

Voluntary turnover of high achievers: A systems psychodynamics analysis with CIBART



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Orientation: Voluntary turnover is a costly and frequently disruptive organisational phenomenon, particularly when it involves high achievers.

Research purpose: The study aimed to develop a psychodynamic exposé of voluntary turnover by applying the conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, roles and task (CIBART) model to the lived experiences of high achievers.

Motivation for the study: The research primarily focusses on voluntary turnover as an individual, rational decision-making process. It recognises the contribution of unconscious systems psychodynamics to voluntary turnover. Research conducted from this perspective is necessary to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the topic.

Research approach/design and method: Seven case studies of individual voluntary turnover were conducted in a large private retail company. Data were collected using free association narrative (FANI) interviews. The analysis of the data was guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, and the interpretive frame used was the CIBART model.

Main findings: Six themes were constructed to describe the conflict dynamics along each of the six CIBART dimensions. Within each theme, the conflict dynamic is exposed, revealing the subsequent anxiety and defences that accumulate leading to the decision to leave. Ultimately, the six themes synthesise to propose that voluntary turnover is a conscious manifestation, yet an unconscious defence against system-wide conflict.

Practical/managerial implications: Facilitating leaders' understanding and processing of the conflict dynamics that occur across the CIBART dimensions, and which contribute to voluntary turnover, create opportunities for both transformation and prevention.

Contribution/value-add: The research offers insights into the psychodynamics of voluntary turnover, which consulting psychologists and organisational leaders can utilise to address this phenomenon within their work groups.

Keywords: voluntary turnover; systems psychodynamics; CIBART; hermeneutic phenomenology; high achievers.

Introduction

Voluntary turnover incurs a significant financial loss, which has led to extensive and ongoing research efforts to predict and prevent it (Mitchell & Lee, 2001; Rothausen et al., 2017). Turnover is defined as voluntary when employees decide to resign at their own discretion. Being more prevalent among low performers and high performers (Trevor et al., 1997), it is especially concerning when high achievers decide to leave. Historically, researchers approached voluntary turnover from an economic standpoint, viewing people as capitalistic, individualistic and profit-seeking (March & Simons, 1958), neglecting to account for the emotional processes that work towards voluntary turnover. Transcending the view of people as purely capitalistic, recent research has established a link between voluntary turnover and job dissatisfaction (Porter & Steers, 1973), work engagement and burnout (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010), psychological needs satisfaction (Rothmann et al., 2013), and autonomy and empowerment (Liu et al., 2011). While acknowledging emotional experiences as a significant consideration for why people leave, research remained focussed on the linear cause-effect relationship between voluntary turnover and its antecedents and continues to define it as a decision elected by the individual employee (Naidoo, 2018). Literature thus emphasises voluntary turnover as an individualistic, rational decision-making phenomenon and continues to neglect its psychosocial nature, acknowledging

the systemic and psychodynamic (unconscious) processes underlying voluntary turnover.

The dynamic four-dimensional cusp-catastrophe model of turnover (Sheridan & Abelson, 1983) was seminal in acknowledging turnover to be a dynamic and nonlinear process, with multiple evolving factors impacting the decision to leave. Although limited, research has been conducted on the psychosocial aspects of voluntary turnover, specifically examining its relationship to social capital and reputation (Ballinger et al., 2015), job embeddedness (Jiang et al., 2012; Mitchell & Lee, 2001; Peltokorpi & Allen, 2024), culture (Aldhuwaihi & Shee, 2015), toxic leadership (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020; Sun & Wang, 2017) and organisational justice (Tayfur et al., 2013). These studies imply that social relationships and psychological attachments in the organisation relate to voluntary turnover and allude to the impact of systemic beneath-the-surface (unconscious) organisational behaviour on employees' turnover intentions. For example, the extreme emotional consequences of leaders' psychopathic behaviour on employees are reflected in their increased turnover intentions (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). This reflects their inclination to leave as a coping response to threatened self-esteem (Apostel et al., 2018). These studies indicate that the psychosocial aspects of voluntary turnover ought to be considered. This article argues voluntary turnover as comprising systemic and psychodynamic processes that work towards it as a phenomenon.

Research purpose

The purpose of the study was to develop a system psychodynamic expose of voluntary turnover by applying the conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, roles and task (CIBART) model to the lived experiences of high achievers.

Literature review

Systems psychodynamics: Meta-theoretical assumptions

Originating from the Tavistock approach, systems psychodynamics applies psychodynamic and open systems principles to study unconscious dynamics driving behaviour in groups, organisations and individuals (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020, 2022). System psychodynamics has become an interdisciplinary field amalgamating influences from psychoanalysis, object relations theory and group relations theory as well as from open systems theory (Cardona, 2020; Geldenhuys, 2022).

