



Trends in Psychological Safety in the Rural Indian Workforce

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Abstract: The concept of psychological safety in the workplace has expanded over the last several decades due to its enormous impact on employee well-being, productivity, and organizational performance. Past literature has provided comprehensive reviews on this concept, its historical evolution, its applicability to modern-day workplaces, as well its impact and implications. Most of this literature is limited to workplaces in the West, and this study attempts to explore this concept, and the variables affecting it, in a Rural Indian context. The study recruited participants from an Indian Food Manufacturing Company residing in the rural Kumaon region of India and explored levels of psychological safety as well as its potentially impacting variables, such as employment period, age, gender, and marital status. Participants ($N = 27$) were asked to self-report demographic information and their experience of perceived psychological safety on Google Forms. Descriptive statistics was conducted to analyze this self-reported data and results indicated that the majority of participants experienced high levels of psychological safety ($N = 26$). Additionally, those with a tenure period of over 5 years ($N = 16$) and less than 1 year ($N = 2$) experienced higher levels of psychological safety than those with a tenure period between 1-5 years ($N = 8$). The review concludes with limitations and future scope for research in the area.

Index Terms: Psychological Safety, Well-being, Productivity, Performance

INTRODUCTION

Psychological Safety in the workplace has emerged as an area for critical research and practice, gaining significance due to its fervent impact on employee well-being, performance, and overall organizational effectiveness. Defined as an employee's perception to take interpersonal risks, and express their thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concerns without the fear of consequences, psychological safety creates an environment of mutual respect, trust, and overall well-being within an organization (Edmondson et al., 2014). As it allows for an employee to feel valued and supported, psychological safety is the foundational need that directs an employee toward self-actualization. In the modern-day workplace, the concept of psychological safety has become increasingly relevant, as it fosters innovation and collaboration which promotes effective organizational outcomes. Previous research conducted by Newman et al. (2017) in their systematic review of the literature and Frazier et al. (2017) in their meta-analytical review highlighted the positive impact of psychological safety on employee engagement, effective communication, increased learning, knowledge sharing, teaming, and overall organizational performance. As organizations strive to create inclusive and supportive work environments, understanding and encouraging the practice of psychological safety has become a crucial step for increasing job satisfaction, employee productivity, teamwork practices, and organizational outcomes (Edmondson, 2002).

Need for Psychological Safety at the Workplace

The notion of psychological safety has evolved as shown in a study by Edmondson et al. (2014) as it delves into its historical roots and resurgence as an interpersonal construct. The study traces the origins and evolution of psychological safety back to previous literature emphasizing group dynamics and highlights the significance

of its understanding and practice in modern, contemporary workplace scenarios. The authors explore the evolution of psychological safety from a mere consideration of feedback seeking to an overall understanding of its impact on various organizational outcomes. Additionally, to provide a thorough comprehension of the concept, Newman et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of existing literature which analyzed and examined the antecedents, consequences, and implications of psychological safety within organizations. The findings offer critical information about the factors that contribute to and foster psychological safety, such as supportive leadership, effective communication, positive team dynamics, and a nurturing work culture. The review also illustrated the correlation between psychological safety and important organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction, motivation, performance, and employee well-being.

Building upon the foundation of psychological safety, Frazier et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analytical review to further provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of psychological safety in the workplace. The meta-analysis demonstrates a strong positive correlation between psychological safety and job satisfaction, suggesting that employees who feel safe in expressing their ideas, opinions, and concerns are more likely to be satisfied with their work. Findings also reveal a positive correlation between psychological safety and performance as an organizational outcome, indicating that those who feel psychologically safe in their workplace tend to perform better at their jobs. Additionally, the study also highlights the impact of psychological safety on overall employee well-being, as those employees who experience higher levels of psychological safety are more likely to experience reduced stress and anxiety, thus indicating improved mental health and well-being. This can be attributed to the sense of trust and support that comes with the ability to express ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences. Another study by Edmondson et al. (2014) suggests that psychological safety allows for feelings of trust within teams, encouraging them to take interpersonal risks and practice open communication, which in turn contributes to increased collaboration and innovation within organizations. This allows employees to feel more comfortable and supported in their organizations, leading to improved job performance and employee satisfaction. These findings reflect the importance of promoting and implementing practices that facilitate psychological safety for both employee well-being and success as well as effective organizational performance.

