his life at the hospital in Washington, DC. I told my brother I needed him to witness my accomplishments, but he passed away. My oldest sister, Sandra D. Samuels, who passed away on February 4, 2021, was happy to see that I continued my educational journey and always supported everything I did. She was more than a sister to me; she was like a second mom. My sisters, Kimberly Underwood and Heather Roberts, who have always been there and supported me on this journey.

I dedicate this doctoral study to my daughter, Hilarie Ford, who knows firsthand how busy life has been, and her patience and words of encouragement. My husband, Derek Thompson-Southern Sr., and son, Derek Thompson-Southern Jr., came into my life during the final stages of my doctoral study. I thank Derek for taking on the responsibility of being mom and dad to our son as I worked on my doctoral study, worked two jobs, and barely had the rest needed to function. My grandkids, Shania and Malachi Ford, have been a witness of my journey, and I appreciate their patience and understanding. I also dedicate my doctoral study to other family members, friends, and my human resource community for the support they all provided me during this process.

Special thanks to Kristy Ivey and Kalisha Ogletree for being my cheerleaders during this process.

Acknowledgments

I would like to first give thanks to God for making it possible for me to make changes in my life and become the woman I am today. I would like to recognize and thank Dr. Jorge Gaytan for guiding me and being that voice of reasoning when I wanted to give up on completing my doctoral journey. I submitted my chair request form on November 29, 2015, and Dr. Gaytan was one of the three chair committee members I selected after reviewing 136 faculty members. I selected Dr. Gaytan because of his expertise in leadership and education. These factors were important to me. Dr. Gaytan showed me a better way to write and gave me the push and motivation I needed to continue my doctoral study.

I would also like to acknowledge the committee members, Dr. Teresa Jepma and Dr. Deborah Nattress, for taking the time to review and approve my doctoral study. I would like to thank Mr. Fred Walker, Walden University's associate director, for helping me in the beginning of my doctoral journey. Special thanks to my academic advisor, Mr. Richard Hay, for checking in to ensure I was getting the support I needed to move forward to complete my doctoral journey.

Finally, I would like to thank the human resource leaders who participated in this study, as their willingness and experience made the completion of this research a great experience for me. I am thankful to have more insight into handling investigations of workplace misconduct more efficiently and effectively as a human resource leader.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Cases of workplace misconduct are increasing significantly (Porath et al., 2015). Many business leaders are failing to investigate suspected cases of workplace misconduct, costing business organizations millions of dollars from lawsuits and litigations (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to handle complaints or incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively to avoid financial losses associated with lawsuits and litigation.

Background of the Problem

Business leaders must treat workplace investigations into complaints of discrimination, harassment, and other types of workplace misconduct very seriously to ensure the creation of a working environment free of workplace misconduct and to avoid financial losses resulting from lawsuits (Lattal, 2016). Workplace investigations of suspected cases of workplace misconduct have become the center of judicial scrutiny. The U.S. court system witnessed several cases in which business leaders conducting the investigations exhibited biased behaviors, tainting their findings (Lattal, 2016).

It is important for business leaders to begin an investigation as soon as they become aware of the potential issue (Ho, 2015). Business leaders have the responsibility to listen to their employees and to attempt to conduct an unbiased investigation of suspected cases of workplace misconduct (Lattal, 2016). Researchers should conduct studies related to cases of workplace investigations to inform others of the new laws and proper ways to handle these cases (Ho, 2015). Business leaders using effective strategies

to investigate workplace misconduct may avoid financial losses resulting from lawsuits and litigation.

Problem Statement

Business leaders often fail to investigate cases of workplace misconduct effectively (Lattal, 2016). In 2017, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission investigated and resolved 201 cases, awarding $525 million in monetary benefits to victims (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). The general business problem is that when cases of workplace misconduct are not investigated correctly, employees leave or file lawsuits that are costly, negatively affecting organizational profits. The specific business problem is that some business leaders lack strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The target population consisted of three business leaders in the human resource sector of three different organizations located in Fulton County, Georgia, with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The implications for positive social change include improved investigation processes that could empower employees to report issues of workplace misconduct and confidence that it will be handled effectively. Employees may feel less stress and live happier lives at home and in the community. Employees working in organizations in which business leaders investigate complaints of workplace misconduct may feel that they are being treated equally, which could increase

the overall emotional well-being of employees at work, home, and in their personal

interactions.

Nature of the Study

Three types of research methodologies exist: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed

methods (Yin, 2018). Researchers use the qualitative research method to explore the

what, *why*, and *how* of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2015;

Yin, 2018). Researchers use the qualitative method to collect and analyze data from study

participants possessing lived experiences related to the overarching research question

(Saunders et al., 2015). The qualitative research method was the most suitable for this

study because I explored the *what*, *why*, and *how* of a phenomenon in its natural setting,

which was workplace misconduct. Researchers use the quantitative research method to

analyze numerical data and to test hypotheses (Kazdin, 2016). Quantitative researchers

use numerical data and statistics (Berger, 2020). I did not select the quantitative research

method because I did not analyze numerical data or test hypotheses. Researchers use the

mixed-methods research methodology when they are interested in using both quantitative

and qualitative research methods to integrate the benefits of both, such as the use of

statistical data and interpretive analysis (Palinkas et al., 2013). The mixed-methods

research methodology was not the best choice because of the quantitative component; I

did not test hypotheses or engage in statistical analysis.

The qualitative research designs considered included phenomenological,

narrative, ethnographic, and case study. Researchers use the phenomenological design to

explore study participants' lived experiences to understand meanings and gain insights

(Saunders et al., 2015). I did not select the phenomenological design for the study because the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences were not part of my study. The narrative approach is used by researchers to study participants' experiences through their personal stories in an open, interpretative way (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The purpose of my study was not on participants' experiences described through their personal stories; therefore, the narrative design was not the best choice for my study. Researchers use the ethnographic research design to conduct an in-depth exploration of an organization's social and cultural aspects (Saunders et al., 2015). The ethnographic design was not the best choice because I did not conduct an in-depth exploration of an organization's social and cultural aspects. Researchers use the case study design to explore a phenomenon in-depth in its natural setting and to triangulate data as part of the strategy for validating findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Researchers use the case study design to explore the *what*, *why*, and *how* of a phenomenon in its real-life setting (Yin, 2018). In this study, I used the multiple case study design to learn strategies that business leaders use to explore the *what*, *why*, and *how* of a phenomenon in its natural setting.

Research Question

What strategies do business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to successfully investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

2. How did your employees respond to those strategies?

3. How did you communicate the strategies for investigating complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

4. What policies and processes did you use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

5. What barriers did you experience when implementing strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

6. How did you overcome the barriers to implementing strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

7. What else would you like to add related to strategies used to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that I used in the study was John Stacey Adams' equity theory developed in 1963. The premise of the equity theory is that employees perceive that they are not being treated equally, which harms the employees emotionally and results in decreased motivation to complete assigned tasks effectively and efficiently (Adams, 1963). Employees who feel they are receiving inequitable treatment will be emotionally motivated to gain equity (Adams, 1963). In the equity theory, employees determine the fairness and equitability of treatment received and act upon these perceptions (Adams, 1963). Business leaders should address employees' perceptions of unfair and unequitable treatment effectively rather than ignore employees' perceptions (Woska, 2013).

If business leaders do not investigate complaints of workplace misconduct effectively, employees may perceive that treatment received is not fair and equitable (Ho, 2015). At the same time, employees will be emotionally motivated to gain equity, which is the craft of one person being honest and neutral in social interplays with another individual (Uhrig, 2015). Because the equity theory's main premise is that employees perceiving that they are not being treated equally feel emotionally harmed and perform at lower levels, investigating complaints of workplace misconduct ineffectively may lead to employees' emotional harm and major potential financial losses resulting from lawsuits and litigation.

Operational Definitions

Workplace misconduct: Workplace misconduct is an unethical, unlawful, and unacceptable behavior in the workplace. Workplace misconduct includes attendance policy violations, insubordination, rudeness or abusive language, dishonesty and theft, or misconduct, which may occur off site from the workplace (F.-W. Zhang et al., 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption is a statement that individuals presumed to be true, often only temporarily or for a specific purpose, and is difficult to verify (Wargo, 2015). This study has four assumptions. The first assumption was that each participant would respond openly and honestly to interview questions. Another assumption was that the information that I presented in the study would add to the body of knowledge. An additional assumption was that the concept of workplace misconduct is universal across

organizations. The last assumption was that the data collected assisted me in answering the overarching research question for the study.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a research study (Wargo, 2015). I identified three limitations in the study. A limitation of the study was the sample size I used, which consisted of only a few business leaders. Another limitation was that some business leaders chose not to participate in the study. The last limitation was the limited time for interviews.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries that researchers establish for a research study (Lidström, 2016). This study has three delimitations. A delimitation of the study was that I selected only business leaders possessing successful experience in investigating complaints of workplace misconduct. Another delimitation was that employees were not a part of the study. The last delimitation was that I conducted the study with organizations within Fulton County, Georgia.

Significance of the Study

Value to Business

The Equal Employer Opportunity Commission secured more than $525 million for victims of workplace misconduct that occurred in private organizations and federal, state, and local governments in 2017 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018). Business leaders may benefit from acquiring strategies for investigating complaints of workplace misconduct to avoid significant financial losses.

Contribution to Business Practice

This study may contribute to business practices by providing business leaders with strategies that might help them investigate workplace misconduct more effectively to reduce employee lawsuits. This study's findings may result in business leaders gaining a better understanding of new perspectives regarding best practices to investigate workplace misconduct. The knowledge business leaders may gain from the results of this study may help them make the right decisions when they are investigating cases of workplace misconduct, saving millions of dollars in potential lawsuits.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change may include an increased awareness by business leaders and employees of the effect workplace misconduct has on victims. Employees witnessing that organizational leaders are genuinely committed to investigating complaints of workplace misconduct may feel that organizational leaders are treating them equally and justly, increasing the employees' emotional state that ultimately has an effect on the employees' quality of family life. Investigating complaints of workplace misconduct could improve the investigation processes that may lead to the empowerment of employees to feel confident that issues of workplace misconduct will be handled effectively. As a result, employees may experience less stress, happier lives at home and in the community, and more willingness to remain in the organization.

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A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

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The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Developing

an understanding of such strategies required a qualitative approach, more specifically an exploratory multiple case study design. The findings from this study might provide insight into workplace misconduct investigations from a group of leaders' perspectives.

The findings of the study may assist with the development of appropriate strategies for handling workplace misconduct investigations to avoid significant financial losses associated with lawsuits and litigation. Once an understanding of the underlying meaning emerges, appropriate strategies might equip business leaders with the skills to improve workplace misconduct investigations. The potential for social change rests in the development of strategies to improve workplace misconduct investigations to protect the rights of employees.

I reviewed the literature on workplace investigations through several databases to obtain literature for this study. I also accessed various journals related to workplace investigations to assist in understanding the manner in which the cases were handled. In some instances, I accessed government websites to obtain information about workplace investigations to help with statistic levels. Some of the other databases I used were the Walden University library, Google Scholar, and a few online human resources websites to assist me with my search.

The literature review section includes information about the strategy for searching the literature, the frequencies and percentages of peer-reviewed articles, and the publication dates. The strategy for searching through existing literature entailed the use of keywords and phrases. I applied filters to database searches to narrow the search results. When using Google Scholar, I gave preference to articles published in or after 2017,

ensuring the literature is topical and relevant. Secondly, I gave preference to articles that were available in the Walden University library. Some of the keywords and phrases I used in my search were *workplace investigations*, *legal issues in the workplace*, and *workplace misconduct*. The 246 references that the study contains include 190 scholarly peer-reviewed articles representing 78% of the total. The total number of references in this study published within the 2017–2021 period are 131, which is 54% of the total number. The literature review contains 70 references, with 18 references published within the 2017–2021 period representing 26% and 44 from scholarly peer-reviewed sources representing 63%.

Equity Theory

John Stacey Adams' equity theory developed in 1963, was the conceptual framework for the study. The premise of the equity theory was that employees perceive that they are not being treated equally, which harms the employees emotionally and results in decreased motivation to complete assigned tasks effectively and efficiently (Adams, 1963). Employees feeling that they are receiving inequitable treatment will be emotionally motivated to gain equity (Adams, 1963). In the equity theory, employees determine the fairness and equitability of treatment received and act upon these perceptions (Adams, 1963).

Using the equity theory, Ross (2015) showed that consumers have a consumer-centric, prosocial consumption behavior when choosing products in the marketplace. Ross based his analogy on Adams' (1963) equity theory. Ross narrowed the gap in marketers' understanding of consumer-centric, prosocial consumption behavior. Ross

used conjoint analysis to measure the differences in the equity exchange for the product choices of consumers. The reason Ross chose to use equity theory is to help the readers understand when, why, and how the consumers make the prosocial consumption decisions.

Consumers are usually prone to self-serving rather than empathetic tendencies. Ross (2015) used equity theory to predict how the marketplace fairly allocates the outcomes through customer choices and their consumption behaviors. Ross surveyed consumers with experience in consumption behaviors in the marketplace. Survey results provided a better understanding of equity theory, resulting in knowing the difference between using equity theory in the workplace versus in the marketplace. Ross conducted a comparison of the equity exchange to see how individuals compare to society inputs and how they perceive society inputs. Ross determined that individuals perceive the equity exchange as equitable. Biswas and Kapil (2017) found similar results.