Psychoanalysis

Freud (1910) referred to psychoanalysis as the process through which psychological symptoms are explained by uncovering repressed conflicts in the unconscious mind. Firstly, psychoanalysis emphasises the interplay of conscious and unconscious forces driving people's behaviour (Flotman, 2018). Behaviour, such as voluntary turnover in this study, is thus seen as stemming from unconscious processes that need to be made conscious. Secondly, a

central aspect of psychoanalysis is the experience of anxiety, which emerges from unconscious internal conflicts (Freud, 1910). Thirdly, individuals develop defences against this anxiety (Mihalits & Codenotti, 2020). Systems psychodynamics applies the psychoanalytic notion of anxiety and defences to enhance understanding of organisational phenomena, emphasising that anxiety informs all organisational behaviour, and that behaviour often manifests in defences against underlying anxiety (Menzies, 1960). Psychological defences refer to involuntary behaviours, effects and thoughts that people exhibit, often to unconsciously cope with perceived threats and challenges (Cioca et al., 2020; Mihalits & Codenotti, 2020; Panfil et al., 2020). In psychoanalytic theory, defences include, for example, repression, regression, dependency splitting, projection and projective identification (Blackman, 2004; Freud, 1910; Halton, 2019; Klein, 1946, 1948). Often, uncovering such defences resolves the anxiety that leads to behaviour that is not conducive to a system's optimal functioning (such as voluntary turnover). The process of uncovering refers to making defences conscious and thus available to work through and resolve on a conscious level.

Object relations theory

Melanie Klein's (1946) object relations theory extended psychoanalysis, providing a relational understanding of organisational behaviour, anxiety and defences (Czander, 1993). Object relations theory explicates the dynamics underlying defences such as splitting, projection, introjection and projective identification. Object relations are first experienced in infancy, where the infant internalises (introjects) the concept of a good breast and distinguishes (splits) it from the metaphorical bad breast. Negative qualities associated with the bad breast, are then projected onto the mother, contributing to the development of the ego (Klein, 1946). This infant development phase is called the paranoid-schizoid position. Only once the infant's ego is sufficiently developed, can it move from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position where the mother is seen as a whole object comprising both the good and the bad. Applying object relations to organisations, groups caught up in the paranoid-schizoid position split good and bad objects and present projections that manifest as excessive blaming (Obholzer, 2019). Guiding a group to retrieve its bad projections and towards seeing others as whole objects with good and bad aspects supports a group's development from the paranoid-schizoid into the depressive position (Halton, 2019). In the context of voluntary turnover, uncovering group dynamics such as splitting and projecting may enhance a systemic insight into the underlying causes of voluntary turnover.

Group relations theory

Group relations theory focusses on the psychoanalytic dynamics of the group. A group is seen as the site of its members' anxiety and defences, calling for giving attention to the group's neurosis as opposed to attributing it to an individual (Hinshelwood, 2007). Group neurosis is a way in

which the group defends against anxiety, taking it off-task. Group defences are called basic assumptions behaviour and include dependency, fight and/or flight and pairing (Bion, 1961), one-ness (Turquet, 1974) and me-ness (Lawrence et al., 1996). Similar to object relations theory, group relations theorists propose that organisational behaviour mirrors the dynamics characteristic of families (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020) and that group identity parallels unconscious maternal representations from early childhood (Rosenbaum, 2004). Akin to an infant's love-hate dynamics with the mother, employees consistently navigate the tensions that result from conflicting wishes of belonging and distinctiveness (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). These tensions shape the thoughts and emotional experiences of the group members, but it is held by the group as a 'container' (Huffington et al., 2004). 'Contained' thoughts and feelings need conscious processing to enable the group's understanding of its individual and collective behavioural dynamics (Ogden, 2004). In the context of voluntary turnover, the purpose is to make the group aware of its defences and to forge an understanding of individual turnover as a manifestation of the broader system's anxiety and defences.

Open systems theory

In open systems theory, the individual, the group and the organisation each constitute an open system that manages input and output interactions across its boundaries to change or maintain itself and its primary task (Appelbaum, 1973). Open systems theory emphasises the importance of managing system (organisation, group or person) boundaries to adjust constructively to environmental changes and continue to fulfil its primary organisational or work task (Geldenhuis, 2022; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022). It also acknowledges that similar patterns of behaviour are mirrored across and between the individual, group and organisation (Miller & Rice, 1975). Thus, exploring voluntary turnover and how it manifests from a group-level perspective provides insight into the individual's decision to leave the organisation as a symptom of system dynamics, rather than of isolated individual factors.

System psychodynamics and conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, roles and task as an interpretive frame

Integrating open systems theory with psychoanalytic principles allows one to view a phenomenon, such as voluntary turnover, as a systemic phenomenon with a psychological dynamic operating on a conscious and unconscious level (Pule, 2022). A systems psychodynamic perspective thus uncovers and makes sense of unconscious systemic anxiety and defence dynamics that manifest in anti-task phenomena such as voluntary turnover. Revealing the conflicting fears, needs and wishes at the root of dysfunctional behaviour creates a deep level of system self-awareness and insight necessary to bring about constructive change in the organisation (Cilliers, 2018; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022). It is, however, clear that system psychodynamics is complex and covers a broad range of ideas and principles. For ease of its application as an interpretive framework, Cilliers and Koortzen (2005) developed CIBART, a

model that integrates primary system psychodynamic principles across six dimensions.