The positive work culture fostered by the implementation of psychological safety has significant implications for organizations. Increased job satisfaction and well-being lead to increased motivation and employee engagement within organizations; engaged employees tend to invest their time and energy in their work more than others, leading to increased productivity, performance, and organizational effectiveness. Additionally, when employees feel supported and valued and their work meaningful, employees tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging to their organization- this increases their commitment to the organization and in turn, reduces turnover rates. Finally, a psychologically safe work environment fosters a positive, safe organizational culture that promotes collaboration, innovation, creativity, and open communication. By feeling safe to take interpersonal risks and sharing opinions and ideas with mutual respect, an organization is likely to see creative problem-solving, improved decision-making, task completion, and increased learning among its employees.

Psychological safety is a crucial imperative to a culture of creativity, problem-solving, and improvement and growth within employees and teams. A seminal study by Edmondson et al. (1999) explored the relationship between psychological safety and the willingness of team members to take interpersonal risks, exchange information, and learn from and rectify mistakes. The finding of a positive correlation between these variables suggests that when team members perceive a psychologically safe environment, they are more likely to take interpersonal risks and engage in growth-oriented and learning behaviors. This may manifest through open discussions of ideas, seeking and giving out feedback, admitting to and learning from mistakes, and collaborating with others to complete tasks and find solutions. The absence of fear of consequences allows employees to step out of their comfort zones and explore and experiment with new ideas, perspectives, and behaviors as well as challenge the status quo and move away from existing practices and policies. This process promotes critical thinking, innovation, and increased efficiency. The implementation of psychological safety within teams allows for a more engaged and motivated workforce, as employees feel valued for their contributions and work which in turn can lead to improved organizational efficiency, adaptability, and agility.

Aim of the Study

In the context of psychological safety in Rural India, this research seeks to investigate how perceived psychological safety varies among old and new employees within a diverse workforce in a Food Manufacturing Company. The study also aims to explore and understand how variables, such as age, tenure, marital status, and

religion, impact perceived psychological safety. By assessing the levels of psychological safety, the study aims to gain insight into the current work culture and its impact on employee well-being and performance and ways of mitigation.

The study also attempts to identify the factors that contribute to the establishment and maintenance of psychological safety within the rural Indian workforce. Cultural norms, leadership styles, and Organizational policies in India may play a crucial role in the formation and experience of psychological safety among employees. A thorough insight into these factors can offer appropriate guidance to organizations in fostering a psychologically safe workspace in the Indian Context, thus leading to enhanced employee and organizational outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I. Participants

Convenience sampling was conducted and a total of 27 participants were recruited for the study. All participants are employed at Midas Foods International Private Limited and reside in the Kumaon region of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand, India. Midas Foods International Private Limited is a food manufacturing organization with base operations in Kashipur, Uttarakhand. A mid-sized company, the organization has an attrition rate of below 5%.

II. Procedure

Participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire on Google Forms, before which they were debriefed about the study; participants were informed that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained. After the debriefing, participants were asked for consent and given instructions on how to respond to the contents of the survey. First, participants were asked to fill out demographic information, such as age, gender, place of residence, marital status, employment period at Midas, and their role. After, participants were made aware of the concept of psychological safety. Participants were asked to self-report their experience of psychological safety via a series of statements with responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Finally, all responses were analyzed using the Google Forms data analysis tool.

III. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to assess the trends in perceived psychological safety from new to old employees.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aims to analyze and assess trends in psychological safety especially between old and new employees within a Rural Indian Workforce. Additionally, this research seeks to investigate the relationship between extraneous variables, such as age, gender, and marital status and perceived psychological safety amongst these employees.

The participants' ages range from 22 to 52, with the majority being male ($N = 24$) and the rest female ($N = 3$). Most of the participants who took part in the study have been employed at Midas Foods for over 10 years. Additionally, the majority of the sample indicated that they are married or in a domestic partnership.