Researchers have used equity theory in their studies of public schools. J. C. Ryan (2016) explained that teachers are concerned about rewards and recognition in their jobs. J. C. Ryan also claimed that teachers experience difficulties focusing on their own business and are more concerned about other teachers' salaries and recognition. J. C. Ryan spoke with teachers because they were the ones appearing to care more about identifying those teachers working harder and the skills they possess, instead of building motivation among each another. J. C. Ryan showed that using equity theory to motivate employees allows employers to treat their employees fairly. J. C. Ryan proved that the quality of a teacher positively affects the success of the students. Quality teachers

maintain a high standard in the workplace because they are role models to the students. J. C. Ryan found that highly motivated teachers are more likely to engage in professional development and to implement innovative programs to increase student learning.

Several researchers have used equity theory as a framework to examine jealousy and envy in nonmonogamous relationships. For instance, Parker (2016) described jealousy and envy as feelings central to the emotional lives of people having rarely been the object of serious scholarship. Parker interviewed participants to determine the manner in which those participants handled jealousy and envy in the participants' nonmonogamous relationships. Parker indicated that relationship stressors in monogamous relationships contribute to expressions of jealousy and envy due to perceived relationship inequities.

Jealousy and envy in relationships lead to an imbalance in the relationship. Parker (2016) found that people experiencing a communal orientation to relationships processed jealousy differently than typical exchange-oriented individuals. Parker found ways to resolve relationship issues and proved that couples could talk things out to enhance their relationship, instead of worsening difficulties in their relationship. Parker found that monogamous couples utilize principles of equity theory to establish balance within their relationship. When both partners within monogamous relationships perceive the relationship as equitable, episodes of jealousy and envy do not cause problems in the relationship (Moors et al., 2014).

Equity theory can be used to analyze the reasons behind the motivation for people to cheat on proctored internet testing. For example, Brophy (2013) looked at the moral

standards while analyzing the behavior of people cheating during proctored internet testing to determine if people cheating were at all concerned about the lack of moral values associated with cheating. People cheating on proctored internet testing feel it is a victimless crime because the person doing the cheating does not see any negative consequences from cheating (Arnold, 2016). Brophy tested five hypotheses and received 108 samples from student participants at a small Midwestern university. One of Brophy's samples measured impression management to access cheating attitudes, norms, and efficacy. Brophy conducted an online survey with all 108 student participants at a small Midwestern university. Brophy found that the first hypothesis was that an individual's equity sensitivity predicted the attitude toward cheating, which supports the work of Abbott (2014). In the second hypothesis, Brophy found that equity sensitivity predicted the cheating norms in such a way that the lower scores on equity sensitivity predicted higher scores on cheating norms. The third hypothesis asserted that attitudes toward cheating predict past cheating behaviors in a way that higher scores on cheating attitude measures predict higher incidents of past cheating (Brophy, 2013). Due to the limiting effects of homogenous equity sensitivity samples, Brophy was not able to find a statistic predictor of attitudes toward cheating or perception of the cheating norms.

The pay-for-performance compensation method in the federal public sector through the generational lens of federal workers, specifically pay banding in the Department of Treasury and the Internal Revenue Service, has been an area of research. Polk (2015) used equity theory to show that most people desire a high input-to-outcome ratio or equity-exchange ratio. Polk argued that one of the remedies for resolving stress

caused by perceived inequity is to leave the work situation. The approach to Polk's research tied directly into equity theory as it related to the object of Polk's research questions. Polk explored the gap in the literature concerning the frontline managers with the Department of Treasury in regards to their pay-for-performance compensation. Polk analyzed pay banding as the potential mediator to determine if pay banding reduced the interaction between generational cohort membership and job satisfaction. Polk also analyzed pay banding as a potential moderating variable to determine if pay banding exerted the influence on the strength or direction of the relation between generational cohort membership and job satisfaction. McWorthy and Henningsen (2014) found similar results. Polk also found that the frontline managers did not band until 2005. Frontline managers had not yet experienced the Internal Revenue Service form of pay-for-performance (Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, 2010). The Internal Revenue Service moved to pay banding in 2007 to recruit more employees, retain the current employees, and motivate their leaders (Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, 2007). Through the review of relevant literature, Polk established there were no statistically significant differences in generational perceptions regarding job satisfaction between generational cohorts among frontline managers employed in the Department of Treasury. Devaro and Heywood (2016) found that leaders implementing pay-for-performance effectively are able to recruit, retain, and motivate their managerial workforce. Polk found that performance linked significantly to job satisfaction and that job satisfaction linked to the turnover intention of employees.

Predictors of relational maintenance behavior within the context of friendship are important. Fearer (2013) used 371 young adult participants to complete online questionnaires regarding their perceptions of maintenance behaviors within close and casual friendships. Fearer used equity theory to connect relational maintenance in people perceiving their relationships as equitable. In addition, Fearer outlined a theoretical rationale for the predictive role of rational uncertainty. To measure interaction enjoyment, Fearer selected items from Hecht's Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory and assessed the participants' global communication satisfaction with a friend. Fearer conducted data analysis using the four-hierarchical regression for each dimensional relational maintenance behavior. Fearer's goal was to test additional theoretical frameworks as represented by relational uncertainty. Overall enjoyment is the strongest predictor of friendship maintenance. Fearer (2013) found that any form of inequity may result in negative emotions. Fearer also found that friendships are a context in which adolescents can practice egalitarian and symmetrical relationship skills. In hypothesis one, Fearer discovered that, within friendships, equity has a curvilinear association with relational maintenance behaviors. Fearer recognized that uncertainty is a lack of confidence about the way an interpersonal encounter will proceed. In the second hypothesis, Fearer predicted that inclusion of the other in self would be positively associated with the friendship maintenance. Fearer concluded that interaction enjoyment was the only positive predictor.

Several researchers have examined the perceptions of subordinate leaders suffering through job loss events in the past. For example, T. Long (2013) used equity

theory, coping theory, and organizational justice in the context of job loss within organizations. T. Long also measured the perception of individuals affected by a potentially life-altering event. T. Long included participants dismissed from their jobs for reasons other than *just cause*. The participants represented two different subsets of individuals, one subset derived from social media and the other from T. Long entering into an agreement with a company.

Equity theory deals with the interaction or exchange between people. T. Long (2013) found that the comparisons people make in equity situations are typically much more psychological than logical. Shoss et al. (2015) found that organizational structure also plays a role in procedural and interactional justice perceptions, which relate to perceived organizational support and supervisory trust. T. Long also found that there is a link between transformational leadership and follower trust, as transformational leadership relates to organizational justice perceptions.

Learning to value everyone as a teacher and a learner requires an understanding of equity theory as a means for finding space and value in the various cultures. Shockley-Smith (2015) explored the reality of teaching and learning about various topics, such as race, gender, and class, to assist students in becoming well-informed members of society. The reality of teaching and learning is consistent with the work of Blalock (2018). Individuals could study equity theory to understand an equitable relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Shockley-Smith determined that African Americans contributed greatly to the United States and relied heavily on seeing a return on their investment. Shockley-Smith chose to use equity theory to help students understand the

complexity of the relationship between the oppressed and their oppressor. The complexity of the relationship is consistent with the work of Lim (2020).

African American and Whites became distressed with one another, which led to anger and a battle for control and equity. Shockley-Smith (2015) found that when there is strife or perceived strife in a relationship, individuals perceive the relationship as unequitable. Perception and understanding are essential to relationship building (Zeller, 2014). Shockley-Smith determined that to empower the marginalized voices and to analyze the works of academic and nonacademic African American women and African American people in general, individuals have to use the lens of equity theory. Shockley-Smith found a way to encourage students by using practices that promoted history. Shockley-Smith discovered that focusing on students' analyses on the text and asking the students to find connections is a strategy that allows students to understand the meaningfulness of studying history.

There are two types of positive workplace relationships: workplace friendship and workplace romance. Gillen (2014) defined workplace romance as a nonplatonic relationship between coworkers where there is a sexual attraction present. Gillen focused on the specific type of workplace relationship between men and women. Gillen used equity theory to examine the contributions the men and women in the workplace make toward workplace relationships along with the benefits men and women may receive. When an employee perceives unfair treatment for not receiving the same benefits as other employees, inequity exists in the relationship. Gillen argued that when inequity exists, the individual affected could become angry, experience feelings of resentment, become

frustrated, and behave in a way that reduces the inequity, similar to what Adams (1965) claimed. Gillen also used equity theory because individuals used equity theory in a variety of communication contexts, including organizational, interpersonal, cross-cultural, and instructional.

Individuals' perceptions affect workplace relationships. For instance, Gillen (2014) found that individuals could perceive that certain factors lead to individuals obtaining benefits in the workplace due to having an established workplace relationship with a member of the leadership team. Gillen found that cross-sex workplace friendships are a rich area for perceptions and individuals often perceive these relationships as romantic. Gillen found that individuals perceive workplace romances as negative relationships, which lower the credibility of an individual, increase the perception of unfair treatment, and lower the trust level and self-disclosure. When a workplace relationship is a secret, others within the organization could perceive these relationships more negatively than when the individuals are open about these workplace relationships.

Managers must possess essential skills required to operate and manage a pay-what-you-can, nonprofit restaurant. May (2014) determined the effect that the pay-what-you-can policy has on the way nonprofit restaurants operate and the implications for owners. The pay-what-you-can restaurant employees prefer to work in exchange for a meal instead of a salary. May explored how often a restaurant was able to provide the pay-what-you-can services while remaining a nonprofit restaurant. May used the qualitative research method because it allowed concentrated, in-depth exploration

centered on real world cases of nonprofit restaurants. May explored how the pay-what-you-can nonprofit restaurant models work.

The use of the nonprofit restaurant model is impactful for organizations. May (2014) found that when the nonprofit restaurant model was in place, some of the marketing professionals claimed it would not remain viable over a long period. May discovered how the pay-what-you-can nonprofit restaurant system operates. May found that the nonprofit restaurant model includes seven core functional elements. One of the functional elements relates to the reaction of restaurant leaders to the nonprofit restaurant model and how the model allows managers and leaders to understand the restaurant model's success with a no set-price concept. May used equity theory and found that perceptions of fair and unfair exchange within society are the foundation of the pay-what-you-can restaurant model's operation. May also determined that while some people use the pay-what-you-can option sometimes paying even more, others do not pay anything at all.

The employee evaluation period should be fair and consistent. Dusterhoff et al. (2013) explored the perceptions and fairness of employees during the employee performance evaluation period. Equity theory centers on perceptions of fairness regarding human relationships. Makhubela et al. (2016) explored issues involving the employer not being able to retain employees due to fairness issues related to supervisors' performance evaluations of employees. Makhubela also explored a more effective way of handling the issues of dissatisfied employees. Makhubela focused on the employees' perception of

fairness and performance evaluations related to organizational commitment. Adams'

equity theory is inclusive of a fair execution of performance evaluations.

Perceptions of justice are an important consideration for organizations.

Makhubela et al. (2016) showed that when employees feel they are treated fairly, positive

outcomes emerge, and negative outcomes are avoided. Makhubela discovered that

employees base their experiences with contentment for their job by comparing

themselves to other employees in the workplace. Makhubela found that employees often

are dissatisfied with the performance evaluation received and reject the performance

assessment procedure along with the comments from their supervisors regarding the

performance. Makhubela also discovered that performance results affect employee

attitudes towards organizational commitment, in addition to the employee's perceptions

of fairness during the evaluation process. Makhubela determined that evaluation feedback

influences the perception of fairness and the association linking the employee and the

supervisor.

Acquisitions and mergers have an impact in employee behavior. Ilo (2016)

examined the experiences of corporate leaders participating in acquisitions and mergers

from 2007-2015. Ilo collected data by conducting telephone interviews with executives

and managers that experienced mergers with employees they managed. Ilo explored the

way leaders of merged companies addressed the issue of creating a new culture, structure,

and system or adopting the more dominant of two cultures involved in the merger. Ilo

examined the experiences of corporate leaders regarding the issue of culture, systems,

and structures to achieve merger objectives. Ilo used equity theory because it supports the

cultural integration process involved in mergers. Ilo found that equity theory applies to fair treatment to every employee in a company for the services rendered and plays an important role in mergers.

Problems go unnoticed in the early stages of a merger but could aggravate at later stages and affect job satisfaction and employee commitment. Ilo (2016) found that problems could lead to a collapsed merger. Ilo found that when a general understanding of the culture within the organization exists, a high standard of cooperation from employees is present. Ilo found that many of the leaders in global and U.S companies innovated and expanded their businesses through mergers and acquisitions. By the end of the 1980s, leaders of foreign organizations, especially those from the United States, acquired several European companies. One of the reasons companies merge is for the leaders of corporations to gain a tax credit advantage. Ilo found that companies receive tax credits for research and development to offset expenses, which leads to a new product design or improvements within the process.

Equity theory has been used to examine the relationship among motivation, satisfaction, and retention of Generation Y leaders. Wiggins (2016) used equity theory because equity theory involves determining a balance between employee input and output. Wiggins conducted a thorough analysis of phenomenology interviews to address how motivation techniques were suitable to Generation Y leaders, affecting their satisfaction and retention rates. Wiggins explored how motivation strategies increased satisfaction that led to improved retention for Generation Y leaders in the workforce. Wiggins conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to develop a better

understanding of how corporate leaders might employ motivation strategies to increase employee satisfaction in Generation Y leaders and decrease attrition. Wiggins explored the retention rate for 20 Generation Y service leaders to illuminate patterns of satisfied millennials by drawing from the employer roles in motivating and retaining millennial leaders.