The CIBART model has been widely used (in research and consulting) to explore and uncover conflict dynamics as a source for resolving dysfunctional behaviour (May, 2019; Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2022; Mayer et al., 2018; Pule, 2022). Its primary psychoanalytic assumption holds that conflict results from uncertainty and anxiety in a system, which can be uncovered, better understood and resolved through an analysis of behavioural evidence along the six dimensions of conflict, identity, boundary, authority (and power), role and task (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Table 1 provides a summative conceptualisation of each of the six CIBART dimensions. The conflict dynamic is explained in the first dimension according to the system psychodynamic metatheory and establishes the foundation of CIBART as a conflict interrogating framework. The other five dimensions provide key areas in any system for further exploring the dynamics of conflict. Conflict arises and perpetuates from the anxiety elicited in each of the other five dimensions and from the consequent use of defences. Thus, the dynamic explained in the conflict dimension in Table 1 also occurs within each of the dimensions.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research approach allowed a rich description and deep understanding of lived voluntary turnover experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). A triple hermeneutic interpretive stance (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) was applied, synthesising phenomenological experience with the interpretive activity of both participants and researchers, which, in the context of this study, resulted in a new understanding (Gadamer, 2004) of voluntary turnover. Working with possibility rather than probability, the study is epistemologically rooted in Pierce's notion of abductive reasoning (Long & Harney, 2013) to construct meaningful interpretations of the phenomenon. Such a hermeneutic and abductive approach is best fitted to studying psychoanalytic phenomena because it 'regards reality as knowable through different possible understandings that are partially constructed by the knower' (Mihalits & Codenotti, 2020, p.5). With the systems psychodynamics CIBART frame as a key interpretive lens, the triple hermeneutic process abducted a possible understanding of voluntary turnover as a systemic phenomenon.

Research strategy

The study was based on a qualitative, ideographic, multiple-case study strategy. Free association narrative interviews (FANI) were conducted with seven individual voluntary turnover case studies in a large retail company. The use of rich ideographic information about the cases allowed for new knowledge to emerge (Durrheim, 2006). Multiple cases allowed for cross-case comparison (Carneiro, 2018), benefitting an integrated collective understanding of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

TABLE 1: The six-dimension model: Conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, roles and task.

Dimension	Conceptualisation and application
Conflict	The conflict dimension is the core assumption and purpose of CIBART. It recognises that conflict is a natural and motivational aspect of system behaviour. However, when driven by unresolved anxiety, it can become dysfunctional. This dysfunctional conflict dynamic arises from unconscious anxiety regarding organisational experiences. In response, individuals may employ defence mechanisms such as splitting, projection, introjection and projective identification. These mechanisms serve to cope with fears and uncertainties. Conflict is manifested through the splitting of differences into good and bad, projecting the bad onto others and introjecting and identifying with negative projections. This splitting and projection can occur within oneself (intrapersonally), in relationships with others (interpersonally) and between or within groups. It is evident in various discourses, such as 'me-them', 'us-them' and in-group and out-group dynamics. If the conflict remains unresolved and the integration of positive and negative aspects of oneself and others is not achieved, defensive strategies will only perpetuate the conflict and anxiety. This can result in non-adaptive behaviours such as fighting, fleeing or freezing (e.g., voluntary turnover) within the system
Identity	Identity refers to those characteristics and meanings of self that distinguish the individual, group or organisation as unique. Team identity provides members with a sense of belonging and purpose, and it is strongly influenced by the leader's personality and style. Anxiety results when members struggle to identify with the team and its leader and when identity boundaries are not clear, leaving members to feel isolated, hopeless and helpless
Boundary	Boundaries refer to the abstract or concrete borderlines that define a system's structure and indicate what is included and excluded. A group's boundaries function like the body's skin and keep the system and its parts together, safe and protected. Anxiety results when time, space and task boundaries are not clear, leaving team members feeling lost, out of control (overwhelmed), abandoned and disconnected
Authority and power	Authority refers to the level of power to make decisions and perform roles and tasks. Authority impacts relationships because it is formally or informally given to an individual or team, either by the organisation/manager/leader/colleagues (i.e. from above), by subordinates (i.e. from below) or by the individual or team itself (i.e. from within). Power refers to one's positional role or resources (personal, material and social) available, to influence your own or another's functioning. Anxiety results when employees in a system do not feel authorised to do their work and when they do not have resources to influence decisions and tasks, leaving them to feel powerless, disregarded, unappreciated and even incompetent
Role	Role describes the tasks and responsibilities to achieve performance goals within the organisation and incorporates the needed authority, resources and boundaries. While the organisation sets out role requirements, the role is taken up by the individual in a unique way that is influenced by previous conscious and unconscious experiences of relating and being. Therefore, three types of roles are relevant in an employee taking up a role in the organisation – the normative (objective job description); phenomenal (inferences about role based on unconscious projection and identification dynamics) and existential (how team/individual believe they are performing) roles. Anxiety results when roles are unclear, incongruent and de-authorised, leaving employees to feel overwhelmed and incompetent. Incongruence often sits between conscious understanding and unconscious beliefs about what roles entail
Task	The task is the basic component that makes up work and organisation. The primary task focusses on and guides employees in achieving the organisation's mission. Anxiety results when employees/teams are confused about task content and focus, leaving them feeling demotivated and disengaged. As a defence, employees engage in anti-task or off-task behaviour

