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Beyond Quiet Quitting: An Exploration of Early Career Research Assistants' Workplace Experiences and Quiet Cracking Phenomenon in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Using a phenomenologically informed qualitative design and directed qualitative content analysis, the study examined interviews with nine early-career academics aged 24 to 38 years and with 3 to 10 years of professional experience. The analytic process was predominantly deductive and was organised around six a priori, theory-informed domains derived from the study's conceptual framework: job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, psychological contract breach, job burnout, organisational cynicism, and quiet quitting. Within these domains, participants' accounts were examined to identify context-specific meanings, manifestations, similarities, and differences related to workplace strain and disengagement. Participants' accounts suggest that precarious contract conditions, excessive administrative workloads, and blurred work-life boundaries were associated with emotional detachment, reduced discretionary effort, and controlled withdrawal, which they often framed as a coping response to persistent work strain. The findings further indicate that sustained psychological contract violations and organisational cynicism may contribute to more intensified forms of disengagement and psychological erosion. Rather than presenting **"quiet cracking"** as a fully established construct, the study treats it as an emerging and contested interpretive concept that may help explain cumulative strain among early-career academics

Keywords: *Quiet cracking, Quiet quitting, Precarity in higher education, Emotional exhaustion, Psychological erosion*

Sessiz İstifanın Ötesinde: Yükseköğretim Kurumlarındaki Araştırma Görevlilerinin İşyeri Deneyimleri ve Sessiz Çatlama Olgusu

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Özet

Fenomenolojik olarak temellendirilmiş nitel bir desen ve yönlendirilmiş nitel içerik analizi kullanılan bu çalışmada, 24-38 yaşları arasında ve 3-10 yıllık mesleki deneyime sahip dokuz erken kariyer akademisyeniyle yapılan görüşmeler incelenmiştir. Analitik süreç ağırlıklı olarak tümdengelimsel biçimde yürütülmüş ve çalışmanın kavramsal çerçevesinden türetilen altı öncül, kuram temelli alan etrafında yapılandırılmıştır: iş güvencesizliği, duygusal tükenme, psikolojik sözleşmenin ihlali, iş tükenmişliği, örgütsel sinizm ve sessiz istifa. Bu alanlarda katılımcı anlatıları; işyeri zorlanması ve işten uzaklaşmaya ilişkin bağlama özgü anlamları, görünümleri, benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları belirlemek amacıyla incelenmiştir. Katılımcı anlatıları, güvencesiz sözleşme koşullarının, aşırı idari iş yükünün ve belirsizleşen iş-yaşam sınırlarının; çoğu zaman süreğen iş zorlanmasıyla başa çıkma tepkisi olarak çerçevelenen duygusal kopuş, isteğe bağlı çabanın azalması ve kontrollü geri çekilmeyle ilişkili olduğunu düşündürmektedir. Bulgular ayrıca, süreklilik gösteren psikolojik sözleşme ihlalleri ile örgütsel sinizmin, daha yoğun işten uzaklaşma biçimlerine ve psikolojik yıpranmaya katkıda bulunabileceğine işaret etmektedir. Çalışma, **"sessiz çatlama"**yı bütünüyle yerleşik bir yapı olarak sunmak yerine, erken kariyer akademisyenleri arasındaki birikimli zorlanmayı açıklamaya yardımcı olabilecek, gelişmekte olan ve tartışmalı bir yorumlayıcı kavram olarak ele almaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Sessiz çatlama, Sessiz istifa, Yükseköğretimde iş güvencesizliği, Duygusal tükenmişlik, Psikolojik yıpranma*

Introduction

Quiet quitting and the emerging notion of quiet cracking have gained attention because of their implications for employee engagement, organisational functioning, and psychological well-being (Pevec, 2023; Putri et al., 2026). Quiet quitting involves withdrawing cognitive and emotional investment while remaining employed and limiting effort to minimum job requirements (Formica & Sfodera, 2022), often as a boundary-setting strategy to protect work-life balance and well-being (Çalışkan, 2023). By contrast, quiet cracking remains a tentative concept whose boundaries relative to burnout and emotional exhaustion are unclear (Burleigh & Royle, 2025; da Paz, 2025; Lindsay, 2025; Sola, 2025). It may capture forms of strain not fully explained by established concepts (180 Engineering, 2025), particularly amid post-pandemic remote work, blurred boundaries, and intensified digital communication (Atalay & Dağıstan, 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Research assistants remain underexplored in workplace burnout research (Altbach & Finkelstein, 2014). Their positions are often characterised by temporary contracts, role ambiguity, and limited career prospects. In Türkiye, employment insecurity (Öztürk & Şahbudak, 2017), unclear duties, invisible labour, heavy workloads, financial strain, and organisational pressure may intensify disengagement and psychological strain (Balki & Köksal, 2026; Ulutaş & Küçüksaygın, 2023).