Motivation is the force that makes an individual act negatively or positively. Wiggins (2016) discovered motivation strategies benefit social change by decreasing attrition of Generation Y leaders. Wiggins identified the difference between motivation and satisfaction of Generation Y leaders. Wiggins found that 60% percent of millennials search for work while employed with an organization. Wiggins also found that millennials expect to change jobs as they discover ways to increase their skillset. Wiggins determined that the use of the principles of equity theory resulted in the involvement of millennial leaders and the increase in these leaders' motivation and job satisfaction through inputs and outputs.

Other Contrasting Theories

Vroom's expectancy theory was used as the conceptual framework to show that student behavior results from conscious choices the students make in a technical college. Hoffman (2015) found that students believe in making higher grades in an effort to do exceptionally well in the technical college. Students believe that making higher grades allows them to achieve at a higher level and advance in their careers. Hoffman examined the relationship between expectancy and valence regarding a goal to determine the students' ability to achieve a higher grade. Hoffman explained changes in the student's

motivation towards the desired outcomes or goals in the students' program. Hoffman attempted to fill the gap on student motivation, as student motivation relates to the student preparing for employment after college. Hoffman presented technical education as the context and background for testing the use of Vroom's expectancy theory explaining student motivation. Hoffman also looked at motivation by examining the relationship between vocational students' learning and performance goals.

Using Vroom's expectancy theory, Hoffman (2015) found that a higher grade leads to a better GPA and increases the students' knowledge to perform a job when a student completes college. Hoffman found that while the motives for learning are the reason, purpose, and incentive for behavior, the motivation for learning is the impulse to act on incentives and desires. Hoffman also found that students in technical colleges have their own reasons for being in school, and students understand what they want to achieve from enrolling in a program and completing the program. Hoffman found that some students enrolled in vocational schools are lazy and slow to learn. Hoffman confirmed the accuracy of Vroom's expectancy theory in predicting student success based on the desired outcomes and perceived expectancy of success when examining the participants' coursework.

Expectancy theory has been used to show the choices farmers and those that manage the farmers make to collaborate as a team. Miller (2013) viewed collaborative initiatives as interpersonal relationship that include communication, joint strategies, and accomplishments, which contribute to a common product or goal. Collaboration efforts include more than just working together, collaboration efforts also include trust and

commitment from all stakeholders (Gupta et al., 2016). Miller classified collaborative benefits as organizational, tactical, and economic. Miller used expectancy theory because expectancy theory focuses on the efforts and outcomes of collaboration among stakeholders. Miller used the expectancy-valence framework to examine participants' perceptions regarding their efforts to collaborate knowing collaboration will result in a desired outcome.

Managers struggle to attract and retain farmers to sustain a viable market if farming in the specific region declines. Miller (2013) surveyed managers and farmers and found that at least 50% of farmers either felt neutral about collaboration or felt collaboration was unimportant. Miller discovered that participation in collaborative initiatives for farmers focused on three areas, most participation, engagement, and actively advocate for policy change, which support sustainable farming or agriculture. Miller also found that many farmers host or organize events at the market as an approach to increase community presence by collaborating with other organizational groups. Miller discovered that the barrier to engaging in collaborative efforts was the farmers' lack of time. Miller also discovered an additional barrier, which is a typical obstacle for regional food system stakeholders.

Pay compression has a positive influence on pay outcomes. The evidence was not sufficient to justify pay variations on performance. Conroy (2014) conducted a thorough review of the pay variation system using several existing assumptions that limit progress. Conroy assessed the pay of multiple jobs in an organization and combined the values of the jobs into a range to compare the variation in pay rates. Conroy tested the firm's pay

level variation to assess its effect on other firm's level constructs, with the ultimate dependent variable being organizational performance. Conroy used expectancy theory to explain the organizational implications of pay variation.

The pay-variation system has been confounded with the concepts of equity and equality. Conroy (2014) discovered that some pay variations exist because of politics. Conroy found that equity and equality, confounded with pay variation, would cause a serious problem with employees. Conroy found that pay variation was an equity or equality proxy. Conroy also found that the accumulation of pay variation has been inconclusive regarding the relationship between pay variation and pay performance outcomes.

Expectancy theory has been used to determine reasons for employee turnover. Oliver (2015) used several self-reporting instruments to measure job satisfaction, employee-employer relationships, organizational climate, and ethnicity to predict the retention of mental health professionals. Oliver identified several reasons for a lack of employee retention, including employee perceptions, attitudes, satisfaction, and engagement. Oliver conducted surveys on mental health professionals housed in African American or Caucasian privately owned mental health agencies to determine the retention among the population. Oliver identified that the employer-employee relationship has an effect on retention. Oliver also found that employees having the least contact with the mental health patients did not have high turnover rates. Oliver determined that when there is a strong relationship between the employer and employee, employee retention rate increases. Oliver also discovered that mental health workers

consider leaving their positions when they perceive that managers are not supportive. Managers play an important role in employee satisfaction by building a positive relationship with their employees.

Workplace Violence

A definition of workplace violence is necessary to understand its context. The U.S. Department of Labor (2019) defined workplace violence as an act of violence, against persons or property, threats, intimidation, harassment, or other inappropriate, disruptive behavior that causes fear for personal safety at a worksite. Some of the acts of workplace violence may include murder, threats, intimidation, and physical and sexual assault (Millington, 2014). Some of the nonfatal acts of workplace violence include physical, verbal, and mental abuse and simple assaults (Millington, 2014). Organizational leaders struggle to eliminate or decrease the instances of workplace violence. Most companies implemented a zero-tolerance policy for anyone committing acts of workplace violence. Millington explored the cost associated with workplace violence for employers and individuals.

Workplace violence has several negative effects. Millington (2014) found that if a person is a victim of workplace violence, it is possible to receive compensation for pain and suffering through the courts. Millington found that the cost of workplace violence might include addressing the victim's depression, psychological issues, and work-related events where a company is spending money to protect their employees. Millington also found that another cause of workplace violence could be the fact that an employee has an issue with the organization. Some organization-related issues include stress from poor

communication, downsizing, lack of pay increases, and change in the management team. Millington discovered the cost of workplace violence is high and is increasing at a fast pace.

Workplace violence is the occurrence of acts of violence in the workplace, which has increased over the years. Martinez (2016) associated workplace violence with an employee becoming angry at the decisions the employer makes, which leads to termination. Martinez examined if there was a pattern related to women experiencing more incidents of workplace violence than men. Martinez reviewed literature on intimate partner homicide, in general, and workplace homicide. Martinez conducted research on stalking in the workplace to prove that women suffer at the hands of a current or former partner. Martinez found that over a given period, acts of mass murder committed by angry coworkers against fellow workers gained media attention. Martinez stated that employers deal with domestic violence issues spilling over in the workplace that stemmed from the employees' homes. Martinez claimed that a former or current partner most likely murders women at work. When someone is having workplace violence at work, companies stray away from getting involved. Martinez argued that a man would purposely disrupt a woman at work by calling or visiting her at work to harass her. In addition, Martinez concluded that 65% of women experienced a current or former partner showing up at their place of employment to stalk them.

Workplace violence in the form of mass shootings has also been investigated. Kristen et al. (2015) explored workplace violence and mass shootings since they are making the headlines in the media all over the world. Kimberly (2016) interviewed

participants using face-to-face and phone semistructured interviews. Kimberly selected participants from police reports related to workplace violence found through businesses with incident reports on file. Kimberly explored the perspectives of workplace violence victims as they relate to the presence of weapons in the workplace. Kimberly examined the views of the victims and found that the rate of workplace homicide shootings decreases if the organization adopts a workplace violence policy. Kimberly explored whether or not incidents of workplace violence would change if employees were able to carry concealed weapons at work. Kimberly also found the experiences, behavior, and perceptions of victims of workplace violence. Kimberly stated that one out of five victims of a workplace homicide was a government employee and 4 out of 5 victims were employees of private businesses. Kimberly found that half of all organizations with over 1000 employees have experienced workplace violence or will experience workplace violence in the future. Kimberly also stated that there are approximately 1.7 million workplace violence incidents per year, resulting in approximately 500,000 employees losing time from work. Kimberly claimed additional areas of concern related to workplace violence, including incidents related to a lower job satisfaction rate and higher turnover rates. Workplace violence negatively affects the victims, witnesses involved, and the entire organization.

Workplace violence forces organizations to develop policy. Boyle (2015) investigated the best practices used to develop a domestic violence workplace policy, program, or protocol. Boyle further investigated the way an organization should protect an employee suffering from an incident of workplace violence. Boyle explored the

perceptions of senior human resource executives having a *domestic violence in the workplace program* in place. The participant executives expressed their views of the organization, allowing for the justification of a best practice used when developing the domestic violence in the workplace program. Boyle found that if a company has a domestic violence workplace policy, program, or protocol in place, this policy would help protect all employees involved in cases of workplace violence. Boyle discovered that most organizations do not have a workplace violence policy in place because senior human resource executives do not want to support the development of such policy. Boyle found that workplace violence victims' perceptions were that the organization would be unresponsive to their needs and the organization would terminate their employment instead of working with the victim to respond to the incident of workplace violence. Boyle found that working victims left their place of employment after pressure from the perpetrator and a lack of understanding by the employer.

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is also a form of workplace violence and is a growing problem within organizations. Stearns (2017) explored the experiences of workplace bullying of employees working in correctional environments. Workplace bullying is an aggressive act that can lead to severe trauma to the victim (Nielsen et al., 2015). Stearns stated that claims of workplace bullying are the responsibility of employees instead of the organization. Stearns used semistructured conversational interviews with study participants to gain a better understanding of the experiences of each participant. Stearns found that employees of the correctional environments described their experience of

bullying in the workplace and identified a need to develop organizational policies to

protect employees from bullying, which is consistent with the work of Patten (2017).

Stearns reported that approximately 64% of those bullied lose their jobs, either by

resignation or termination. Ahmad and Sheehan (2017) discovered that a 20-year veteran

committed suicide after enduring nine months of extreme verbal abuse and harassment

from other correctional officers. During the investigation, the 20-year veteran made

reports about the abuse and harassment to his supervisor. However, the supervisor failed

to take the 20-year veteran's claims seriously and recommended that the 20-year veteran

should handle the issue. Stearns found that when management does not treat these

situations seriously, the employee might go to extreme measures to escape the situation.

Stearns discovered during an interview with one of the participants that the correctional

staff does not refer to extreme verbal abuse and harassment as bullying. Instead, Stearns

found that the correctional staff refers to extreme verbal abuse and harassment as an

interpersonal communication issue, which is an acceptable and expected behavior in the

corrections environment. Stearns identified a connection between abusive work behaviors

and high stress work environments during the participants' interviews. Stearns further

discovered that when individuals lack social aptitude, they are unable to understand the

feelings of others and may not perceive extreme verbal abuse and harassment as abusive

behaviors.

Workplace bullying constitutes a negative action towards one or more employees,

and it creates a hostile work environment to include repeated and persistent harassing

behavior (Mackey et al., 2016). Repeated and persistent behavior is when the aggressor

continues to harass the victim with negative intentions. There is no limit to the number of

negative acts; however, more than one act constitutes workplace bullying (Peng et al.,

2016). Researchers indicate that workplace bullying affects an organization's human

capital effectiveness because victims experience job dissatisfaction, fear, reduced

performance, and lack of safety (Peng et al., 2016).

Many individuals have attempted to understand the reasoning behind workplace

bullying within the industrial realms. For instance, Valentine and Fleischman (2017)

investigated workplace bullying, which is caused by a conflict, and the best way to

resolve the conflict process is for organizational leaders to review the case; however, the

aggressor may not agree with the results from the leaders' investigation. Many times,

workplace bullying occurs due to attitudes of employees, organizational changes, or

employers' ineffective communication practices (Coetzee & Van Dyk, 2017). Sometimes

workplace bullying has no reasoning behind it, and the bully may be going through

personal issues causing the behavior. Organizational leaders should investigate specific

issues that give rise to conflict and bullying. Some individuals may see workplace

bullying as an eye of labor process theory and may be perceived as a failure on the

employer-employee relationship (Valentine et al., 2017).

Workplace bullying is harmful in workplaces and has long-term damaging effects

on the victims and the organization. Workplace bullying may cause a severe and

pervasive problem with negative implications for all parties involved (Rai & Agarwal,

2018). In fact, workplace bullying may be a harmful and intense experience for the

victim. Workplace bullying takes the form of unfairness and can block an employee's

promotion (Samnani & Singh, 2015). Some of the behaviors of workplace bullying also include ignoring an employee by giving that employee the *silent treatment* and not wanting to help the employee in the workplace. Workplace bullying may increase employees' stress levels causing employees to quit their jobs or even commit suicide (Gupta & Bakhshi, 2018).

Most organizations treat workplace bullying as a zero-tolerance activity in their policies to deter current and future employees from committing this act. The bully not receiving the proper disciplinary action may continue the bullying behavior (Ahmad, 2018). Business leaders can recognize when an employee becomes a victim by some of symptoms the employee displays, such as anxiety, depression, and stress. The bully also has certain characteristics associated with bullying behaviors, such as an authoritative personality, a domineering character, and abrasive behaviors at times (Webster, 2016).