Source: Cilliers, F., & Koortzen, P. (2005). Working with conflict in teams – The CIBART Model. *HR Future*, pp. 52–62.; Czander, W.M. (1993). *The psychodynamics of work and organizations*. The Guildford Press.; Green, Z.G., & Molenkamp, R.J. (2005). *The BART system of group and organizational analysis*. 005012, pp. 1–10.; May (2019); Mayer, C.H., Tonelli, L., Oosthuizen, R.M., & Surtee, S. (2018). 'You have to keep your head on your shoulders': A systems psychodynamic perspective on women leaders. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 44, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v44i0.1424>; Obholzer, A. (2019). Authority, power and leadership. In A. Oberholzer, & V.Z. Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work: A Tavistock approach to making sense of organizational life* (2nd edn., pp. 49–57). Routledge.; Pule, N. (2022). South African student leadership unrest and unsettled constructions: A CIBART analysis. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(2), 239–257. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-2-4718>; Stapley, L.F. (2006). *Individuals, groups and organizations beneath the surface: An introduction*. Karnac. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=5uhgDwAAQBAJ>

CIBART, conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, roles and task.

Research method

Research setting and access

A large South African retail corporation formed the research setting. The sector is highly competitive, with a few big retail groups dominating the environment (Malgas et al., 2018). Cost-affecting challenges such as national power cuts and technological advancements forcing retailers to provide e-commerce and e-marketing (Malgas et al., 2018) add to a complex, consistently changing work environment and a consistent concern for retention of high achievers. The primary researcher was in a consulting role with the company for a period of 5 years during which time, several cases of voluntary turnover occurred. The company gave permission to conduct the study. Access to participants was obtained via an appointed gatekeeper in the talent management team, who identified potential participants and established contact between the researcher and willing participants.

Participants and sampling

Purposeful and judgement-based sampling establishes inclusion criteria to ensure the selection of participants with lived experiences that will provide rich information relevant to the research phenomenon (Durrheim, 2006; Taherdoost, 2016). In this study, the aim was to select high-achieving individuals having experienced voluntary turnover. Inclusion criteria prescribed that participants, (1) had at least 6 months working experience in the organisation, (2) were identified as high achievers and (3) had voluntarily resigned. The sample comprised of middle managers ($n = 4$) and

professionals ($n = 3$); male ($n = 4$) and female ($n = 3$); aged between 25–39 ($n = 3$) and 40–49 ($n = 4$). Due to the small sample size, participants' were assigned a code (C1–C7). Quotes within this article are only identified by the use of these codes.

Data collection and recording

Firstly, data were collected using the FANI (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008) to gather voluntary turnover stories and free associations. Interviews were approximately 90-min and conducted in a neutral and convenient setting for both researcher and participant. The FANI makes use of free association and aims to co-create the interview process instead of imposing a pre-determined structure onto it. It makes use of four principles, namely, (1) the use of open-ended questions, (2) elicitation of a story, (3) avoiding asking 'why' questions and (4) the use of the interviewees' own words without interpretation (Clarke & Hogget, 2009). Interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Atlas.ti was used to organise and manage the data during the analysis phase.

Secondly, working reflexively meant the researcher turning the lens inward to recognise and take responsibility for the researcher's situatedness within the research and the effect that the researcher may have had on the setting and on the people whose stories were studied, questions asked, data collected and the interpretation thereof (Berger, 2015). Reflexive practice was applied by journaling about personal voluntary turnover experiences, making extensive field notes

on interview experiences and engaging in critical supervision and coaching (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) to consistently explore researcher identifications, transferences and counter-transferences with each of the participants, as part of the data collection process (Cilliers & Terblanche, 2010).

Data quality and ethics

To ensure trustworthiness, strategies were employed to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and authenticity (Krefting, 1991; Morrow, 2005). Credibility was ensured through familiarity with the research context, peer debriefing, using well-established research methods and applying reflexivity. Thick descriptions of participants' lived voluntary turnover experiences and explanation-building using existing theory further enhanced the study's credibility (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Transferability was enhanced by providing information about the research context, processes and participants. For dependability, an audit trail of the research design was provided (Morrow, 2005). Confirmability was ensured by using theoretical triangulation (Carter et al., 2014) and reflexive analysis (Krefting, 1991) and using multiple cases with a range of realities (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Important considerations guided the research to ensure its ethical execution. An explanation in this regard is provided in the declaration on ethical considerations.