Although studies have examined quiet quitting in general workplaces (Galanis et al., 2025; Georgiadou et al., 2025; Xueyun et al., 2023) and academic burnout (Balki & Köksal, 2026; Chan & Batahong, 2024; Hall et al., 2019; Sabagh et al., 2018; Ulutaş & Küçüksaygın, 2023), limited qualitative evidence explains how early-career academics relate disengagement, burnout, psychological contract breach, and quiet cracking. This study therefore examines research assistants' experiences of quiet quitting and whether their accounts reflect strain associated with quiet cracking, treating it as a contested interpretive concept rather than an established construct.

Theoretical Framework of Quiet Quitting

Quiet quitting refers to the gradual reversal of organisational engagement (Scheyett, 2023) and gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic as employees reduced discretionary effort in response to heavier workloads, blurred work-life boundaries, and burnout (Çalışkan, 2023). Although remote work was initially valued for its flexibility and home-based comfort (Ipsen et al., 2021), it increasingly produced role permeability and weakened boundaries between professional and personal life (Baumann & Sander, 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). Expanding work demands ultimately created unsustainable conditions by allowing professional obligations to subsume private life (Youthall, 2022).

Quiet quitting has consequently been interpreted as resistance to "hustle culture," which equates commitment with sacrificing personal time and well-being (Starling, 2022), and as a coping strategy for restoring work-life balance (Dillard et al., 2025; Georgiadou et al., 2025; Patel et al., 2025). Its emergence is also associated with insufficient recognition (Zenger & Folkman,

2022), limited career support, poor communication, unjustified reprimands, and declining organisational trust (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) explains this process by contrasting demands such as workload, time pressure, emotional strain, and role ambiguity with resources including autonomy, social and supervisory support, and development opportunities (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). High demands combined with insufficient resources increase burnout risk (Bakker et al., 2023; Maslach, 2018), potentially resulting in withdrawal and reduced discretionary effort when coping resources are inadequate (Rosse & Hulin, 1985).

Quiet quitting is multidimensional, involving emotional detachment, reduced motivation, initiative, proactivity, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Georgiadou et al., 2025; Kachhap & Singh, 2024; Xueyun et al., 2023). Its outcomes include burnout, reduced knowledge sharing, and deteriorating team cohesion (Atiku et al., 2025; Galanis et al., 2025; Gone et al., 2026; Putri et al., 2026). Observable behaviours include lateness, meeting absenteeism, shortened working hours, limited collaboration, and weakened communication (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Burnout, restricted career development, and lack of appreciation are also prominent antecedents (Gabelaia & Bagociunaite, 2024). In Türkiye, quiet quitting may appear as performance decline (Çalışkan, 2023), managerial passivity (Çakan, 2022), or a gradual, potentially contagious process (Telford, 2022), demonstrating its contextual variability.

The Emerging Discussion of Quiet Cracking

Quiet cracking has been proposed as a tentative label for psychological strain in which employees remain functional and meet formal expectations despite fatigue, reduced motivation, and emotional deterioration (Burleigh & Royle, 2025; da Paz, 2025; FAS Psych, 2025; Lindsay, 2025; Sola, 2025). However, limited evidence leaves unclear whether it constitutes a distinct phenomenon, severe burnout, or a new description of established strain.

Emerging evidence links quiet cracking more closely to organisational vulnerability-including company size, organisational age, and industry pressure-than to individual traits (Balcıoğlu & Altındağ, 2026). Prolonged strain and withdrawal may also arise from organisational climate, ineffective leadership, ambiguous roles, inadequate support, reduced psychological safety, and toxic management (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Gallup, 2022; Gone et al., 2026; Moisoglou et al., 2025; Parker & Horowitz, 2022; Xueyun et al., 2023).

This study therefore treats quiet cracking as an unvalidated interpretive concept whose distinctiveness from emotional exhaustion, burnout, psychological contract breach, and quiet quitting requires qualitative examination. Using a phenomenologically informed, theory-guided, predominantly deductive design, participants' accounts were analysed through predetermined domains derived from the Job Demands-Resources framework and related literature. Their narratives were used to contextualise these domains and assess whether quiet cracking offers additional interpretive value for understanding research assistants' workplace experiences.

Research Question and Model

Research links job insecurity and emotional exhaustion to psychological contract breach, burnout, and organisational cynicism (Alsubaie & Nasaani, 2021; Maslach, 2018; Piccoli &

Witte, 2015; Viljoen & Claassen, 2017). Among early-career academics, insecurity, toxic management, and work pressure are associated with cynicism, exhaustion, and turnover intentions (Guidetti et al., 2022; Iqbal et al., 2024). Disrespect, unethical behaviour, excessive workload, work-life imbalance, and limited career development may also precede quiet quitting (Özsoy, 2026). Quiet cracking potentially encompasses prolonged dissatisfaction, burnout, emotional deterioration, entrapment, and perceived inability to leave employment (Burleigh & Royle, 2025; da Paz, 2025; FAS Psych, 2025; Lindsay, 2025; Sola, 2025). Within the JD-R framework, these experiences may reflect interconnected strain and disengagement caused by sustained demands and insufficient resources.