Some business leaders may ignore workplace bullying behavior to avoid conflict because of the lower ranks and position of the employees involved. Some business leaders exhibit bullying behaviors that are never reported, which allows business leaders to obtain promotions and high-performance ratings (Ritzman, 2016). Most bullies may be protected by people in higher positions that are able to do something about the bullying behavior but decide not to stop it because leaders perceive the bullies as good employees. In fact, some business leaders feel that it is acceptable to threaten and harass employees and, if another leader disagrees, the bullying business leaders threaten and harass those leaders not embracing the bullying that they are witnessing (Naseer et al., 2018).

Workplace bullying is a result of individuals wanting power over others. In other words, workplace bullying can be associated with contested conflicts within and outside of the organization (Dali, 2018). It is imperative for organizations to have a policy in place to address issues related to workplace bullying. A clear, concise policy provides a good picture and explanation of the process and safeguards the rights of employees (Dali, 2018). The entire act of bullying in the workplace should lead to thorough and effective investigations to ensure businesses are no longer able to suppress the rights of employees.

Workplace bullying is unacceptable behavior, and organizational leaders must address it at the time of occurrence. Business leaders practicing dignity see the quality resonate throughout the organization (Boddy, 2015). It starts at the top and is all about creating a culture of open, honest, and respectful communication. A socially intelligent business leader creates a healthy organizational culture by being a fair leader and encouraging other leaders to do the same (Middlemiss, 2017). Business leaders should show empathy and concern for others at the core of social behavior. Organizations that value their employees develop, hire, promote, and empower socially intelligent leaders to lead employees in a positive anti-bully facility (Omari & Paull, 2017). All employees should be educated on workplace bullying and the effects it has on an employee's ability to perform the assigned duties.

Information pertaining to workplace bullying should be included in the employee learning system and policies. With so many cases of sexual harassment and workplace violence, more organizations are providing training programs to their employees to address these negative behaviors (Perminiene et al., 2016). Workplace bullying is a

serious problem and has been neglected by most organizations (Ryan, 2016). Education and training are the first steps to educating employees and business leaders about the importance of workplace bullying (Ryan, 2016). One of the most difficult steps is for business leaders to enforce the policies related to workplace bullying and conduct proper investigations when complaints arise. In fact, some employees complained about incidents or workplace bullying, and unfortunately, the complaints about their experience made the situation worse. Good leaders listen, observe, and are in tune with what is going on in the organization. Operating in this manner helps business leaders identify bullying behavior and address it immediately.

Transition and Summary

Section 1 contained several subsections, including the background of the study; problem statement; purpose statement; nature of the study; research and interview question; conceptual framework; operational definitions; assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; significance of the study; and literature review. Section 2 includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection, data analysis techniques, and reliability and validity. Section 3 includes the overview of the study, presentation and findings, application to professional practice, implication for social change, recommendation for action, recommendation for further study, reflections, summary, and study conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

I begin Section 2 with a restatement of the purpose statement. I discuss my role in the research process and provide an overview of my participants. I also explain the research methodology and design, population and sampling, participants, ethical research, data collection method, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity of the research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The target population consisted of three business leaders in the human resource sector of three different organizations located in Fulton County, Georgia, with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The implications for positive social change include improved investigation processes that could empower employees to report issues of workplace misconduct and confidence that it will be handled effectively. Employees may feel less stress and live happier lives at home and in the community. Employees working in organizations in which business leaders investigate complaints of workplace misconduct may feel that they are being treated equally, which could increase the overall emotional well-being of employees at work, at home, and in their personal interactions.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher includes becoming an instrument of data collection (Sanjari et al., 2014). The role of the researcher includes obtaining access to participants,

transcribing interviews, analyzing data, and reporting emerging themes (Kimberly, 2016).

I collected data from multiple sources to obtain a better understanding of workplace

investigations and to explore strategies that business leaders use to handle complaints or

incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively. As the primary research

instrument, I followed Yin's (2018) recommendations to manage every aspect of the

study, such as the concept definitions, data collected from various sources, interviews

with study participants, interviews transcriptions, and data analyses. I used additional

resources such as company documents containing workplace violence policies and

complaint processes. I collaborated with business leaders in the manufacturing sector to

determine availability of prospective participants whom I selected and invited to

participate in this study. I conducted and recorded interviews with participants,

transcribed the audio recordings, conducted an analysis of the data, and ensured data

saturation.

My prior experience as a human resource professional in manufacturing, retail,

logistics, and telecommunications for 18 years provided me with a realistic perspective

on complaints of workplace misconduct. Working in the manufacturing and

telecommunication sectors with globally owned companies broadened my worldview to

include a wide variety of situations and variables. This global experience assisted me in

writing interview questions to give the participants an opportunity to provide their global

experiences related to workplace investigations.

The ethical issues that researchers need to consider when conducting social

science research exist in the form of codes, guidelines, and regulations (Sanjari et al.,

2014). Researchers have the moral responsibility to conduct studies in an ethical manner and to adhere to the guidelines outlined by the Belmont Report protocol (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (1979), the three primary principles of ethics involving human subjects are respect for persons, justice, and beneficence. Researchers adhering to the principle of respect for persons recognize the participants' autonomy and acknowledge that some respondents may have diminished autonomy, which requires researchers to provide additional protection (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The principle of beneficence requires researchers to ensure participants do not suffer harm or injury while deriving maximum benefits from their participation in the study (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Finally, when applying the principle of justice, researchers must give participants fair treatment in relation to burdens and benefits of the research study (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The Belmont Report protocol includes further information to researchers on the application of principles of ethics while conducting a research study. These ethical principles relate to the selection of subjects, assessment of benefits and risks, and securement of informed consent (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The main focus in this section is on informed consent, which relates to the voluntariness of participants, disclosure of information, and the completeness of such information. I accepted the moral obligation to conform to the principles of ethics outlined in the Belmont Report protocol, adhered to any requirements of the review board of their business organization, and addressed any other ethical concerns of the participating business organization. I did not

start my study until I received authorization from the Walden University Institutional

Review Board (IRB). Similarly, explaining to participants the principles of informed

consent and obtaining their signed consent forms before commencing my study were the

approaches warranting the ethicality of this research study. I treated all participants fairly,

informed them that participating in the study is voluntary, and reminded them that they

could withdraw from the research process at any stage. I safeguarded and ensured

participants' confidentiality and privacy of information.

It is difficult to avoid bias in a research process because the researcher could be

inclined to support the evidence that conforms to the researcher's fundamental beliefs

(Fluid Surveys, 2013; Jelic, 2013). Confirmation bias results when researchers support

the findings that are in line with their fundamental beliefs over the evidence that

contradicts researchers' beliefs (Bossuyt & Van Kenhove, 2016). In addition, researchers

use member checking in their studies to avoid bias (Anney, 2014). Researchers use

member checking to provide study participants with the opportunity to review

researchers' interpretation of the participants' interview responses for verification

purposes and to mitigate bias (Koelsch, 2013). I conducted member checking by giving

the participants the opportunity to review my interpretation of their answers to interview

questions to verify the accuracy of participants' answers to mitigate bias. I also avoided

inclining to support the evidence that adhered to my fundamental beliefs.

An interview protocol includes important information such as interview

procedures, interview questions, a script of the introduction and the conclusion, and

prompts for getting consent from respondents (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The interview

protocol includes a four-step procedure to guide the process of interviewing participants (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The four steps are ensuring the interview questions are consistent with the overarching research question for the study, planning an interview procedure to formulate an investigation-based dialogue, asking other researchers to review the interview protocol, and administering a pilot test of the interview (Stuart et al., 2017). Researchers use an interview protocol in their studies as a routing guide (Patton, 2015). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to guide the entire interview process and to ensure I shared the same information with all study participants. I followed the interview protocol's four-step procedure to ensure the interview questions were consistent with the overarching research question for this study, planned an interview procedure to formulate an investigation-based dialogue, asked other researchers to review the interview protocol, and administered a pilot test of the interview.

Participants

Researchers must find appropriate participants before embarking on the process of data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The process of identifying suitable participants begins with defining eligibility criteria that will ensure alignment with the study's overarching research question (Padgett, 2016). Researchers use eligibility criteria to define the parameters that the participants should meet to qualify for participation in a research study (Yin, 2018). Participants are also eligible if they are knowledgeable and experienced about the phenomenon under investigation (Mertens, 2019; Roets, 2017). Participant eligibility criteria must include the selection of appropriate participants with knowledge of and experience in the phenomenon under investigation (Corbin & Strauss,

2015). I purposively selected business leaders in the manufacturing sector located in Fulton County, Georgia, with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Eligible participants attained a minimum of 5 years of successful experience using strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct.

Gaining access to organizations and participants for a research study could be a rather difficult task (Roets, 2017). DePoy and Gitlin (2019) proposed that researchers consider getting a list of business organizations from the local chamber of commerce, working with the main staff in organizations, using more recruitment tools, and possessing a better understanding of the target population to perform the task of gaining access to organizations and participants successfully. Hancock and Algozzine (2016) suggested that gaining access to participants shows the assumptions of the researcher as well as the chosen setting. In this study, I visited the local chamber of commerce to obtain a list of potential participants.

Researchers must gain the trust and acceptance of the participants involved in the study (Bell & Waters, 2018). Establishing good rapport with research study participants enables the researchers to collect rich data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Researchers gain the trust of participants and build good rapport by engaging with participants regularly (Bell & Waters, 2018). I engaged with participants of this research study regularly to build rapport, which allowed me to collect rich and thick data.

Research Method and Design

Researchers choose an appropriate method and design based on the nature of the overarching research question (Alavi & Hąbek, 2016). Three research methodologies

exist: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The choice of the research method has an important effect on the choice of the research design. In this subsection, I discuss the logic used to select the research method and design for this research study.

Research Method

For this study, I chose the qualitative research method. When deciding on a proper research method to use, researchers should consider the nature of the overarching research question (Bansal et al., 2018). For researchers investigating new fields of study, the qualitative research method is suitable because researchers collect data using a variety of data collection methods that researchers analyze (House, 2018). In addition, researchers conduct a qualitative research study to look at the experiences of diverse participants through thick descriptions of their experiences (Levine, 2018). Gaining a complete understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation is critical to researchers (Marjan, 2017). I selected the qualitative research method because I considered the nature of the overarching research question. I collected data from participants, used a variety of data collection methods to explore participants' experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation, and analyzed the data collected.

Researchers use the quantitative research method to concentrate on relationships, prevalence rates, and cause-and-effect relationships (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Researchers use the quantitative research method when conducting studies that are confirmatory (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Researchers should consider the nature of the overarching research question when selecting a research design (Sundell & Ahsberg,

2016). Researchers use the quantitative research method to test hypotheses in a group and draw inferences based on statistical significance in the rejection of null hypotheses (Kazdin, 2016). I did not select the quantitative research methodology because I did not use numerical data or test any hypotheses.

Using the mixed-methods research methodology requires extra resources to ensure the researcher meets the needs of both qualitative and quantitative factors of both research methodologies (Palinkas et al., 2013). The mixed-methods research methodology is a simultaneous combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, allowing researchers to answer quantitative (i.e., confirmatory) and qualitative (i.e., exploratory) research questions (Mabila, 2017). For this specific research study, a mixed-methods research methodology was not suitable given that the quantitative design component would not help me answer the exploratory research question. I did not select the mixed-methods research methodology because I did not employ the quantitative part of the mixed-methods to test hypotheses or engage in statistical analysis.

Research Design

In this study, I selected an explorative multiple case study design. The qualitative research method includes multiple designs such as case study, ethnography, and phenomenology (Aggarwal & Sabharwal, 2017; Yin, 2018). Researchers gather a variety of data using various sources in a case study design and use triangulation to compare and confirm data from various sources (Ledoux & Ohori, 2016). Interviews, document analysis, and observations are the data origins for a case study (Calzada, 2018). Ledoux and Ohori (2016) asserted that researchers employ the case study design when they need

to explore the *what*, *how*, and *why* of a phenomenon in its natural setting. While studying a modern phenomenon in its real-world setting, case analysis is exemplary (Roughgarden, 2019). The case study design was the best suitable for my study because I explored the *what*, *how*, and *why* of a phenomenon in its natural setting, which is workplace misconduct. Based upon Yin's (2018) description of the purpose of a case study, I selected the multiple case study design because it was the most suitable for exploring the strategies that business leaders use to handle complaints or incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively.

Researchers concentrate on shared behavioral patterns, beliefs, and language of cultural groups when using an ethnographic design (Ferguson, 2017; K. C. Lewis, 2019). In this research study, I did not focus on cultural groups' shared behavioral patterns, beliefs, and language. An ethnography was not the ideal method of inquiry because I did not explore cultural groups' shared behavioral patterns, language, and beliefs. Researchers use a phenomenological design to explore study participants' lived experiences about phenomena (Roughgarden, 2019). Phenomenology is best suited when researchers use collected data to find the relevance of the participants' lived experiences (Williams, 2018). I did not select a phenomenological design because the focus of my study was not on participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon.