Data analysis

Data were analysed systematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis and applying the principles of the hermeneutic circle (Gyollai, 2020) and triple hermeneutics (Hofius, 2020). The analytic phases included familiarisation with the data, coding the data, searching for themes, refining themes, defining themes and constructing an integrated thematic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By applying the hermeneutic circle, the meaning of the whole text and the meaning of its parts, informed and illuminated each other (Rennie, 2012). Simple hermeneutics (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) was used to make sense of participants' narratives. Double hermeneutics (Roberge, 2011) represent a second level of interpretation whereby the researchers constructed a systems psychodynamic understanding of participants' narratives. Triple hermeneutics (Hofius, 2020) was applied to interpret the systems psychodynamics of the primary researcher's experiences of the research process.

Findings

Six themes, grounded in the data, were constructed to explain the dynamics of voluntary turnover from a CIBART perspective. The findings show how voluntary turnover spirals from conflict dynamics revolving around systemic anxiety and defences in and across the six CIBART domains. Each constructed theme, as discussed here, flows from and is linked to each of the six CIBART dimensions, namely, conflict (theme 1), identity (theme 2), boundary (theme 3), power and authority (theme 4), role (theme 5) and task (theme 6).

Theme 1: Conflict permeates the system and is defended against with splitting and projection dynamics

Conflict manifested interpersonally and intrapersonally. The data especially highlighted the manifest interpersonal conflict between participants and their leaders and how this led to intrapersonal conflict in the self. Participants experienced leaders as blocking their promotion and growth, bullying and undermining their work. C3 relates 'your ultimate director sort of stifles you a bit ... he just shot me down from a dizzy height [leaving me feeling] stifled and ja, bullied in a sense'. This resulted in obvious conflict as C1 describes the relationship as 'lots of fighting ... I shouldn't be having'. Denoting how the interpersonal conflict with leaders consequently also manifested intrapersonally, C7 describes the conflict-in-the-mind: 'It placed me in a very difficult position ... I was conflicted' and C2 agrees that 'It made life quite difficult'. Leaders inappropriately involved participants in conflict among superiors, causing further intrapersonal conflict for participants, as remembered by C7, 'It was dramatic every single day ... I felt uncomfortable ... I told her no, don't put me in the middle and it ended up being a huge thing'. Such interpersonal and related intrapersonal conflict lead participants to experience heightened levels of anxiety, which is evident in C3's self-reflection, 'I felt like piggy-in-the-middle' and in C4's description of feeling unworthy, disrespected and rejected by the organisational system: 'I slowly started questioning whether I was good enough ... I was out. Done. Disrespectful. Done'.

Anxiety continues to escalate as conflicts also manifest on a group level. C7 describes a group conflict and the detrimental effect thereof on his sense of psychological safety, 'after the altercation I felt I couldn't really comment on anything'. The emotions reflected in participants' references to interpersonal conflict with leaders and within-group conflict denote how the anxiety left participants feeling conflicted, stuck, unworthy and silenced. This led them to unconsciously defend against the anxiety by splitting the bad and good and projecting the bad onto the leaders. C1 compares the screaming, unprofessional behaviour of his leader versus himself 'doing it professionally obviously ... not coming in screaming'. Other participants similarly engage in an us-them narrative, denying the bad in the self and projecting it on leadership in the company, 'so typical of corporate, a lot of games there and I will tell you exactly what I am thinking, I'm not playing stupid games!' (C4); and 'I was trying to maintain his reputation with them. They're bitching and moaning' (C2). Participants seem to have been caught in an overwhelming cycle of interpersonal, intrapersonal and in-group conflict, creating anxiety and a plethora of destructive emotions, which they coped with by splitting themselves (as good intentional role players) from their (bad) leaders and the company.

Theme 2: Identity incongruence breeds potential loss of self

Participants did not identify with their leaders' ways of being and doing and related examples of leaders behaving

incongruently with their personal and professional identities and with the identity of the group. For example, C7 reflected 'she is very materialistic and that's how she shapes her life ... I can't identify with her ... it's not the person who I am'. Similarly, C1 vehemently relates his inability to identify with his leader: 'this isn't an example of where I'm being overly dramatic ... I can't be that person ... I can't subscribe to that, it's too hard'. Participants moreover experienced the identity of their work group as coming under attack by their leaders. Emphasising incongruence with the leader who is 'treating people unfairly', C2 identifies the workgroup as 'the fairness police ... trust is our commodity', whereas 'you [referring to the leader] are now displaying values that don't connect with me' (C2). Identity incongruence leads to internal identity conflict and participants risk losing their sense of self, as noted in C4's words, 'so these are your leaders, how does that define you as a person?'. Survival anxiety escalates within a team when they struggle to identify with the leader (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005) and when individuals experience identity conflicts (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Such anxiety is defended against using splitting and projection defence dynamics. Participants split themselves and their work group from the leader and project the bad parts onto the leader's identity and introject into theirs, the good. As such, leaders were described as having no integrity, incompetent and not professional, but as materialistic, underhanded and manipulative. In opposition, participants described themselves as having integrity, competence and professionalism. C3, for example, claimed, 'I'm quite pragmatic and analytic ... my problem solving got me here', whereas the leader 'was a superficial sort of on the surface type leader who didn't have a depth of knowledge'.