Results indicate that though the majority of the sample experiences psychological safety in their workplace, participants who have an employment period of 5 or more years ($N = 16$) experience higher levels of psychological safety than those who have been employed for less ($N = 11$). However, new employees, specifically those with an employment period of less than 1 year ($N = 2$), also experience higher levels of psychological safety than those employed for a period between 1-5 years.

Additionally, the results of the study indicate that age as a variable does not significantly impact perceived psychological safety. The age of the sample ranged from 22 to 52 and nearly all participants indicated moderate to high levels of psychological safety ($N = 26$). Additionally, marital status also does not seem to impact psychological safety; the majority of both married ($N = 24$) and unmarried individuals ($N = 2$) experienced high levels of psychological safety.

With its profound impact on employee well-being, job satisfaction, performance, and organizational productivity and effectiveness, workplace psychological safety has been a concept that has been a critical area of research in the last several years. Within an organizational setting, psychological safety is a crucial element in fostering a positive, supportive, and effective work environment. This study attempts to evaluate trends in and factors that contribute to psychological safety, and findings run consistent with previous research that indicates

that psychological safety strongly correlates with and influences various organizational outcomes, such as employee performance, job satisfaction, and overall well-being.

This study attempts to analyze levels and trends in psychological safety from new to old employees within a food manufacturing company, Midas Foods India, as well as the impact of age, gender, and marital status on perceived psychological safety. Results of the study indicate that the majority of the employees at Midas Foods India experience high levels of psychological safety, job satisfaction, and support. These results run consistent with Midas Foods' attrition rate of below 5%. Furthermore, the findings of the study are implicative of employment period possibly impacting psychological safety; employees with a tenure period of over 5 years report higher levels of psychological safety than employees with a shorter tenure period. However, those with a tenure period of less than a year experience higher levels of psychological safety than those with an employment period of 1-5 years. These findings suggest that organizational policies should be formulated and implemented in a way that benefits both newcomers as well as seasoned employees. This way, psychological safety does not only pertain to a select group of employees but to the entire organization as a whole.

Additionally, findings indicate that age and marital status do not have a significant impact on psychological safety. This suggests that there may be objectivity in psychological safety experienced by employees depending on the organizational structure and policies that foster a psychologically safe work environment.

The results of this study pave the way for increased employee and organizational productivity and effectiveness, especially for organizations basing their operations in suburban and rural areas of India with a culturally diverse workforce. Particularly, organizations can gain insight into the concept of psychological safety and the significance of its fosterage, as it promotes employee motivation, job satisfaction, performance, well-being, and ultimately, improved organizational outcomes. A thorough evaluation and comprehensive review of this concept can assist leaders in identifying areas of improvement and implementing HR policies that nurture and strengthen a positive, supportive, and safe work culture and environment.

Secondly, the findings of this study also shed light on how demographic variables impact psychological safety, such as tenure period, age, gender, and marital status; the study suggests that not all variables have a significant impact, and HR policies pertaining to culture and work environment, leadership practices, and organizational support have a stronger impact. This can serve as an area for further research.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides crucial insight into the concept of workplace psychological safety within a rural Indian workforce, it also maintains some limitations. Firstly, the study employs convenience sampling by recruiting participants only from Midas Foods India. This may not represent the entire rural Indian workforce or those employed at other manufacturing companies. Additionally, the sample size is relatively small. Both of these factors may reduce the generalizability of the study. It is also imperative to note that within the sample, there was significantly reduced variation in gender and marital status. Thus, it is irrelevant to compare the impact of these variables on the experience of perceived psychological safety among participants.

Furthermore, the study made use of a self-report questionnaire due to which participants may be compelled to provide more favorable, desirable responses. This could subject the study to social desirability bias which may potentially affect the results. Also, the study analysis of data was limited to descriptive statistics; this does not provide enough reliable information on a causal and/or correlational relationship between the said variables and perceived psychological safety.

Hence it is recommended that future studies incorporate more organizations in India as well use a bigger and more varied sample to get a more nationally representative idea of psychological safety in the country. The larger sample size and the use of interpretive statistics can provide a more reliable and valid overview of psychological safety.

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