The data saturation point is not a clear concept because researchers are unable to predict when they will reach the saturation point and whether the sample size is sufficient (Mabila, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Researchers reach data saturation when they have collected sufficient information to reflect participants' experiences related to the

phenomenon under investigation and collecting new data does not result in new themes or ideas (Mabila, 2017; Yin, 2018). A research study's sample relates more to data saturation than to the number of study participants (Hagaman & Wutich, 2016). Researchers collect data beyond the saturation point because of the lack of a specific data saturation formula for qualitative research (Roets, 2017). I reached data saturation by the third participant; therefore, I did not have to conduct additional interviews.

Population and Sampling

I collected data from three business leaders in the manufacturing sector located in Fulton County, Georgia, with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Researchers determine the sample by identifying the richness of data, exploratory nature of the study, and generalizability to a larger population with at least one case study (Graham & Clough, 2018; Han & Liu, 2018). Calzada (2018) recommended that three to five participants represent an adequate number of participants for a case study. Brear (2017) indicated that participants in the study need to be knowledgeable on the phenomenon under investigation to contribute to the study. Establishing the appropriate sample size could be challenging in a case study (Brear, 2017). Selmer (2016) stated that two to three replications suffice in case study research. I reached data saturation with three participants; therefore, I did not have to conduct additional interviews.

Researchers need to select the appropriate sampling method to improve the trustworthiness of the study (Kornbluh, 2015). The use of purposive sampling helps researchers narrow down the participant pool by making sure the participants meet the

same set of criteria, giving a clear understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Jeon, 2018). Purposive sampling includes selecting and identifying participants that meet specific criteria for the study (Jeon, 2018). I selected purposive sampling to recruit participants meeting the specific criteria to extract relevant information.

Researchers are unable to predict when they will reach the saturation point because data saturation is not a clear concept (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Researchers reach data saturation when they have collected sufficient information to reflect participants' experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation and collecting new data does not result in new themes or ideas (Brear, 2017; Gravely & Fraser, 2018; Yin, 2018). A research study's sample relates more to data saturation than to the number of study participants (Hagaman & Wutich, 2016). Researchers collect data beyond saturation point because of the lack of a specific data saturation formula for a qualitative research (Roets, 2017). I was able to reach data saturation with three participants; therefore, I did not have to conduct additional interviews.

The researcher must ensure the interview setting is conducive to open dialogue, as this is important to the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). It is important to make sure all participants are at ease to avoid any cases of anxiety and create an atmosphere where the researcher and participant are able to have a conversation to build rapport (Selmer, 2016; Zamanzade & Mahdizadeh, 2017). Other researchers suggest conducting interviews that are not public, loud, and make sure the participants feel comfortable (Gravely & Fraser, 2018). The setting I selected for the interview was conducive to open dialogue. I ensured the interview arrangements were convenient to the study participants

to avoid any anxieties and in a proper environment to enhance the communication and build rapport with the study participants. I made sure I communicated to the study participants that the interview would take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

Ethical Research

An important part of any study is obtaining consent from participants (Mallia, 2019). The informed consent process may include two parts: developing the consent form and providing the consent form to the research study participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Pietersen, 2018). I provided each participant with a copy of the informed consent form and reviewed the form in detail with each participant upon identifying qualified participants. Researchers must review the consent form with each participant because not every participant will take the time to read the informed consent form in its entirety (Baker & Chartier, 2018). I reviewed the informed consent form with participants to ensure they understood the intent of the study, my role, and that they could withdraw at any time during the process. All participants must sign the informed consent form prior to participating in a study (Yin, 2018). Before I started the semistructured interviews with participants, I provided the participants the informed consent form, explained its contents, and asked participants to sign it. The informed consent form includes the expectations from the participants; the nature of the study; any potential risks, benefits; and my contact information in the event participants had questions. I highlighted the main purpose of this research, and I made sure I informed the study participants about their voluntary participation. During or after the research, none of the study participants received any rewards for participating in the study.

Massidda and Parisi (2017) recommended that the researcher informs participants about at-will participation in the study. The participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any given time without giving reason. The participants were informed that they can withdraw at any time from the process without any penalty, by calling or emailing me. The privacy and confidentiality of study participants should be in the forefront of any researcher's agenda (Rendina & Mustanski, 2018). I ensured participants understood the voluntary nature of their participation in the study and respected participants' privacy and confidentiality.

I did not begin the interview process until I received permission from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure I adhered to Walden University's IRB guidelines, I focused on the participants' safety and informed consent when conducting the interviews. The Walden University IRB approval number is 09-11-19-0515892.

I did not use the participant's real names or their affiliated organizations to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, I made sure I did not include any attributes that could have led to the indirect discovery of the study participants or their organizations. A researcher should provide ethical, trustworthy, and meaningful results while ensuring the confidentiality of participants (Massidda & Parisi, 2017). I collected, dated, and stored all of the research documents on a password-protected flash drive. I will keep any physical documents in a locked drawer in my residence for a period of 5 years. Witherspoon (2017) recommended researchers destroy all data 5 years after the completion of a

research study. Following Walden University's IRB guidelines, I will destroy the flash

drive and shred paper copies after 5 years.

Data Collection Instruments

In the 1980s, Lincoln and Guba introduced the concept of the researcher as the

primary research instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The

researcher becomes the research instrument in a qualitative research (Lalanda, 2015;

Simpson, 2015). As the research instrument, case study researchers collect data using

interviews, observations, and document analysis to gain an understanding of the

participants' perspectives regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Chu et al.,

2017; Walsh & Brinker, 2019). As the primary research instrument, I used semistructured

interviews with open-ended questions and organizational documents to collect data from

participants selected from a group of business leaders to collect rich and thick data.

I collected data as the primary research instrument for this study by recording and

transcribing semistructured, face-to-face interviews using the interview protocol (see

Appendix A) to facilitate the interview process. The participants answered all the

questions (see Appendix B) during the interview, as required in the interview protocol.

The participants were given an opportunity to give their parting thoughts on

investigations of workplace misconduct before the interview ended. Participants should

be given an opportunity to disclose any thoughts or experiences related to the

phenomenon under investigation that did not emerge during the interview process (Kim

& Park, 2015). As the research instrument, a qualitative researcher plays an important

role in the development and understanding of the details of qualitative research (Guo,

2019). Miller (2017) pointed out that, as the research instrument, a qualitative researcher could develop effective interviewing skills to collect rich and thicker data. In essence, a researcher brings bias to a research study (Lewis, 2018). Researchers practice researcher reflexivity to address their bias (No & Hong, 2017).

Document analysis is another data collection technique researchers often use in their studies (De Alcaraz-Fossoul & Roberts, 2017). Researchers find qualitative data in documents in various formats, including textual, pictorial, or graphical (Maluka, 2018). Researchers further explore the phenomenon under investigation by using document analysis in conjunction with semistructured interviews (Harte, 2017), which improves rigor of the study because using semistructured interviews and document analysis allows researchers to perform data triangulation (Kern, 2016). Researchers may analyze various documents, such as budget justification, financial statements, and annual reports (Cardno, 2019). In addition, researchers use the information contained in documents to provide certain information regarding the case study, including correct spelling of names and a detailed description of events (Atmowardoyo, 2018). I analyzed organizational documents related to investigations of workplace misconduct and performed methodological triangulation using data collected from semistructured interviews and document analysis to increase the rigor of the study.

Researchers use member checking to allow study participants to confirm, add, clarify, and correct certain aspects of the data collected, increasing the trustworthiness of a study (Harte, 2017). Researchers use member checking by having participants review and verify the researchers' interpretation of participants' answers to interview questions

(Kim & Donaldson, 2016). I increased the trustworthiness of the data collected by using

member checking. A week after the interviews, I gave participants my interpretation of

their answers to the interview questions and asked them to correct, confirm, add, and

clarify my interpretation of their answers.

Furthermore, I recorded the thoughts and decisions that I made throughout the

interview process to increase the validity and reliability of the data collected during the

semistructured interviews. Researchers reflect on thoughts and decisions regarding the

data collected by using a researcher reflexivity process (Guishard, 2018). Researchers use

reflexivity to address their bias and enhance the transparency of the research process

(Guishard, 2018).

Data Collection Technique

Researchers conduct interviews as an accepted method for qualitative data

collection to obtain participants' experiences related to the phenomenon under

investigation (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017). Researchers use structured, unstructured, and

semistructured interviews to collect data in a qualitative research study (Incollingo,

2018). The use of qualitative, open-ended interview questions helps participants describe

the phenomenon in their own words (Thompson, 2018). Researchers use the overarching

research question to steer the directon of the interview process during the semistructured

interviews and ask supporing questions to obtain additional information regarding the

phenomenon under investigation (Oni, 2016). During the interview process, researchers

use semistructured interviews to collect data by using predefined questions to prompt

participants to elaborate on the areas of interest (Austin & Gregory, 2019). Researchers

conduct semistructured interviews to gain flexibility in adapting research questions to generate rich and thick data (Long & Li, 2016). Researchers usually record and transcribe the interviews for analysis purposes (Dieujuste, 2016). I conducted semistructured interviews to obtain participants' experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation, which is workplace misconduct in the study. I recorded and transcribed the semistructured interviews to analyze the data collected. I used qualitative, open-ended interview questions to allow participants to describe the phenomenon under investigation in their own words. I used the overarching research question to steer the directon of the interview process during the semistructured interviews and asked supporting questions to obtain additional information regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

Using interviewing as a method to collect data has a variety of advantages for the participants and the researcher (Yaman, 2017). For instance, using semistructured interviews allows the participants to elaborate on their answers and researchers are also able to ask clarifying questions (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Yaman, 2017). Researchers are able to establish a relationship with the participants as well as answer any questions the participants may have regarding the study (Thompson et al., 2016). Researchers develop rapport with the participants, which invites participants to ask clarifying questions (Cargill, 2018). Researchers conduct face-to-face interviews to observe the participants reactions, such as nonverbal communication, when answering questions or describing their experiences with the phenomenon (Wilkinson, 2016). I conducted face-to-face interviews to allow study participants to elaborate on their answers and asked clarifying questions, established a relationship with the participants, answered any

questions the participants had regarding the study, and developed rapport with the participants to invite them to ask clarifying questions. I observed participants' nonverbal language cues during the interviews.

Using interviews to collect data has disadvantages, which affect the quality of the data the researchers collect (He, 2019). Among the disadvantages of using interviews in data collection is that participants may feel nervous and uncomfortable about the researchers recording their voices and perceive interviews as intrusive (Wilkinson, 2016). Regarding disadavantages of using interviews that researchers may encounter, a common disadvantage is that novice researchers may have difficulties with the interview process because of the lack of experience (He, 2019). Conducting interviews is a method of data collection that is time consuming (Yin, 2018). In addition, participants may introduce bias into the study when trying to please the researcher or giving the researcher pleasing answers instead of their true experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The views and body language of the researcher may influence the responses of the particpants (Cargill, 2018). I used interviews to collect data and, knowing the disadvantages of using interviews, I ensured the participants were comfortable with the fact that I recorded their voices when answering interview questions. I conducted my research thoroughly and rehearsed the interview process to prepare for participant interviews. In addition, I asked the participants to discuss their true experiences and ensured that my views and body language did not have an influence on participants' responses.

Researchers use pilot interviews for their interview protocol testing (Mikhaylova, 2016). Receiving feedback from potential participants regarding the overall structure of,

and experience with, semistructured interviews is critical (Cargill, 2018). Researchers use this feedback to refine the interview protocol and improve the quality of data collected (He, 2019). Researchers should hold at least one complete pilot interiew with a potential participant selected from the pool of eligible participants (Mikhaylova, 2016). I conducted a pilot interview with a potential participant that I selected from the pool of eligible participants, once I received IRB approval. I utilized feedback from the pilot interview to make appropriate changes to the interview protocol.

Researchers use member checking to allow participants to review their interview transcripts to make corrections and verify their responses (Zhao, 2014). Participants provide clarifying information through the member checking process (Thirusha & Neil, 2018). Researchers use member checking for improving the credibility of data (Caretta, 2015). Thirusha and Neil (2018) warned about the disadvantages of using member checking, including the possibility of making the assumptions that participants not making any comments would mean consent when the particpants may not have read the transcripts. Another disadvantage of member checking is that participants may not understand the manner in which they could disagree with text in the transcript or may feel forced to accept the summaries as presented (Caretta, 2015).

I used semistructured, face-to-face interviews to collect data from participants. I ensured that the interview guide aligned with the overarching research question for this study. I used the interview questions as a guide to conduct interviews effectively, considering the uniqueness of each interview. To mitigate bias, I used member checking by recording and transcribing all of the participants' answers to the interview questions

and asked the participants to review my interpretation of their responses to ensure the accuracy of participants' responses and increase the validity of this study.

I used document analysis as an additional source of data collection. Document analysis is one of the various research methods available to researchers when collecting data (Vincent & Ogier, 2019). Usually, data included in documents are in a text, graphic, or picture format (Oni, 2016). Researchers develop a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation when using document analysis in conjunction with semistructured interviews and improve the study's rigor because researchers are able to conduct data triangulation (He, 2019; Rodriguez & Silveira, 2017). Annual reports, financial statements, and budgets are examples of organizational documents useful for document analysis (Rodriguez & Silveira, 2017).