Theme 3: Unclear boundaries leave employees feeling vulnerable and exposed

Unclear boundaries manifested in role, task and psychological boundaries. In speaking to role and task boundaries one participant said, 'it does become blurred, but I'm still expected to carry out those duties' (C5). Psychological boundaries were also experienced to have been violated as noted by C6, 'after leaving I still know everything that's going on there' as well as in C7's recollection of her superior: 'she crossed a lot of boundaries and shared a lot of information with me'. Unclear boundaries leave participants feeling vulnerable and exposed, as reiterated by C2, 'People don't feel safe ... It's really real. People don't feel safe'. The unclear task boundaries created performance anxieties as noted in feelings of low self-worth and self-efficacy expressed by C4, 'slowly I started questioning whether I was good enough, whether or not I have the right skills'. Blurred boundaries left participants feeling unsafe, creating anxiety and participants were left feeling confused, vulnerable and doubting their own competence.

Theme 4: Disempowered, de-authorised leaders and followers perpetuate directionless conflict

Participants experienced their leaders as disempowered and disempowering. They reported a sense that the leader could

not fight for their cause, recalling about a leader: 'he's lacking the ballsiness to just say, 'this is what I believe' (C1). Another even felt sorry for the disempowered leader saying, 'I do feel sorry for him because some days he looks like a beaten dog ... he wouldn't push back... he doesn't have the balls to fight for it' (C2). Leaders, in turn, disempowered the participants by withholding information, silencing them, excluding them from important meetings and failing to address the issue of unfair and inequitable compensation. C1 summarised this as 'you don't have the mandate to do anything' and C2 recalled the consequent powerlessness she felt, 'I had reached a state where I thought I was useless'. The experience of being disempowered generated conflict and performance anxiety which led participants to fight, as metaphorically described by C1, 'we realise there's a bone now so we're going to dig, we're not letting go' and C6 similarly remembers the consequent conflictual discussions: 'I wasn't particularly kind on my comments'. So, to defend against their anxiety, followers first fight the leader and then use me-ness (Lawrence et al., 1996) to withhold power from the leader. The dynamic creates an inescapable double bind that locks both parties into a disempowering dependency.

Leaders were also deauthorised by their leaders, culminating in a top-down cascading and bottom-up mirroring deauthorising dynamic. A participant shared how lines of authority were often bypassed, saying, 'he dealt directly with me' (C7). Followers defend against their resulting anxiety by assuming a parent ego state in relation to the leader, causing further deauthorisation and conflict. For example, followers accused leaders of incompetence, as noted by C2 about her leader 'he's not a professional expert, he's nowhere and it's very sad' and C3, 'He was very much unqualified for the position ... he's got no clue'. Deauthorised leaders, in turn, deauthorised their followers. One participant relayed how the leader deauthorised the team expressing distrust in them: 'I'm going to rather use an external agent because I want this to land well' (C1). Being deauthorised, left participants feeling inadequate, directionless and frustrated, as reflected in the words of C3, 'If you're not been given authority or mandate to go in a certain direction, then it is what it is'. C5 noted his frustration, 'You're expected to operate and exercise authority but without the role title'. The participants struggled for authorisation by telling leaders what to do. For example, C1 told her leader: 'you need to listen because this is what you need to go and tell them'. The summative effect of the disempowering and deauthorising dynamic was a frustrated, angry followership and a defensive leadership manifesting in perpetual leader-follower conflict.

Theme 5: Leaders' role confusion leads to scapegoating followers

Leaders often lack the ability to effectively manage themselves in their respective roles. As a result, they tend to transfer roles inappropriately and step out of their designated responsibilities. For example, C1 said about his leader that 'he plays the role of coach because that's the role he played before'. In C3's recollection, the leader did not take up his

role because he was friends with another senior executive. C3 reflects that '[name] could play a stronger role ... but I got the feeling that he was too close to the hip with [name]'. C7 noted how her leader failed to mentor her and instead that she had to mentor the leader: 'I said give me growth, give me learning and development ... she [the leader] might be intimidated because I'm the only one who has the voice to call her out when she is wrong'. The anxiety of not being contained by clear role boundaries and the resulting conflict is evident in the previous words of C7, as it demonstrates splitting and projections of badness. Leaders stepping out of roles could not establish clear roles for participants either. This made participants feel used, and that their competence was under attack by the leader. When scrutinised about something which he helped with over and beyond his role, C5 feels misused: 'I mean you feel like you're being used'. Similarly, C2 narrated a story of being blamed and scapegoated for a mistake that was not part of her role, she says 'it gutted me, that was one of the moments that made me decide to leave'. The summative effect of leaders falling out of their role was a followership who were, in turn, forced out of their role and scapegoated in relation to the leader who was out of the role.