Rather than validating quiet cracking as a distinct construct, this study examines whether research assistants' experiences reflect this emerging concept and how it relates to established forms of strain and withdrawal. Research assistants provide a relevant context because they face heavy workloads, employment insecurity, publication pressure, and limited recognition (Balki & Köksal, 2026; Sabagh et al., 2018; Ulutaş & Küçüksaygın, 2023). Accordingly, the study addressed the following research question:

RSQ: How do research assistants in higher education experience and interpret workplace strain, disengagement, and the recent notion of "quiet cracking" in relation to quiet quitting?

Based on this conceptual reasoning, Figure 1 presents a proposed interpretive model that illustrates the potential relationships among the antecedent conditions and experiential outcomes discussed in the literature, rather than a fixed or deterministic causal sequence.



Figure 1. *Research model*

Method

Research Approach

All stages of reporting this study were conducted in accordance with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) 21-item checklist (O'Brien et al., 2014). The study adopted a phenomenologically informed qualitative design to examine how research assistants described and interpreted their lived experiences of workplace precarity, strain, and disengagement. The phenomenological orientation informed the study's attention to participants' subjective meanings and workplace experiences; however, the analytic procedure itself was not designed as a purely inductive phenomenological analysis.

At the analytic level, the study employed directed qualitative content analysis, which is appropriate when existing theory and previous research provide an initial structure for organising and interpreting qualitative data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The Job Demands–Resources framework, burnout literature, psychological contract theory, organisational cynicism, and quiet quitting research were used to establish the principal analytic domains before the transcripts were coded. Accordingly, the study followed a predominantly deductive strategy while remaining attentive to context-specific expressions, variations, and data that refined or challenged the initial conceptual framework.

Positionality

Given the study's phenomenologically informed and theory-guided design, the research team's positionality was made explicit. In interpretive qualitative research, researchers' backgrounds and assumptions shape how participants' accounts are understood (Yip, 2024); acknowledging this influence was therefore integral to the study design, data collection, analysis, reflexivity, and rigour (Yip, 2024). Rather than eliminating interpretation, the analysis remained closely grounded in participants' statements while recognising the researchers' role in meaning-making, consistent with principles of reflexivity and close textual engagement (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Yin, 2018). This approach aimed to make researcher influence and the interpretative process transparent and methodologically coherent (Yip, 2024).

All authors have backgrounds in sports sciences and organisational behaviour and are familiar with university workplaces. The first author's previous research on quiet quitting and organisational behaviour positioned them as both an informed insider and an analytical outsider required to examine participants' accounts critically rather than assume shared meanings (Yip, 2024). The second author provided methodological guidance based on phenomenological and interdisciplinary research experience, while the third author challenged assumptions and strengthened interpretative depth.

Participants

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball recruitment, both of which are appropriate for identifying information-rich participants in qualitative research. Purposive sampling was first used to identify research assistants who met the inclusion criteria, after the initial contact with eligible participants, they were asked to recommend colleagues with similar experiential backgrounds who were likely to meet the study's inclusion criteria. This approach was considered suitable because the study sought

participants with direct and sustained experience of the phenomenon under investigation rather than statistical representativeness.

Inclusion criteria included: (a) current employment as research assistants at Turkish universities, (b) at least three years of professional experience in higher education institutions and (c) self-identifying as being in a quiet quitting process. These criteria ensured participants had sufficient exposure to the academic hierarchy, job demands, and organisational dynamics under investigation. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals without relevant professional experience (e.g., newly appointed research assistants) or those who had recently been promoted to higher academic positions (e.g., assistant professor). These exclusions minimised potential confounding effects from career transitions or limited institutional familiarity.

The study focused on research assistants working in faculties of sport sciences at higher education institutions in Türkiye. The accessible population for the study comprised 315 research assistants working in this academic field, retrieved from the official database of the Turkish Higher Education Council (n.d.). From this group, participants who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to share their experiences were invited to take part in the study. The final sample consisted of nine early-career academics aged 24 to 38 years, each of whom had worked as a research assistant in a higher education institution in Türkiye for at least three years. Consistent with the study's emphasis on contextual depth rather than statistical representativeness, this relatively small and fairly homogeneous sample was considered appropriate for examining participants' workplace experiences in detail. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Academic Position	Employment Status	Age	Years in HEI
Anna	Research Assistant	50/d	30	5
Ben	Research Assistant	50/d	27	3
Clara	Research Assistant (PhD)	50/d	29	6
Daisy	Research Assistant (PhD)	33/a	29	7
Ethan	Research Assistant (PhD)	33/a	38	10
Frank	Research Assistant (PhD)	50/d	30	6
George	Research Assistant (PhD)	33/a	36	7
Henry	Research Assistant	50/d	24	3
Iris	Research Assistant (PhD)	33/a	35	7

Note: *Research assistant appointments in Türkiye have historically been made under either Article 33/a or Article 50/d of Higher Education Law No. 2547. Prior to the regulatory changes effective from 1 January 2018, appointments under Article 33/a were generally the prevailing practice for newly recruited research assistants and were commonly perceived as providing a more continuing and secure employment status. Since 1 January 2018, newly appointed research assistants at universities have generally been employed under Article 50/d, a fixed-term appointment linked to the duration of postgraduate education. In 2023, a temporary legislative provision enabled eligible research assistants who were already employed under Article 50/d to be appointed under Article 33/a, subject to an individual request within the prescribed period and institutional procedures. This was a one-time transitional arrangement and did not alter the general practice whereby new research assistant appointments are made under Article 50/d. This distinction was considered relevant because appointment status may shape research assistants' employment security, career expectations, and experiences during postgraduate education.*