Document analysis has disadvantages that researchers must not ignore. For instance, risks associated with reviewing a document created by an individual having a specific personal interest exist (Zhao, 2014). Researchers must consider the organizational's purpose of each document developed (Dewandre & Orsolya, 2018). Researchers must not assume that documents include an accurate representation of events because documents inevitably contain the author's perspective. Another disadvantage of using document analysis is that the researchers would struggle in gaining access to such documentation (Sardar & Ansari, 2018). Several advantages of document analysis exist. For instance, researchers are able to triangulate data collected from various sources (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2016). Researchers use document analysis to discover new themes or topics that may require additional exploration and to obtain detailed information

regarding the case study, such as details of the events and spelling of names (Zhao, 2014). I asked the appropriate people for access to documents with the case organization after I received IRB approval to conduct this research study. I asked for organizational documents related to the overarching research question for this study to analyze the documents. I triangulated data collected from conducting semistructured interviews and engaged in document analysis to confirm themes, discover new themes and topics that require further exploration, and obtain names of events and stakeholders.

Data Organization Techniques

Fletcher and Islam (2015) recommended that researchers conducting qualitative studies should find a suitable process to organize data prior to data analysis. Researchers with organized data conduct more rigorous research studies (Cooper, 2017). Organizing qualitative data is essential to the success of the research study, similarly, to organizing quantitative data in a database (Cooper, 2017). By importing the raw data into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program from my computer's hard drive, I improved data organization. Researchers analyze and organize data efficiently by using CAQDAS (Krcal & Naxera, 2018). The researcher must organize and analyze data and use CAQDAS to enhance the data analysis process (Niedbalski & Slezak, 2016).

The participants in the study received unique participant codes for confidentiality purposes, as recommended by Horne and Paul (2019). I assigned individual identifiers to participants that consisted of the letter P and a number for the participating organization. For instance, I used P1, P2, and P3. I ensured that any identifying information did not

appear in the transcripts. Horne and Paul recommended changing the names of participants, any names mentioned by participants, and the places mentioned by participants to ensure confidentiality. I transcribed the interviews, removed any identifying information, and allocated the participant identifying code to the interview transcript.

Researchers should use a reflective journal to demonstrate transparency of the research process and to receive assistance in the bracketing process (Apsari, 2018; Hussein, 2018). Researchers should also use a reflective journal to record the research steps and capture descriptions related to the reactions of participants to interviews or descriptions of the settings (Hussein, 2018). I kept an electronic reflective journal to document the interview process and setting, recorded ideas during document review, made decisions about coding, and made theme-identification decisions to ensure transparency.

Researchers must understand the importance of not retaining data longer than required and keeping the data secured (Greengard, 2019). Researchers must adopt best practices to ensure adequate data protection during and after conducting the research study (Greengard, 2019). Some of the best practices are to (a) identify the reason for collecting data, (b) receive participants' consent, (c) collect only the data needed for the research study, (d) use the data only for the purpose of the study, (e) retain information only as long as needed, and (f) secure the information. I collected and stored all the research documents on a password-protected flash drive. I will keep any physical documents in a locked drawer in my residence for a period of 5 years. Following Walden

University's IRB guidelines, I will destroy the flash drive and shred paper copies after 5 years from graduation.

Data Analysis

The use of multiple sources of data is one of the characteristics of case study research (Lee, 2018). Researchers use one of the four types of triangulation, which are investigator, theory, methodological, and data to analyze data collected (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2016). Interviews and document analysis are the data collection procedures when using a methodological triangulation (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2016). The researcher triangulates data using interview data and document analysis to explore phenomena from different perspectives (Natalia & Rodrigo, 2017). The researcher is able to show the richness and depth of the data by applying methodological triangulation (Dennis, 2017; Habib et al., 2017). I used methodological triangulation to analyze the data collected from semistructured interviews and document analysis. Using methodological triangulation allowed me to reveal the richness and depth of data collected from various sources, confirming the validity, credibility, and authenticity of the data, analysis, and interpretation.

Qualitative data collection and analysis processes often run parallel to one another (Humble & Green, 2016). Three methods exist to analyze qualitative data, which are thematic, content, and discourse analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum, 2017). The researcher has to read the transcripts more than once to get a better feel for the text when using thematic analysis (Fourie & de Vries, 2017). Some researchers use CAQDAS, such as DeDoose, to help with ordering, analyzing, and classifying data (Moore & Ginsburg,

2017). Researchers use CAQDAS to facilitate the identification of relationships and themes (Niedbalski & Slezak, 2016).

I used DeDoose to import transcript notes and interview records after the interviews using the interview protocol (see Appendix A). I used a data analysis method known as the meaningful unit analysis. A meaningful unit analysis includes a phrase, word, or a letter (Zhou, 2018). The researcher identifies meaningful units regardless of length, instead of following a line-by-line or word-by-word analysis (Zhao, 2016). The researcher assigns labels to the meaningful units of the transcript and assigns labels to all transcripts (Zhao, 2016). Using the *Insert Comment* function in Microsoft Word for all notes and transcripts helps the researcher with an audit trail and improves the validity of the analysis process (Matthes & Ball, 2018). The researcher is able to use this feature to identify, highlight, and tag every meaningful unit using a description for external parties to verify (Matthes & Ball, 2018). A great option for researchers is to keep a reflective journal while interviewing to capture background information, themes, and context to review at a later time (Hussein, 2018).

Documents related to the participating organizations are the second source of data triangulation. Many options are available with data analysis methods for document-review data analysis (Khatri & Samuel, 2019). Some of the options include content analysis and thematic analysis (Gengxin & Sheng, 2018). I conducted content analysis for document analysis related to this study. The researcher is able to identify emerging themes and systematically identify codes by using content analysis to analyze data (Heroux-Legault, 2017). There are three phases in document analysis, which are

preparation, organization, and report generation (Al-bulushi & Ismail, 2017). I imported

in PDF format relevant document files into DeDoose for preparation, organization, and

generation of reports. While the preparation phase included selecting and sense-making

of suitable units of analysis, the organization phase included assigning codes to the data

and categorizing the data.

During the interview process, I took notes and provided background and context

to interviews, which allowed me to have a better understanding of participants'

responses. Researchers should engage in memo writing in order to keep account of

reflections and thoughts as the researcher moves between analysis of transcripts (Levita

et al., 2016). Researchers group similar labels together to form themes from the data

(Levita et al., 2016). Researchers use concept mapping and mind maps to help with the

analysis and interpretation of data (Fraser, 2016). Researchers map concepts into themes

to provide a map indicating any connections between themes and concepts (Fraser, 2016).

I used concept mapping and mind maps to identify themes, show the various connections

between the emerged themes and current literature, and demonstrate the manner in which

themes relate to the conceptual framework I selected for this study.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative studies, researchers establish reliability and validity by addressing

four widely accepted criteria, which are confirmability, transferability, dependability, and

credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tokudome et al., 2017). Researchers trust these four

criteria to address the equivalent of quantitative research's reliability and validity

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tokudome et al., 2017).

Reliability

Qualitative researchers have concerns about establishing reliability and invest much effort in finding instruments and measurements that are reliable to ensure the reliability of study results (Biasutti, 2019; Jamous & Balijepalli, 2018). Several researchers suggest using several sources of evidence in a case study to include interviews, documentation, and observations (Ahmed & Shirahada, 2017; Joshi & Pindoriya, 2018). Researchers should understand that no source has a complete advantage over other sources, certain sources are highly complementary, and researchers conducting case study research should use many sources (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Weick, 2018).

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions (Jain & Tiwari, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I used a panel of experts to explain, describe, and explore the phenomena under investigation to enhance the dependability of the study, as Yin (2018) recommended. Using the same interview questions with all the study participants enhances the dependability of a research study (Govender, 2018; Li & Chen, 2018). I asked participants the same interview questions to enhance the dependability of the study. Experts recommend researchers use member checking to confirm data dependability (Ginter & Braun, 2017). I used member checking by interpreting participants' responses to interview questions, giving participants my interpretation of their responses to interview questions, and asking participants to verify that my interpretation of their responses is accurate and complete. The purpose of member checking is for participants to verify their answers are accurate and check for any errors (Govender, 2018). A good way to ensure the researcher does not have any bias with the

facts is the use of member checking to increase data dependability (Govender, 2018; Zhang, 2018).

The researcher can review and reflect on what the interviewee states by recording the interview session, increasing the reliability of transcripts and themes (Chakraborty & Logan, 2018; Gonzalez, 2017, 2018). To avoid adding my biases, I ensured that the interviewees explained their answers with sufficient details. When participants' answers were not sufficient, I asked participants to elaborate on their answers. I also used member checking to mitigate bias. Several authors suggest not to discuss any details about the study prior to the interview to avoid tainting the perspectives of participants (Jones & Reeve, 2018; Silverman, 2017). I followed the interview protocol and did not ask any additional questions to achieve consistency and to increase reliability.

Validity

Confirmability, credibility, and transferability are part of the validation framework of a research study (Bragge et al., 2017). Researchers use the case study design with a repetitive process to collect data, which compares across and within participants for research validity to ensure credibility (Babatunde et al., 2016; Friemel & Bonfadelli, 2016). The credibility of the data analysis will depend on the representation and inclusiveness of the data as a whole, particularly when only one researcher is analyzing the data (Haegele & Buckley, 2019; Schmeller, 2019). Researchers should thoroughly read the interview transcripts to help establish credibility (Schmeller, 2019). I reviewed the interview transcripts thoroughly to ensure I captured every aspect of the participant's views. I focused on the differences and similarities across and within the

study participants. I conducted member checking once I transcribed and prior to analyzing data to ensure I captured the validity of the interview data.

Transferability is whether study results from one study apply to other studies (Liasidou, 2015; Lyle, 2018). I used a pilot test through which I interviewed an individual from the participant pool using semistructured interviews to gain transferability. I selected suitable study participants, obtained detailed participants' demographic information, and reported results in an intuitive format to increase the transferability of the study.

Researchers establish confirmability after they ensure dependability, credibility, and transferability (Cor, 2016). Confirmability refers to the ability that the researchers have to demonstrate that the data collected from study participants is the actual interpretation of participants' responses to interview questions without the researchers' biases (McAuliffe & McGann, 2016). I ensured that I transcribed responses to interview questions, linked data to results, and used current literature to enhance the confirmability of the study results.

Several experts recommend methodological triangulation because it improves the validity of a case study (Fischer & Van de Bovenkamp, 2019; Hejji, 2019). The use of methodological triangulation includes the use of multiple sources to provide confirmation of a research study findings (Kaivo-Oja, 2017). I used methodological triangulation by collecting data from conducting semistructured interviews and analyzing company documents. I used member checking once I transcribed interview data. Experts suggest methodological triangulation of data sources is the main strategy that supports the

principles of research validity in case studies because the case study design has a foundation in collecting data from various sources (Joslin & Muller, 2016; Kok & Jarodzka, 2016).

I continued to analyze data until I reached data saturation. Data saturation is when no additional data collection and analysis can provide any new, meaningful information because data become replicated or redundant (Davydenko, 2016; Glenn & Urquhart, 2019). Researchers are not able to derive conclusive findings without data saturation (Asoodeh & Shadizadeh, 2015; Zhang & Li, 2018). I continued to collect and analyze data until I reached data saturation, which is the point when no new themes emerge from new data. Data saturation was achieved by the third participant so additional interviews were not needed.

Transition and Summary

Section 1 included a discussion of the foundation of the study; background of the study; problem statement; purpose statement; nature of the study; research questions; interview questions; conceptual framework; definition of terms; assumption, limitations, and delimitations; significance of the study, and review of the literature. Section 2 included a discussion of the purpose statement, role of the researcher, research participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis technique, and reliability and validity of the study. Section 3 includes the presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social

change, recommendation for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusions.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 3, I restate the purpose of the study and the overarching research question and present the study findings. Section 3 also includes the applications to professional practice, implications for positive social change, and recommendations for action and future study. Finally, Section 3 includes my personal reflections, summary, and conclusions.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. I completed individual face-to-face and Zoom interviews with three business leaders with successful experience in using strategies to investigate workplace misconduct complaints for at least 5 years and managing a manufacturing facility located in Fulton County, Georgia. I used other sources of data, including the organization's employee handbook, workplace violence policy, and anti-harassment policy. Two themes emerged as a result of data analysis: improved process for handling workplace misconduct investigations and decreased employees' perception of favoritism.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative multiple case study was the following: What strategies do business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct? To answer the overarching research question, I conducted semistructured interviews with business leaders and reviewed organizational documentation and artifacts. Two themes emerged from analyses of all data collected: improved process for

handling workplace misconduct investigations and decreased employees' perception of favoritism. I assigned the following codes to the three participants: P1, P2, and P3.

Theme 1: Improved Process for Handling Workplace Misconduct Investigations

The first theme that emerged from analysis of the data was an improved process for handling workplace misconduct investigations. All participants began misconduct investigations by ensuring the employees involved did not feel attacked or threatened. All participants were honest during the investigation process. The three participants stated that some company leaders were either ignoring complaints of workplace misconduct or failing to investigate all complaints of workplace misconduct thoroughly. All participants reported that they realized that some company leaders were not always giving allegations of workplace misconduct serious consideration, resulting in employees no longer feeling comfortable in reporting incidents of workplace misconduct.

P2 noted that when an employee submits a complaint of suspected workplace misconduct, the complaint prompts an investigation. P2 pointed out that they had to make contact with the employee being accused and any witnesses. Before interviewing other employees, P2 reviewed information received from the complainant, accused employee, and any witnesses to determine if further information is needed.

P1 admitted to reviewing the company's policies to determine the policy category the suspected workplace misconduct violated. P1 noted that they collect all company electronic devices until the investigation is complete. P1 pointed out that the investigation process begins as soon as the complaint arrives.