Theme 6: Not knowing what to do makes me want to leave

Participants experienced leaders as failing to provide clear task boundaries and inhibited followers from performing their tasks. C3 noted: 'They keep trying to make prioritisations, concessions and 'let's focus on this', but I don't think they're tackling it correctly'. Leaders instead overloaded them with tasks and participants experienced becoming stuck and overwhelmed by task complexity and overload: 'I kept having new initiatives, new projects and it was totally unrealistic to expect execution and delivery' (C3). This led them to feel inefficient and unproductive, expressed as being very busy yet not achieving goals: 'It became 3–4 years of going forward without marking off key objectives' (C3). The lack of progress was attributed to leaders being incapable of understanding the task and not having the ability to give clear definitions to tasks. C2 said about the leadership that 'In the past our function created safety, security, accountability, ownership. It's all gone'. In some cases, participants experienced their leaders to have intentionally stifled them from performing their tasks, as emphasised by C1, 'you're stifling that person, you'll not be able to deliver' resulting in him exclaiming 'It's a place to question your sanity' and for C3 to say:

'so, I just needed to get off the ship ... [the] definition and understanding what you are trying to achieve and hold yourself accountable, that to me is a key ingredient to move the company forward and it's not happening and that's the big reason I left.'

Leaders acting off-task and followers colluding in anti-task behaviours leave participants without a sense of direction, without meaning and purpose. This causes high levels of survival anxiety, because survival anxiety is related to the fear of not achieving work goals (Edmondson et al., 2004).

They then question the reason for their continued existence in the organisation and employ flight as a defence against consuming anxiety.

Discussion

This study explored high achievers' voluntary turnover experiences with the aim of uncovering the system psychodynamics of voluntary turnover. The CIBART model was applied as an interpretive framework resulting in the construction of six themes, each relating to a dimension in the CIBART framework.

In the first theme, participants' experiences of being stifled and undermined by their leaders created interpersonal conflict and this led to intrapersonal conflicts manifesting as feeling conflicted, uncomfortable and misused. Conflict was also experienced in their work groups. The manifest interpersonal, intrapersonal and in-group conflicts increased participants' performance anxiety and led to their unconscious splitting the self as 'good' object from their 'bad' leaders and organisation. The second theme demonstrated participants' experience of identity incongruence with their leaders' behaviour, and they reported identity incongruence between the workgroup and the leader. Identity incongruence leads participants to present with internal identity conflict and consequent survival anxiety. As in the conflict dimension (Theme 1), the anxiety is defended through participants' splitting and projection dynamics. To sustain their self-esteem, people split good and bad parts of being – introjecting the good and projecting unwanted self-aspects onto others (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012; Stapley, 2006).

In Theme three, unclear boundaries and boundary violations leave participants feeling psychologically unsafe, doubting their competence, further increasing their survival and performance anxiety. Similarly, in Theme four, participants experience their leaders as having been disempowered and de-authorised, as well as disempowering and de-authorising of the participants. Their resulting anxiety is expressed in feeling powerless and downplaying their self-worth. Deauthorised leaders often deauthorise followers in a sequential mirroring deauthorisation dynamic (Hirschhorn, 2018). While the power dynamic thus left participants in a fight state, feeling angry and frustrated, this only perpetuated destructive conflict dynamics with their leaders.

Theme five explores role dynamics and demonstrates how leaders behaving out-of-role, force followers to act out-of-role. The role confusion resulted in participants feeling uncontained, blamed and scapegoated by their leaders. It seems that leaders out-of-role elicit a process of projective identification wherein participants become the receivers of negative characteristics such as being incompetent and responsible for mistakes and poor performance. According to Petriglieri and Stein (2012), leaders often project unwanted parts of themselves onto followers. Followers' projective identification with these projections, perpetuates and

intensifies destructive interpersonal conflict and a toxic organisational culture (Mobasser et al., 2023; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Insufficient role clarity in theme six follows insufficient task boundaries. Participants reported their leaders as being off-task and not competent in leading and giving direction to their task performance. Task confusion of both leaders and participants leads participants to feel directionless, without meaning and purpose. The resulting anxiety is overwhelming and flight out of the organisation is considered a viable option to cope. Voluntary turnover thus evolves from the symptom of leaders' bad projections and participants' consequent projective identification with the scapegoating dynamic.

While each theme may offer a possible systems psychodynamic explanation of voluntary turnover, the conflict and consequent anxiety and defences across all CIBART dimensions fortify the stage for voluntary turnover. Participants apply primitive defences such as splitting and projection as a defence against experienced interpersonal, intrapersonal, in-group and identity conflicts. This makes identification with the leader or with the organisation, as a mature psychological attachment (Ciocca et al., 2020) impossible. Splitting denies a more realistic, integrated self-other perspective, and in this study, the escalating emotional consequences may have set the foundation for needing to physically split from or leave the organisation to maintain a positive sense of self. The identity conflict that results from conflict manifesting across the system is exacerbated by unclear boundaries, disempowering power and authority dynamics, as well as role and task uncertainties. Insufficient role boundaries and destructive power and authority dynamics left participants angry and frustrated and fighting to retain a sense of direction and purpose. The fighting was, however, not constructive and perpetuated the unhealthy conflict dynamics already prevalent across the system. Adding out-of-role dynamics seemed to have caused participants to start believing and acting as if the blame and scapegoating from their leaders were true. Their sense of self became to object of their own scrutiny and doubt. Such projective identification thus exacerbates an already flailing sense of self and their de-identification with the organisation. Adding task confusion cements the idea of leaving and fight turns into flight. In this way, voluntary turnover becomes a defence against the overwhelming, perpetuated and unresolved conflict across all CIBART dimensions in the system. Flight is thus used in defence to exit the organisation in search of continued attachment to an alternative work group as a good object and a way to sustain a coherent sense of self.