To protect participants' personal information and prevent the disclosure of their identities, pseudonyms were assigned alphabetically from Anna (P1) to Iris (P9). Participants are referred to by these pseudonyms throughout the manuscript. Two additional individuals were initially recruited and interviewed but were not included in the final analytic sample. During the interviews, they experienced emotional discomfort and had difficulty providing sufficiently detailed responses relevant to the research questions. Following a review of the interview material, these accounts were considered insufficiently rich for the phenomenological analysis. To protect participants' well-being and ensure analytic adequacy, the two interviews were excluded from the final dataset, and all related data were removed from the analysis and reporting. The final analysis was conducted with data from nine participants. In line with ethical research practice, all data related to these individuals were removed from the dataset, deleted, and excluded from the analysis and reporting.

Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants both online, via Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and face-to-face. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it allows the researcher to explore participants' subjective experiences in depth while retaining flexibility to follow emerging meanings and clarify responses during the interview process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Roberts, 2020). The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants and conducted outside their daily work routines. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes.

To develop the interview protocol, a review of the relevant literature was first conducted, and an initial pool of questions was generated. This question pool was then reviewed by experts, and the interview guide was revised accordingly before the final version was established. The interview questions and protocol are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol and Questions

Category	Questions
Warm-Up	✓ Warm-up questions on their role and position in the University, age, experience, length of service, communication with supervisor etc.
Conceptual Knowledge & Awareness	✓ Do you have knowledge of the concepts of job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, psychological contract breach, burnout, organizational cynicism, quiet quitting, and quiet cracking? ✓ Do you know anyone who has experienced these phenomena?
Work Stress	✓ How do the sources of stress in your workplace affect your commitment to your job? ✓ Have there been situations where you refused extra responsibilities due to stress? If so, how would you explain this?
Motivation	✓ How does a lack of motivation affect your effort and willingness to take on responsibilities at work? ✓ Has the absence of motivating factors at your workplace led to quiet quitting behaviour?
Burnout	✓ How has the feeling of burnout changed your expectations and goals regarding your job? ✓ During periods of burnout, did you experience a decrease in your work effort? ✓ To what extent has your burnout condition influenced your quiet quitting behaviour?

Category	Questions
Quiet Quitting	✓ What does quiet quitting behaviour mean to you? ✓ Have there been periods when you only performed mandatory tasks in your job? If so, can you explain the reasons? ✓ Have there been moments when you hesitated to express yourself or share your ideas at work? If so, what were the reasons? ✓ Have there been times when you felt your job lacked meaning? Can you share the reasons? ✓ What changes do you think should be made in your workplace to prevent quiet quitting? ✓ How do you interpret the situation where the controlled withdrawal behaviour of quiet quitting might eventually trigger an irreversible burnout process called "quiet cracking"?

The interview protocol was structured around six a priori domains identified in the literature: job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, psychological contract breach, burnout, organisational cynicism, and quiet quitting. Following contextual questions concerning participants' roles and experience, theory-informed questions and flexible probes were used to obtain examples, clarify meanings, and explore accounts that refined or did not correspond with the initial framework. Quiet cracking was introduced only as a provisional and contested interpretive concept.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki 2024. Prior to participation, all participants provided written informed consent and granted permission for audio recording.

Data Treatment and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word, checked against the recordings, and analysed without substantive alteration of participants' words (Tracy, 2013). Before coding, the first and second authors developed an analytic matrix comprising six a priori domains: job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, psychological contract breach, job burnout, organisational cynicism, and quiet quitting. Their operational descriptions were informed by the study's theoretical framework and interview protocol.

Both authors read the transcripts repeatedly and coded relevant segments within these predetermined domains. The analysis was therefore predominantly deductive, while remaining attentive to similarities, differences, and statements that refined or challenged the initial framework. Context-specific patterns, such as avoiding workplace visibility, withholding knowledge to prevent additional workload, delaying tasks, and losing a sense of academic identity, were interpreted as data-informed manifestations of the broader domains rather than as inductively generated principal categories. Quiet cracking was examined as a provisional interpretive proposition, not as an established category or confirmed outcome.