P3 noted there are times when their company uses a third-party to handle complaints involving C-suite employees due to the business relationship with executives. P3 noted that if the employee is not a C-suite employee, they make the employee feel comfortable by holding the investigation interview in a conference room or an off-site location, such as a coffee shop. P3 stated that they would sit next to the employee during the investigation interview instead of sitting across from the employee or at the head of the table. Additionally, P3 shared that employees react to this approach by opening up because they do not feel threatened.

Business leaders need to take an unbiased approach and keep the investigation conversational to ensure employees understand the purpose of the investigation meeting (P3). In addition, P3 stated that "there have been times during an investigation where witnesses had to come back to answer additional questions, depending on additional information received from other employees." P3 also emphasized the importance of documenting everything during the investigation to ensure all information received is reviewed before rendering a decision. Company policies are used to decide the outcome and, depending on the severity of the complaint and the evidence provided, an employee had to be suspended or moved to a temporary job until the investigation was completed (P3). A suspension or removal from the work area depends on the reaction of the employees subjected to the investigation (P3).

P2 ensures all employees understand that the information they would provide during the investigation would be kept confidential. P2 stated, "I never ran into an issue where the information from an investigation was shared with other employees." Keeping

the information confidential allows employees to trust the organization's leaders whenever there was an issue (P2). As a result, employees are more willing to bring issues to the organizational leaders to investigate without the concern of causing tension to the work environment (P2).

P3 talked about the importance of building relationships with employees in the organization. P3 stated that "when leaders build relationships with employees, it helps leaders resolve conflict." This approach allows employees to report complaints or concerns of workplace misconduct. Many employees are not honest with organizational leaders if employees do not trust leaders or perceive that leaders do not handle their complaints appropriately (P3). One of the best strategies in enhancing employee relations is to "show employees they can trust you" (P3). Establishing a presence in the workplace by walking around and engaging in simple conversations with employees is very important (P3). P3 also stated that this conversation-rich approach "will allow employees to visit human resources whenever they have issues, regardless of the kind and seriousness of the issue." When there is a concern or complaint reported and the severity of the issue is low, the concern or complaint can be resolved by taking an action as simple as bringing in both employees to have a conversation (P3). In addition, P3 shared experiences as a human resources (HR) leader investigating workplace misconduct, and ways the misconduct can possibly end in a concern being resolved amongst the employees. P3 stated that "by having a conversation with the employees involved the issue can be resolved without further investigation or disciplinary actions."

P1 stated that "all employees understand the policies and procedures in the organization." P1 referenced setting a precedent in which employees were aware that if a concern or complaint were reported, the company would investigate that complaint or concern immediately. P1 stated that "other employees will observe to see what is going to happen to another employee," trying to determine if there was a violation of company policy. When employees understand they will be held accountable for their actions, they are less likely to violate company policy (P1). All employees receive and sign an acknowledgement form to show they received and understand the company's rules and policies (P1). In addition, when the organization stands behind its policies and holds employees accountable, other employees refrain from engaging in practices that may violate company policy (P1). Furthermore, P1 highlighted the importance of consistency by creating an environment in which employees respond positively to strategies used during the investigation progress. P1 deduced that "it is also important as an HR leader to be objective when conducting workplace misconduct investigations."

P2 stated that a best practice in the organization is to make sure employees are provided with the company policies when addressing concerns of misconduct during an investigation. There is information in the anti-harassment policy that advises employees to raise their concerns to their managers and, if the employees do not feel comfortable speaking with their managers, to seek help from human resources (P2). Furthermore, P2 shared that when an employee files a complaint with a manager or someone at the human resources department, an investigation begins promptly. P2 stated, "it is important to

reiterate to the employee the process the company takes to handle the investigation promptly."

P3 stated that "building trust with the employees" helps to rebrand human resources and is a more positive approach in reinforcing investigation strategies. P3 retrained all members of management on various leadership fundamentals regarding employee relations. Furthermore, P3 explained that the training was based on interactive situations and real-life issues that took place in the workplace. P3 provided examples of the training needed and stated that "once the training was completed, all leaders were held accountable; the expectation was for leaders to hold the employees accountable for their actions" to decrease the incidents of workplace misconduct.

After reviewing company documents, entitled Anti-Harassment Policy, Workplace Violence Policy, and Employee Handbooks, I gained a better understanding of the information the participants provided. The documents reviewed were in line with the way participants conducted investigations of workplace misconduct. In addition, the participants shared the importance of treating all parties involved in the investigation in the same way and allowing all employees the opportunity to provide their version of the events that occurred. Furthermore, the three leader participants revealed that some employees are reluctant to provide information about the investigation out of fear of retaliation.

The information included in the company policy is in line with the participants' claims that leaders have a responsibility to ensure the employee understands the confidentiality of the investigation and the importance of helping to resolve the issue. All

participants reported that if the investigation relates to a person in authority, there are

guidelines to follow to ensure the victim or witnesses do not receive any form of

retaliation from a leader subjected to an investigation. Similarly, all participants shared

that once they complete an investigation, they review company documentation, such as

policies and handbooks, and provide a recommendation. All participants noted that the

outcome from the recommendation depends on the severity of the complaint. For

instance, there have been times when the legal department had to get involved to review

investigation documents and provide its recommendations.

P1 discussed a company policy found in the employee handbook that entails the

investigation process. Specifically, P1 shared the code of conduct policy from the

employee handbook and showed me the text related to the consequences an employee

would face when violating the policy and the position the company would take to

investigate and render a decision. P1 noted that all employees must sign a form in which

they agree that they have received a copy of the company policy and that they have read

it and will abide by it.

Correlation to the Literature

The findings noted in Theme 1 aligned with the findings of Wolf (2019) in that

once a concern or complaint of workplace misconduct is reported, leaders should follow

three stages to handle the investigation effectively. The first stage of an investigation is

the pre-investigation. The pre-investigation is when leaders have the complainant

document the complaint in writing (Wolf, 2019). Furthermore, in the pre-investigation

stage, steps may be taken to separate the complainant from the alleged accuser to ensure no retaliation will occur (Wolf, 2019).

Meissner and Lyles (2019) asserted that in the next stage of the investigation, leaders begin talking to witnesses and the alleged accuser. During this stage in the investigation process, Wolf (2019) noted leaders must use an unbiased approach to avoid the employees' perception of the unfair way leaders usually handle complaints or concerns of incidents or workplace misconduct when reported. It is recommended to avoid judgment, use empathy, and apply a collaborative approach to ensure that all parties involved will cooperate willingly (Brimbal et al., 2019). Metcalfe et al. (2019) noted that when a person is stressed or traumatized, the person may provide inconsistent statements, hindering the investigation process.

In this study, all participants developed a report related to the investigation of an incident of workplace misconduct at the end of the process. The final stage is the post-investigation where the leader focuses on the investigation report (Wolf, 2019). All participants in this study ensured that all parties involved in the investigation would provide statements about the case. Meissner and Lyles (2019) asserted that leaders must ensure they receive and review all statements from all parties involved. In this study, all leaders focused on facts to determine whether an incident of workplace misconduct had occurred that violated company policy or the law. Leaders must stick to the facts, look at the big picture, and review company documents to determine whether the conduct was a violation of a company policy or a federal, state, or local law (Arlen & Buell, 2019).

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 1 aligns with Adams' (1963) equity theory because the facets of perception rely on the employees thinking that they will receive equitable treatment from leaders. In the context of this study, leaders should address employees' perceptions of unfair and inequitable treatment effectively instead of ignoring employees' perceptions. Wolf (2019) noted that leaders should address employees' perceptions that the investigation was not handled appropriately by identifying those employee perceptions of unfairness and injustice. Furthermore, this approach may help leaders develop strategies to investigate complaints or concerns of incidents or workplace misconduct.

When employees experience workplace misconduct, the perception is that the organization will not be fair during the investigation process, which may cause severe ramifications and turnover (Medina-Craven & Ostermeier, 2020). This perception is tied to low morale and decreased productivity, job satisfaction, and cooperation among employees (Bao et al., 2020). Adam' (1963) equity theory is a model of motivation that focuses on the way individuals strive for fairness and justice. In Theme 1, business leaders provided strategies used to ensure fairness and justice when investigating complaints or concerns of incidents of workplace misconduct. Regardless of leaders' perceptions regarding the fairness of organizational policy, the most important element for employees is to see that leaders' handle complaints fairly, giving everyone equal treatment (Meissner & Lyles, 2019).

Theme 2: Decreased Employees' Perception of Favoritism

The second theme that emerged from analyses of data was that leaders' decreased employees' perceptions of favoritism. All participants shared that enforcing policies and procedures improved the perception of favoritism. All participants explained that leadership training also helped ensure workplace misconduct complaints were handled effectively. All participants advised that following and enforcing policies as well as local, state, and federal laws prevented favoritism.

P1 stated that "the code of ethics policy applies to everyone; egregious behavior and conflict of interests are strictly prohibited." P1 advised that, to decrease favoritism, all employees are held to the same standards. P1 pointed out that the employees are bound by contract to understand the behaviors that could lead to an investigation. In other words, by signing their contracts, employees acknowledge that they have read and understood the type of behaviors that could lead to an investigation of workplace misconduct. P1 further explained that "noncontract employees are provided with a handbook, which lays out the policies," and all employees are required to sign an acknowledgment that they received the handbook and policies. P1 noted "when conducting investigations, all are treated the same to deter the perception of favoritism."

P1 stated, "in addition to policies written in handbooks, the state requires mandated training each year, and this is included in the handbook." The additional training help leaders understand the importance of being consistent and fair when handling investigations. P1 also noted, "some things are common sense, and we should not have to put them in a handbook." However, P1 informed me that it is necessary to

have guidelines in the handbook to ensure employees are aware of the expectations. P1 pointed out that leaders must follow the handbook guidelines to ensure all employees do not have notions of favoritism. P1 explained, "in my experience, investigations revealed that people had violated policies intentionally, it is my job to investigate in a fairly manner. Believe it or not, others are watching to see if there will be consequences." Most favoritism acts open the door to more severe misconduct allegations, even though they are not all illegal. Additionally, leaders should be aware of favoritism-related issues. For instance, when employees perceive that favoritism exists, leaders should revise policies and procedures (Muller, 2020).

P1 stated, "when going into a role, you inherit the culture that was built before you." P1 further explained, "anytime you're trying to change a culture, it's like turning around the battleship, you can turn it around, but it's not quick work." P1 also stated, "one of the biggest barriers for any leader is coming behind the leader that preceded them and trying to make sense out of the current culture." P1 mentioned, "you can't come in like a raging bull and strip the current culture down and build it up in a week." P1 explained the importance of learning to prioritize things by importance and gauge the organization's readiness for change.

P1 explained that "when you work in an environment where people hate changes, they hate anything new, this includes a new leader." P1 stated, "when you come in as new leader where the perception is, we do what we want, and you have to conduct an investigation, it takes time to turn that perception around." P1 noted, "as a leader, you begin the investigation and look to see if there was a substantial reason to believe that

you had a misconduct." P1 ensures that when there is a change in the culture, the perception of favoritism decreases. P1 provided an example of an employee stealing company time. P1 said, "employees will share the results of what happened to someone. Johnny was over there riding the clock, and nothing happened to Johnny, but Sue did the same thing and was reprimanded." Both are examples of workplace misconduct, but one was not addressed, and the other one was, explained P1.

P1 advised, "you're going to face some headwinds when you work to overcome a barrier." One of the things P1 did was to get all leaders onboard to ensure consistency and fairness. P1 stated, "hey, this is what HR is doing, and we have to all enforce the policies in the same manner." Following policies and procedures will help decrease favoritism, which helps change the culture (Muller, 2020). P1 noted, "I have employees that are happy with the changing culture, and they want to know how they are doing. They want to ensure they are not violating any policies." P1 commented, "it is important to provide training to employees to help them understand a hostile work environment and get the staff up to speed on workplace misconduct." P1 further stated, "mandated training and redeveloping the company handbook are ways to mitigate the risk of workplace misconduct and perception of how investigations are handled."

P2 stated, "we have a standard policy if there's a concern or complaint. We advise in the policy on how to go about addressing concerns." This is a part of the policy the organization has in place for reporting concerns. P2 added, "you always reference the handbook as this helps to set the stage for consistency." Following policies will deter the perception that leaders negatively address incidents of suspected workplace misconduct.

For example, P2 ensures that investigations are handled effectively, and leaders are fair and consistent when enforcing policies.

P2 stated, "one of the barriers to handling workplace investigations is when the witnesses discuss the matter of the investigation with others versus maintaining confidentiality." When information about an investigation leaks, P2 noted, "employees will repeat things they hear, secondhand information, which could be incorrect information." P2 concluded, "I decreased favoritism by asking all employees involved in the investigation process to refrain from discussing the investigation with others." When employees refrain from discussing the investigation with others, it decreases favoritism because employees will not know how the investigation was handled (Muller, 2020).

P3 stated, "HR had to build the trust with the employees, to rebrand the department. The rebranding of HR took about six months; however, rebranding HR was a huge help in decreasing favoritism in the workplace." P3 was confident that HR's rebranding helped change the perception of how leaders were handling complaints and concerns about suspected workplace misconduct. P3 explained, "one of the things we did for the first year was provided training to leaders," which included fundamental management training and employee relations training. P3 discussed, "it was interactive-situations training based on a real-life situation that took place in the organization." The training provided to the leaders helped the organization hold leaders accountable for their actions if a complaint or concern was not handled appropriately. If an organization holds its leaders accountable, it will help decrease favoritism issues (Muller, 2020).