Ultimately, the decision to leave is a conscious manifestation of the unresolved unconscious conflicts in the system, manifesting quite predominantly in the leader-follower relationship. High achievers can be regarded as highly competitive followers, placing the leader-follower relationship central to the voluntary turnover dynamic (Liborius & Kiewitz, 2022). Voluntary turnover is a defence against the anxiety spiralling from systemic conflict. Voluntary turnover does not

resolve the identity conflicts incurred by the participants, the work group or the bigger organisational system. It presents as a non-adaptive (Panfil et al., 2020) or even maladaptive defence mechanism because it locks in repeated destructive defences, conceals damaging organisational discourses and disables constructive change (Mobasser et al., 2023). For example, individuals may find themselves perpetuating the need to separate themselves as good from the bad leader or the bad organization, thus learning to rely on flight as a defense to avoid disempowering conflicts. The conflict dynamic remains, and voluntary turnover may be seen by retained staff as a phantasy object of emancipation. Voluntary turnover as a defence thus severs the secure attachments in and with the organisation that are needed for the work group and the organisation to flourish (Ciocca et al., 2020). Conflict dynamics can be disrupted, and attachments repaired, by creating safe, constructive holding environments for groups to engage in intrapsychic and intergroup repair work (Geldenhuys, 2022; Mobasser et al., 2023). Organisations, work groups, leaders and high achievers should therefore rather be made aware of and work through the conflict dynamics in the system and their responses to it.

Implications

The findings of this research provide novel insight into the beneath-the-surface systems psychodynamics of voluntary turnover. It contributes to the knowledge field about voluntary turnover by illuminating how dysfunctional systems psychodynamics may lead to voluntary turnover as a complex systemic-driven process. The findings provide evidence of the emotionally laden and unconscious consequences of conflict, emphasising that this needs to be worked through should high achievers be retained. The findings suggest that leaders who do not recognise and work through dysfunctional CIBART dynamics are at greater risk of losing their group members to voluntary turnover. The research also highlights the importance for leaders and groups to provide containment for group members. The findings can be used by consulting psychologists as an analytic guide to explore and understand issues of voluntary turnover manifesting in an organisation. Consulting psychologists can also use these insights to address issues of voluntary turnover by facilitating leaders' and followers' insights into possible manifesting CIBART dynamics. Coaching psychologists may make use of the findings and working hypotheses to coach a client through the process of voluntary turnover to better adjust, develop and transform through it.

Limitations and recommendations

No prior research into the systems psychodynamics of voluntary turnover exists, making it difficult to compare the study to others. The authors had to make use of their in-depth knowledge of systems psychodynamics and competence as researchers throughout the research. More research into the systems psychodynamics of voluntary turnover is therefore needed. Further qualitative research will be useful to build new knowledge about the unconscious

dynamics of voluntary turnover as a systemic phenomenon rather than an individual, rational decision-making act.

The findings were constructed from interviews with a small sample of seven participants and may further be partial to the single organisational study context. The researchers' predisposition to taking a system psychodynamic stance, additionally subjected the findings to a certain view, albeit unique and underexplored. It may be useful to conduct similar studies in other organisations and industries. The findings are proposed as abductive truths rather than absolute truths and present a novel contribution to voluntary turnover research by putting forth a system psychodynamics explication of its dynamics.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to explore the voluntary turnover experiences of high achievers and to develop an in-depth understanding of the systems psychodynamics of the phenomenon using the CIBART model as a frame. Conflict permeating the system on interpersonal, in group and intrapersonal levels creates survival and performance anxiety in followers. It also makes it impossible for followers to identify with the leader as a mature psychological defence. Insufficient role and task boundaries and violated psychological boundaries make people feel unsafe, uncertain and incompetent. Disempowering and deauthorising dynamics make containment of the consequent anxiety impossible and create feelings of impotence, dependency and low self-worth. To be forced out of a role and off task is anxiety-provoking. Voluntary turnover is a systemic defense that members use to protect themselves from unresolved conflict within a group. Voluntary turnover occurs when CIBART dysfunctional dynamics arise in the group. It represents a phantasy object of emancipation from conflict and anxiety but perpetuates the phenomenon through unresolved conflict dynamics. Voluntary turnover thus represents the forceful explosion of unprocessed unconscious psychic material out of and across the organisational boundary.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

C.B.M. and A.B. conceptualised the research project. C.B.M. conducted the literature review and the empirical study. A.B.

acted in a supervisory role and oversaw the scientific rigour and academic quality of the study.

Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, CEMS Ethics Committee (ERC Reference no.: 2019_CEMS/IOP_005) and ethicality was ensured through voluntary participation and written informed consent. Data were anonymised using pseudonyms and electronically saved on the primary researcher's password-protected hard drive.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the information.

Disclaimer

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