The first and second authors compared coding decisions across cases and resolved differences through discussion and renewed examination of the transcripts. The third author reviewed the resulting structure as a critical friend, assessing conceptual clarity, internal consistency, and correspondence between the domains and supporting quotations (Tracy, 2013). Credibility was supported through collaborative analysis, reflexive engagement, peer debriefing, and consideration of convergent and divergent accounts (Denzin, 2017). As the interviews were

conducted in Turkish and the manuscript prepared in English, translated quotations and narrative descriptions were reviewed for fidelity to meaning (Squires, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to six a priori analytic domains and three broader conceptual groupings established through the study's theoretical framework. The first grouping concerns work-related strain and includes (I) job insecurity and (II) emotional exhaustion. The second grouping covers burnout-related and attitudinal experiences and includes (III) psychological contract breach, (IV) job burnout, and (V) organisational cynicism. The third grouping addresses (VI) quiet quitting as a pattern of reduced discretionary involvement and voluntary engagement. These domains were used deductively to organise the findings, while participants' accounts were examined to clarify how each domain was experienced and expressed in the context of Turkish higher education. The relationships among the domains were interpreted as contextual and conceptually informed associations rather than as a verified linear or causal progression. Quiet cracking was considered separately as a provisional interpretive proposition whose distinctiveness from the predetermined domains remained open to examination.



Figure 2. *Themes and interpretive domains related to the emerging notion of quiet cracking*

Job Insecurity, Emotional Exhaustion and Psychological Contract Breach

Five participants emphasised job insecurity by referring to the temporary and contingent nature of research assistant positions.

> ***Anna:*** *I have experienced periods during which I was required to perform tasks beyond my formal responsibilities. However, as a contractual research assistant, it is unfortunately not possible to refuse or say "I cannot do this" or "this is not my responsibility." There is always an implicit concern about being dismissed or facing obstacles to promotion. Therefore, we end up performing every assigned task without objection.*

Anna noted that, as a contractual research assistant, refusing an assigned task was not perceived as a realistic option due to the implicit risk of dismissal or other negative career consequences. Ethan and Iris similarly characterised the position as insecure and described the resulting stress.

> ***Ethan:*** *When I first started the position, I was employed under a permanent contract. Later, the system changed, and we became subject to renewable annual contracts. You live in constant uncertainty. You never know when it might end or what will happen next.*

> ***Iris:*** *I believe that the position of research assistants within academic employment is highly insecure. This is because contractual positions are not permanent. Contracts can be terminated at any time, and even after years of service, one may suddenly lose their job.*

In relation to this situation, they described the lack of opportunity to refuse excessive workloads and tasks beyond their job descriptions as a form of helplessness. In the study by Breevaart et al. (2020), a high level of job insecurity was found to reduce employees' tendency to voice objections or refusals and lead to workplace silence. This pattern was reflected in the accounts of Clara, Frank and Anna who linked job insecurity to silence and compliance in the face of managerial demands. Iris similarly suggested that silence was safer than speaking openly, given the possibility of negative consequences in future task allocation (*I hesitate to express my ideas because they might reach the dean's ears, after which attitudes toward me change. Staying silent feels safer*).

> ***Clara:*** *How could you possibly refuse a task assigned by a professor? Considering your position, if you were to tell the department head or the dean, you would immediately gain a bad reputation. In other words, refusing a task is not an option. You are compelled to carry it out.*

> ***Frank:*** *I refused a task once, and it cost me dearly. Since then, I have never refused any duties, because if I do, I would be excluded from the system. And if I am excluded from the system, it would mean, metaphorically speaking, academic death for me.*

> ***Anna:*** *After expressing my opinion on a matter to the previous dean, I was openly reprimanded to some extent. I wouldn't call it mobbing, but our previous rapport and closeness were lost.*

On the other hand, Ben and Daisy described increased workload as contributing to a gradual loss of control over their work.

> ***Ben:*** *I usually avoid sharing what I know. I intentionally act this way to avoid additional work. If it becomes known that I am capable of handling certain tasks, I will inevitably be given extra workload, and no option to decline. That's why I try to avoid it.*
>
> ***Daisy:*** *When my workload increases, I lose my sense of control. Multiple sports courses, hundreds of students, exams, assignments, and various bureaucratic and administrative tasks… Sometimes we are even asked to assist with tasks in the student affairs office. You reach a point where you no longer have the capacity to manage or control things.*

Several participants also referred to emotional exhaustion. Henry and George described their work as increasingly detached from their academic identity.

> ***Henry:*** *There are times when my job feels meaningless to me. I am a research assistant, the lowest-ranked member of the academic staff, yet I am still a scientist. I want to conduct my own studies, write articles, and work on research projects; however, I can hardly find time for academic work due to the faculty's administrative tasks.*
>
> ***George:*** *I have become like an ordinary clerk here, constantly dealing with paperwork and supporting the department's administrative processes. Or sometimes, I feel like an IT specialist, spending my time managing news and announcements on the website rather than doing research. I am supposed to be a research assistant, but it simply isn't possible.*

Participants further suggested that the loss of work-life balance blurred the boundary between working time and private life, and that this spillover contributed to fatigue and procrastination. Anna explained that the absence of fixed working hours reduced personal time and occasionally disrupted sleep and eating routines. Daisy described flexible working hours as a source of stress because work demands continued during holidays and leave periods (*No one forces us to arrive early in the morning, but if there is a task during holidays or annual leave, we are still obligated to complete it. Thus, the flexibility of working hours manifests as a stressor for me*). Henry indicated that urgent administrative demands frequently displaced his academic work and led to postponement. Hall et al. (2019) indicated that a high level of procrastination has a 70% impact on emotional exhaustion. Additionally, Ethan's inability to put his new ideas into practice due to workload and intensity suggests that employees not only experience emotional exhaustion but may also have limited capacity to translate their innovative contributions into actual behaviour (*Sometimes I think of a new idea and come to my office to work on it; I turn on the computer, but five minutes later, I find myself thinking about something else. I start a task, but it remains unfinished*). This is consistent with findings indicating that negative leadership and high work pressure can, under certain conditions, weaken employees' innovative behaviour in non-linear ways (Yuan et al., 2022).