P3 stated, "if employees came to HR without speaking to their managers, we would ask that the employees have the conversation with their manager before coming to HR." P3 encouraged employees to communicate with their managers to allow the managers the opportunity to help resolve any complaints or concerns about suspected workplace misconduct. Leaders in the organization should build relationships with their direct reports equally, as these relationships help to decreasing the perception of favoritism (Muller, 2020). P3 informed me that "using this strategy helped build confidence and trust amongst the organization's leaders and employees."

P3 stated, "we have the progressive discipline steps to handle disciplinary situations." P3 highlighted the importance of leaders enforcing the policies and handling all disciplinary issues accordingly. P3 also advised the way they will look at local, state, and federal laws to determine any violations when handling complaints or concerns of suspected workplace misconduct. P3 mentioned, "consistency, training, and earning the employees trust helps decrease favoritism." P3 explained that organizations would improve if their leaders do not take anything personally and train everyone in the organization the right way to handle complaints of workplace misconduct.

P1 shared the code of ethics policy with me to review the company's expectations for all employees to decrease favoritism in the workplace. P1 explained that "leaders receive standards of behavior training to ensure fairness and equal treatment." P1 pointed out the specific language in the code of ethics policy that explains expectations from leaders and nonleaders. After reviewing the code of ethics policy, I gained a better

understanding of the importance that P1's organization places in treating everyone fairly and equally to decrease favoritism in the workplace.

P3 shared the progressive discipline policy with me that entails the way leaders should handle various violations to decrease favoritism. P3 highlighted the importance of following all company policies contained in the employee handbook to further deter possibilities of favoritism in the organization. P3 made an emphasis on the section in the employee handbook that refers to retaliation. P3 stated that a retaliation policy that is enforced to all employees and not just a few, decreases employees' perceptions of favoritism. For example, two employees, such as Y and X, reported that a leader was involved in unethical acts, the leader began retaliating against employee Y; however, employee X did not receive retaliation from the leader. P3 further stated that this is an example of a perception of favoritism towards employee X because the leader used retaliation tactics towards employee Y and not employee X. P3 advised that, "having a retaliation policy in place, sets the tone of expectations of all employees." During the review of the retaliation policy, the policy further contains consequences of anyone violating the policy to include termination of employment. P3 added, "when employees see leaders following and enforcing policies, that alone decreases the perception of favoritism in the workplace."

Correlation to the Literature

The findings noted in Theme 2 align with Mackey et al.'s (2016) study because certain behaviors, such as workplace romance, sexual harassment, nepotism, and bullying, can cause perceptions of favoritism if the complaints or concerns are reported

but are not handled appropriately. In the context of this study, leaders should ensure they are following all policies and procedures and are consistent and fair to all employees to decrease employees' perceptions of favoritism. If employers do not address policy violations appropriately or are ineffective when communicating the expectations, the employee perception of favoritism arises, along with other issues, such as workplace violence and bullying behavior (Coetzee & Van Dyk, 2017). Organizational leaders must handle workplace misconduct appropriately to decrease or eliminate any employee perception of favoritism in the workforce. The information found in the anti-harassment policy enabled me to understand the organization's expectations for employees regarding appropriate incident-reporting methods and processes that lead to a decrease in employee perception of favoritism.

One of the strategies organizations use to decrease favoritism was to implement a nepotism policy (Akca, 2020). It is not unusual for organizations to hire family members; however, doing so can cause perception of favoritism if one of the family members is in a leadership role. According to Akca (2020), selecting and promoting family members is known as nepotism and employees will see this as favoritism among family members if leaders do not treat all employees equally. Mackey et al. (2016) used effective measures to hold leaders accountable for their actions when failing to correct inappropriate behaviors. Holding leaders accountable encourages positive reinforcement and decreases favoritism in the workplace (Mackey et al., 2016). Wolf (2019) recommended that leaders communicate and use a collaborative approach to decrease employee perception of favoritism in the workplace.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 2 aligns with Adam's equity theory because when employees perceive

they are not being treated equally, employees will perceive that favoritism exists in the

workplace. In Adam's equity theory, employees feeling that they are receiving

inequitable treatment are not motivated, which may cause increased perceptions of

favoritism particularly if other employees are treated better with everything else being

equal. Furthermore, favoritism is a sign of poor management behaviors, as employees

would like to receive fair treatment and managers practicing favoritism in the workplace

cause increased employee perceptions of favoritism (Wolf, 2019). Favoritism in the

workplace has the potential to create an uncertain environment, which will cause the

motivation of others to decrease and their perception of favoritism to increase (Shaheen

et al., 2020). Business leaders should reduce favoritism by enforcing policies equally

with all employees and holding all employees violating company policies accountable for

their actions.

If employees experience that leaders engage in favoritism in the workplace, the

employee perception is that the organization will not be fair when policy violations are

investigated (Medina-Craven & Ostermeier, 2020). If a leader tolerates unacceptable

behavior, such as sexual harassment and workplace violence, or a leader does not address

policy violations, employees will feel that the leaders will not handle any complaints or

concerns of suspected workplace misconduct effectively, resulting in an increase in

employee perception of favoritism (Akca, 2020). Furthermore, employees perceive that

favoritism exists by looking at the evidence of negative consequences or lack of equity;

employees lose trust in their leaders in the organization (Shaheen et al., 2020). One basic premise of Adam's equity theory is the assumption that people are motivated according to the reciprocity to their perception of fair treatment. Once employees are motivated and receive fair treatment, employee perception of favoritism in the workplace decreases.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. I used a multiple case study design to highlight the experiences of three business leaders in the manufacturing sector with successful strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. I found that all participants successfully handled complaints of workplace misconduct by improving the process for handling workplace misconduct investigations and decreasing employees' perception of favoritism.

Adam's (1963) equity theory of employee perception was the conceptual framework used to guide this case study research. The results of this qualitative case study aligned with Adam's equity theory of employee perception because the facets of perception rely on the employees feeling that they will receive equitable treatment from leaders. Wolf (2019) found that once a concern or complaint of workplace misconduct is reported, leaders should follow appropriate stages to handle the investigation effectively. In this study, all participants followed the appropriate steps to handle workplace misconduct investigations as soon as the complaint was reported. Incorporating the results of this case study into business goals could help organizations improve the investigation strategies to be significant to human resource leaders in the formation of

useful strategies to handle complaints of workplace misconduct and decrease employee perception of favoritism.

Human resource leaders could use the findings of this case study to implement the organization's workplace investigation process and decrease employees' perceptions of favoritism. Improving strategies used to handle complaints of workplace investigation would enable leaders to have an unbiased approach during the investigation process and allow the leader to focus on the factual statements from employees. These improvements will help leaders decrease the employees' perception of favoritism in the organization. Adam's (1963) equity theory of employee perception was the conceptual framework used to guide this case study research. The use of Adam's approach embodies factors for the employee perception that could encourage business leaders to evaluate the strategies the organization uses to handle complaints of workplace misconduct.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this case study may provide effective strategies business leaders could use to handle complaints of workplace misconduct, which could have a positive influence on the workforce. When organizational leaders create a positive workplace, they create a desirable work environment for the employees, which shows the community, society, organizations, and institutions surrounding the place of employment that leaders recognize their social responsibilities (Nielsen et al., 2017). When leaders do not handle cases of workplace misconduct effectively, leaders affect the relationships between employees, leaders, and the communities (Shaheen et al., 2020). The strategies used in this study may help leaders create positive outcomes in the organization and

develop opportunities for their employees to participate in activities geared to improve

social programs in the community. Reducing employees' perception of favoritism may

lead to a more productive workforce that can help build a positive brand for the

organization in the community.

The findings of this case study might positively impact social change by

eliminating negative perceptions, promoting workplace equality, and sustaining a

workforce able to continue to live and thrive in their neighborhoods. Additional

implications for positive social change rest in the development of partnerships between

the business leaders, employees, and community. When employees feel the workplace is

fair and equitable through internal process, they experience less stress, live happier lives

at home and in the community, and exhibit more willingness to remain in the

organization.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies

business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Based on the

findings in this study, business leaders should provide appropriate training to all

employees handling complaints of workplace misconduct to ensure these employees are

empowered to handle complaints more effectively. After reviewing the strategies, the

participants used, I propose two recommendations for action.

Organizational Policies

Leaders need to ensure that all employees read and understand organizational

policies about expectations related to interacting with others in the workplace. Those who

handle complaints of workplace misconduct need to enforce the organization policies. This case study's results disclosed that the business leaders need to improve how complaints of workplace misconduct are handled and to decrease the employee perception of favoritism. business leaders must decrease favoritism, enhance communication, and provide training to ensure all investigations of complaints of workplace misconduct are handled appropriately and consistently. I recommend that business leaders provide all employees with the proper training to ensure everyone understands the policies and procedures. Providing employees with training on policies may help them have a clear understanding of expectations. I further recommend that business leaders work on a strategic plan to ensure communication is provided for policy changes and updates.

Fair Treatment

I recommend that business leaders promote an environment of fair treatment. To sustain an environment of fair treatment, leaders may want to ensure they are being fair and consistent when enforcing policies. Leaders should adopt the behaviors of fair treatment by being honest and respectful to the employees. To promote a fair work environment, leaders should build a culture where people are treated equally. This may help with consistencies and fairness.

Each participant will receive a 1–2-page summary of my study findings. I also intend to publish this study on the ProQuest database of dissertations and theses to reach a greater audience in the human resources field and those responsible for handling

investigations of complaints of workplace misconduct. In addition, I plan to submit to an academic journal for review and potential publication.

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to handle complaints or incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively to avoid financial losses associated with lawsuits and litigation. The findings of this multiple case study were based on the knowledge of three leaders in the three different organizations in the State of Georgia with successful experience in handling workplace misconduct investigations. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that future researches conduct (a) similar case studies with business leaders in multiple business sectors to receive additional data on handling workplace misconduct investigations, (b) quantitative studies in which they would administer a questionnaire survey to business leaders regarding strategies used to handle cases of workplace misconduct investigations effectively, and (c) analyses of the behaviors of business leaders to see if there is a correlation to the reasons employees perceive favoritism once a complaint or concern is reported.

Reflections

My doctoral journey was challenging and eventful. This journey gave me the academic knowledge to help me overcome many barriers. My research, writing, communication, and organization skills improved significantly throughout this process. I gained knowledge in various ways to build the trust from employees. The intent of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to

investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. The participants for this study included three business leaders with experience in successfully handling workplace misconduct investigations.

The participant process was challenging towards the end due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I followed the interview protocol, processed the interviews, and used member checking. Participants provided valuable information on various strategies they used to effectively handle complaints of misconduct in the workplace. They shared their leadership skills, common sense, company policies, and applicable training to improve their process for handling workplace misconduct. I appreciate the work and efforts of the leaders who used internal processes to create a fair and consistent culture for reviewing workplace misconduct claims.

Summary and Study Conclusions

Business leaders must have knowledge and skills to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct effectively. According to Wolf (2019), leaders must use an unbiased approach to avoid the employees' perception of favoritism when handling cases of workplace misconduct. Employee perceptions of leaders' favoritism may cause low productivity and lack of trust in leaders of the organization. By identifying and understanding the causes of workplace misconduct, business leaders may incorporate the strategies that emerged from this study to handle complaints of misconduct effectively. When employees feel the process is confidential, fair, and consistent, they will likely speak up when they see or experience bad workplace behaviors.

The underlying reason for this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct. Two themes emerged from analyses of data collected in this case study: improved process for handling workplace misconduct investigations and decreased employees' perception of favoritism. By using the recommendations in this case study, business leaders can create a fair, consistent, and transparent process for handling workforce misconduct complaints that protect the confidentiality of the individuals involved and help support a healthy work environment.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Strategies to Handle Complaints or Incidents of Suspected Workplace Misconduct

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore strategies that business leaders use to handle complaints or incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively. The target population for this study will consist of business leaders having handled complaints or incidents of suspected workplace misconduct effectively in their business organizations located in the Southeastern United States. The social impact of this study may include an increased awareness by business leaders of the types of behaviors that lead to issues of workplace misconduct and the psychological impact it has on its victims. Awareness of these issues may lead to prevention.

Interviewee: _____

Location: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Notes:

1. Greet interviewee and introduction.

2. Provide overview of the study and advise on the usefulness of the results.

3. Retrieve a signed consent form. Open floor for questions interviewee may have.

4. Remind interviewee that the participation in the study is voluntary.

5. Remind interviewee data will be recorded and begin recording.

6. Begin interview by acknowledging interviewee by pre-assigned code name, date, time, and location.

7. Begin asking interview questions with time given to allow interviewee to respond.

8. Listen actively to interviewee. Ask follow up and probing questions if necessary.

9. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewee for their time and participation.

10. Provide contact information to participant in the event they have questions later on.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to successfully investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

2. How did your employees respond to those strategies?

3. How did you communicate the strategies for investigating complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

4. What policies and processes did you use to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

5. What barriers did you experience when implementing strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

6. How did you overcome the barriers to implementing strategies to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct in your organization?

7. What else would you like to add related to strategies used to investigate complaints of workplace misconduct?