



Umbrella Summary

Psychological Safety

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is the belief that one's workplace is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). It has been suggested that psychological safety is a condition necessary for people to feel attached to and engaged in their work, when people feel they can reveal themselves without fear of negative consequences to status or career (Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety is not only an individual perception; it can also be a group-level shared belief that a team or work group is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). The most popular way to measure psychological safety is with a 7-item scale that includes questions such as, "Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues" and "It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help" (Edmondson, 1999).

Why is psychological safety important?

Psychological safety is important because it is positively related to several job attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, individual-level psychological safety is strongly associated with work engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment. It is also moderately associated with task performance and citizenship behaviors, which are discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as such as volunteering, helping others, and making suggestions for improvement, that benefit the group and organization (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017). Group-level psychological safety shows similar associations with job attitudes and behaviors, though there is insufficient information available to examine its connections to commitment and citizenship behaviors (Frazier et al., 2017).

What contributes to psychological safety?

Due to a lack of experimental research, there is little evidence as to what causes the development of psychological safety. However, there are a few personality variables that are associated with individual perceptions of psychological safety. Specifically, having a proactive personality (i.e., a stable disposition toward engaging in proactive behaviors), being emotionally stable, or having a learning orientation (a personal focus on increasing competence and developing new skills) is associated with higher perceptions of psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). Both individual- and group-level psychological safety are also positively related to peer support, a variety of indicators of leadership support, and organizational support. Finally, psychological safety is positively associated with job design characteristics, including autonomy, interdependence, and role clarity, for both individuals and groups (Frazier et al., 2017).

How can psychological safety be increased?

It remains unclear how to definitively increase psychological safety. First, it is not clear from existing research which of the conditions discussed above are necessary and/or sufficient for the development of psychological safety, nor have clearly causal relationships been established. It is also not well understood how psychological safety develops over time and how psychological safety can be rebuilt in a workplace if it is broken. The traits of proactive personality, emotional stability, and learning orientation may not be relatively malleable within an individual worker. Thus, agencies could focus on facilitating positive relationships between workers and leaders, which is actionable. Agencies can also design positions to improve workers' autonomy, chances for interdependent work, and clarity of role within the organization.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Individual-level psychological safety is strongly predictive of work engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment and moderately predictive of task performance and citizenship behaviors.
- ▶ Group-level psychological safety is strongly predictive of work engagement and job satisfaction and moderately predictive of task performance.
- ▶ There are no meta-analyses assessing the connection between psychological safety and turnover, though, due its connection with performance, it is possible that higher psychological safety may be associated with lower involuntary turnover caused by poor performance, but research is needed to test that question. Voluntary turnover may also be lower due to higher commitment, but additional research is also needed to test that question.
- ▶ Due to a lack of experimental research, there is no clear evidence as to what causes the development of psychological safety; this is a significant research need.
- ▶ Individuals with a proactive personality or who are emotionally stable or who have a learning orientation are more likely to perceive and experience psychological safety.
- ▶ Both individual- and group-level psychological safety are positively related to peer support, leadership support, organizational support, and several aspects of job design.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess psychological safety should consider the scale developed by Edmondson (1999).

References

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Author(s)

Rebecca Orsi, PhD, MS, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical School
Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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