Finally, several participants described a mismatch between their expectations on entering academia and the reality of their work environment, which they interpreted as a breach of the psychological contract. This sense of disappointment was reflected in accounts of role mismatch and alienation from academic work. Anna explained that she had expected research-

centred work but instead encountered substantial administrative responsibilities. Ethan described a similar mismatch between the work promised at the time of entry and the clerical tasks that dominated the position (*This is not science; it is bureaucratic work. My profession has begun to feel meaningless.*). Aydın and Özeren (2019), in a qualitative study with 25 research assistants in Türkiye, found that discrepancies between initial expectations and actual academic conditions led to feelings of meaninglessness and job alienation.

> ***Ben:*** *When I started this job, I expected to conduct scientific research as a research assistant to collect data, analyses it, write articles, or contribute book chapters. However, being obligated to serve on administrative committees or perform tasks assigned by the deanship has led to profound disappointment.*

Job Burnout and Organizational Cynicism

Some participants indicated logical inconsistencies in workplace decision-making processes and their implementation, as well as a lack of uniformity in the application of decisions, which led to certain tasks being performed carelessly. Participants' accounts in this domain reflected two closely related patterns: experiences consistent with job burnout and the gradual development of organisational cynicism. Across the interviews, burnout was described through delayed task completion, reduced care in work performance, physical and mental fatigue, and diminished enthusiasm toward assigned duties. Ben described intentionally delaying assigned tasks in order to avoid being given new ones immediately (*I now hold onto tasks assigned to me for 15 days instead of completing them today or tomorrow. The reason is that the faster I finish, the quicker one is assigned*). Clara emphasised the physical and cognitive consequences of late-night work requests (*At 9 p.m., I receive a message saying a report needs to be written: "Will this be ready by 8 a.m. tomorrow?". I end up at the computer until 2 a.m. You expose yourself to hours of blue light and then try to sleep. I have also started to feel physically exhausted*). Henry reported a marked decline in enthusiasm and a corresponding reduction in work quality (*I no longer have the initial enthusiasm I once had. When a task comes in, I complete it quickly, if there are errors, so be it. Why maintain high quality? A "just get it done" mentality has taken over everyone*). George and Daisy similarly reflected on the consequences of being seen as a reliable worker. In their account, performing well did not lead to recognition but rather to repeated over-assignment, which he interpreted as deeply unfair.

> ***Daisy:*** *Generally speaking, there is a pattern in academia: if someone performs a task well, they are typically assigned more work.*
>
> ***George:*** *My department chair said that "The work we give you is neither deficient, late, nor erroneous, we get exactly what we want from you. But when we assign tasks to others, we unfortunately encounter problems. To avoid such issues, we try to rely on you as much as possible." What!!! Is it possible to have a system where the person who successfully completes tasks is punished, while those who do not perform well are rewarded by not being given additional duties?*

Smeenk et al. (2009), in their study of university employees across six European countries, stated that managerial decision-making styles directly impact employees' job performance and quality. They further reported that the combination of these ineffective managerial decisions

and excessive overtime resulted in mental and even physical exhaustion. Consequently, they noted that this organisational structure, which contributes to workplace burnout, prompted research assistants to engage in procrastination as a means of protecting themselves mentally. Indeed, Galanis et al. (2023) indicate that employees exhibit withdrawal behaviours at work to safeguard their mental health. In the study by Tabakakis et al. (2020), individuals in research positions were found to experience high levels of workplace burnout, with key determinants including excessive overtime, role ambiguity, and perceived injustice.

Workplace stressors and experienced disappointments appear to have led research assistants to develop cynical thoughts and behaviours over time. Accounts were especially evident regarding perceived injustice, lack of appreciation, and the belief that effort was neither recognised nor fairly rewarded. Anna described managerial behaviour as unjust and disrespectful (*There are clear instances of injustice by managers. They address us merely as "assistants" or by our names in a dismissive manner and assign unnecessary workloads. I feel anger toward them*). Ethan emphasised the absence of meaningful managerial response, noting that even when concerns were acknowledged verbally, no practical improvement followed. In his view, this lack of support reinforced the perception that research assistants were treated as temporary and expendable.

> ***Ethan:*** *When any issue is raised, solutions are rarely provided. They acknowledge, "Yes, you work hard, you're right," but no changes follow. The same workload, uncertainty, and tension persist. There is no support, neither from management nor in terms of recognition. This is because they have no intention of retaining us after 3-4 years; we are treated as temporary workers.*

Frank's account illustrated a shift from institutional loyalty to disillusionment. Although he had initially tolerated perceived injustices, he later described reaching a breaking point, at which he expressed increasingly cynical sentiments toward the institution.

> ***Frank:*** *Initially, I thought, "even if there are injustices, it's fine, because there is a psychological contract between us." But as time passed, I experienced a breaking point. If this is how little value is placed on junior staff and these are the conditions, then I will adjust my behaviour accordingly. In some places, assistants are even jokingly referred to as "modern slaves." Such statements lead me to develop increasingly covert and sinister sentiments toward the institution.*

Byrne et al. (2023) stated that feelings of inadequacy among employees who feel alienated from their work subsequently transform into hostile sentiments. Inequities in task distribution are also causing a decline in motivation among young academics and eroding their trust in managerial colleagues. In their study of university employees in Pakistan, Nazir et al. (2024) demonstrated that organisational injustice negatively moderates employees' motivation. Similarly, Kee and Chung's (2021) research identified a negative correlation between organisational injustice and motivation, with a direct impact on turnover intention. Azeem et al. (2020) also established a positive relationship between workplace dissatisfaction and burnout. Zhao et al. (2024) reached comparable findings in their study of healthcare workers. In our research, some participants reported feeling unappreciated and lacking a sense of motivation after successfully completing tasks. Vasquez et al. (2020) found that job insecurity negatively

affects job satisfaction, with lack of recognition acting as a mediator in this relationship. Bregenzer et al. (2022) further emphasised that institutional recognition, beyond mere supervisor appreciation, holds greater importance. In their study of female academics, Ronnie et al. (2022) found that academics experienced psychological contract breaches due to increased workloads and insufficient support during the pandemic, resulting in anger and distrust toward their institutions.

Taken together, these accounts show that burnout-related experiences were intertwined with unfairness, lack of recognition, and distrust toward managerial structures. This aligns with evidence that high job demands and low control create a particularly unfavourable condition for burnout and work engagement (Wu et al., 2023). The following section turns more directly to participants' descriptions of quiet quitting as a pattern of withdrawal from discretionary involvement and organisational engagement.

Quiet Quitting

Participants' accounts in this domain reflected a clear pattern of withdrawal from discretionary effort and voluntary engagement. In many cases, quiet quitting was described not as a single decision but as a gradual response to prolonged strain, perceived unfairness, and limited organisational support. Ben described a deliberate effort to avoid unnecessary visibility and extra tasks. In his account, this protective strategy was closely associated with quiet quitting. (*I avoid all unnecessary tasks. I refrain from leaving my office, wandering the hallways because if they see me, they assign work to me. This naturally leads to quiet quitting*).

Clara, Daisy, George, and Iris similarly indicated that they avoided taking on additional responsibilities whenever possible and consciously limited their involvement to the boundaries of their formal job descriptions. One participant linked quiet quitting to uneven workload distribution and the perceived importance of leadership quality. In this account, unfair task allocation and weak managerial oversight contributed to withdrawal, slower task completion, and reduced willingness to accept new responsibilities. Another participant defined quiet quitting as a reluctant form of remaining in the organisation while deliberately restricting effort, delaying work, and disengaging from tasks that were not strictly required. In the same account, the participant noted that this process had at times been accompanied by thoughts of resignation. Several participants described quiet quitting as a form of self-protection in which voluntary duties were gradually abandoned, and attention was restricted to mandatory work. This was also reflected in statements emphasising minimum compliance, reduced participation in voluntary projects, and reluctance to take on responsibilities not formally required. These narratives are illustrated below with examples.

> ***Ben:*** *The manager's leadership role becomes crucial. If the department chair fails to act equitably, individuals are driven to burnout and begin withdrawing from tasks, performing them carelessly, slowing down work to avoid new assignments, in other words, reaching the stage of quiet quitting. If someone has arrived at quiet quitting, I believe the situation is truly serious.*
>
> ***Frank:*** *For me, quiet quitting means intentionally not performing tasks, deliberately delaying work, remaining in the organization reluctantly, and, even unwillingly, causing*

harm to the institution when no solutions are found for workplace injustices. I have gone through all these stages and have even considered actual resignation.

George: *You withdraw from voluntary duties without putting yourself in difficult positions, avoiding traps, and preventing the institution from effectively utilizing you. During these periods, I only perform the tasks I am strictly required to do.*

Iris: *I now only fulfil the minimum required duties. I complete mandatory tasks out of necessity, but I no longer participate in voluntary projects or additional work.*

When all findings are evaluated holistically, they indicate that a significant portion of participants have consciously or unconsciously transitioned into a state of quiet quitting. However, as noted in the literature, quiet quitting is characterised by an individual's withdrawal from taking on tasks and responsibilities at work, demonstrating minimal performance, and engaging in a form of rebellion to preserve work-life balance (Çalışkan, 2023). Nevertheless, emotional exhaustion and workplace burnout were prevalent among the many participants. The behaviours of some participants align with what the literature terms a psychological contract breach. Taken together, these accounts indicate that quiet quitting was experienced as a gradual and deliberate reduction in discretionary engagement, rather than as a fully separate stage detached from the broader pattern of strain described in the previous sections. The findings suggest that withdrawal behaviours emerged alongside, and in some cases were shaped by, emotional exhaustion, frustration, and perceptions of limited recognition. Bhawna, Dogra, and Akram's (2026) study of early-career academics also shows that workplace stressors intensify quiet quitting tendencies, thereby indicating that the findings of our study are similarly supported across different geographic and cultural contexts.

In Turkish higher education system, the 33a status provides permanent tenure security, with contracts automatically renewed at specified intervals provided academic performance thresholds are met. In contrast, the 50d status pertains to academics recruited by universities to pursue master's or doctoral studies; upon completion of their studies, these young academics' affiliations with the university are terminated. This distinction explains variations in attitudes and behaviours between tenured and temporary research assistants in certain situations. For example, while those with permanent 33a status may react to excessive workloads and tasks outside their job descriptions by slowing down work, temporary 50d status holders tend to remain silent due to job insecurity and are effectively employed as part of academia's precariat (Aydın & Özeren, 2019; Balki & Köksal, 2026; Durmaz, 2017). In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Starling (2022) states that anger, exclusion, and alienation from work are key indicators among employees experiencing job insecurity. This distinction points to job security as a contextual condition that may shape how quiet quitting is enacted, rather than as a deterministic explanation of the phenomenon itself.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study suggests that quiet quitting in precarious academic settings is part of a broader process of strain, withdrawal, and erosion of meaning rather than solely a boundary-setting behaviour. Job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, psychological contract breach, burnout, and

organisational cynicism appeared closely interconnected in participants' accounts. The JD-R framework helps interpret how high demands, limited resources, insufficient recognition, and weak managerial support may contribute to withdrawal in this academic context. The findings do not establish quiet cracking as a distinct construct; instead, they suggest that it may function as a contemporary expression for accumulated strain already described through established concepts. The Turkish higher education context also reveals culturally situated manifestations, including continued task compliance despite emotional withdrawal.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that universities should reduce unnecessary administrative burden, clarify role expectations, and protect time for research-related work. Participants' accounts also point to the importance of fair workload distribution, respectful communication, and more consistent managerial support. These measures may help reduce the conditions that encourage silence, minimal compliance, and withdrawal. In addition, universities may consider work-family supportive arrangements, as improving work-life balance may help alleviate sustained strain and reduce the likelihood of disengagement and withdrawal (Li & Wang, 2022).

At a broader level, the study highlights the need for institutions to monitor early signs of prolonged exhaustion and disengagement among research assistants. Supportive leadership and clearer organisational processes may help prevent strain from developing into more entrenched forms of withdrawal. Because the 33a and 50d statuses differ in terms of employment security, interventions should be sensitive to local contractual realities and the distinct vulnerability of temporary staff. This further indicates that the adoption of such measures may prevent the emergence of new related phenomena (e.g., quiet cracking), positioning these practices as a proactive and positive form of organisational support.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While providing contextually rich qualitative insights through a phenomenologically informed and theory-guided design, this study has several limitations. First, the small and relatively homogeneous sample of nine research assistants from Turkish sports sciences faculties limits the transferability of the findings to other disciplinary or national contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design captures participants' accounts at a single point in time and cannot illuminate how experiences of strain and withdrawal may develop over time. Third, because quiet cracking is treated in this study as an emerging and contested interpretive concept, the findings should be read as context-specific interpretations rather than as evidence of a fully established phenomenon.

Future research could build on these findings by using longitudinal qualitative designs to examine how strain and withdrawal may change over time in academic settings. Comparative studies across disciplines, countries, and employment categories would also help clarify whether the patterns identified here are context-specific or more widely observable. Further qualitative work could focus on refining the conceptual boundaries of quiet cracking in relation to burnout, psychological contract breach, and quiet quitting before any attempt is made to operationalise it quantitatively.

Conclusion

This study suggests that research assistants in Turkish Higher Education described workplace experiences characterised by job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, breach of the psychological contract, burnout, organisational cynicism, and quiet quitting.

The findings also indicate that these experiences were closely interconnected and interpreted through the JD-R framework. The concept of quiet cracking was not treated in this study as a fully established and clearly delineated construct. Instead, the findings point to its interpretation as a contemporary concept increasingly discussed in the literature, which may help make sense of accumulated patterns of strain and disengagement among early-career academics.

Ethics Approval and Consent To Participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki 2024, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Yozgat Bozok University (protocol code 25/28 dated 14 May 2025. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the OSF repository, https://osf.io/74qbd/overview?view_only=45a86b2421bf4d6599b43a9e43946b23

Author Contributions Statement

Conceptualization, K.Ç., S.G.E. and S.S.; methodology, K.Ç., S.G.E. and O.K; formal analysis, K.Ç., S.G.E. and O.K; investigation, K.Ç., S.G.E. and S.S.; data curation, K.Ç. and S.G.E.; writing-original draft preparation, K.Ç., S.G.E. and O.K.; visualization, K.Ç.; supervision, S.G.E. and O.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

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