

Kindness at work: The impact on employee trust and belonging of working in a psychologically informed environment.

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Introduction

In the current climate of economic uncertainty where many employers are seeking to recruit in a tight labour market (CIPD, 2022) retaining and ensuring the engagement of employees is paramount. The importance of understanding what motivates and engages employees to ensure retention and high-performance working is of particular interest to those working in adult social care where recruitment is extremely challenging. In October 2022 it was reported that there were 165,000 vacant posts in adult social care (Skills for Care, 2022). This study will explore whether kindness or prosocial behaviour in the workplace is impacted by working in a psychologically informed environment and whether this has a positive impact, not only on service-users in adult social care (Benson & Brennan, 2018) but also on employees resulting in higher levels of trust, belonging and engagement.

Research Question and Objectives

To what extent does working in a psychologically informed environment impact on employee trust and belonging?

Research Objective	How will this objective be met?
To explore whether employee belonging is impacted by working in a psychologically informed environment.	Literature Review Interviews
To develop the application of social identity theory in relation to employee belonging in a psychologically informed environment.	Literature review Interviews
To explore the impact that working in a psychologically informed environment has on the trust relationship between employees and their employer.	Interviews
To explore the impact of kindness/prosocial behaviour on employee wellbeing, trust and belonging	Literature review Interviews
To develop the application of organisational support theory in relation to employee wellbeing and job satisfaction when working in a psychologically informed environment	Literature review Interviews
To understand whether working in a psychologically informed environment has a positive impact on trust, belonging and intention to remain.	Literature review Interviews

Relevance and Impact of Research

This research will centre on three organisations within the Liverpool City Region whose focus is working with vulnerable people in adult social care and supported housing. The three companies are at different stages of implementing trauma informed care (McNally et al., 2022) and working within a psychologically informed environment (Benson & Brennan, 2018). However, if there is a positive impact on how employees trust and feel that they belong to the organisations when they work in this way, there is potential for adapting a psychological working environment to other employers whose business involves employees dealing with challenging service-users or customers.

Literature Review

While there has been research undertaken into the impact a psychologically informed environment has on service-users (Phipps et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2022), there has been little or no research on the impact that working in this way has on employees, particularly those working to support vulnerable people with complex mental health conditions who can present significant challenges.

Benson & Brennan (2018) refer to a psychologically informed environment as a place where the overall approach is holistic and considers the psychological and emotional needs of service users. Many of the people who experience homelessness have suffered complex trauma in their lives which in turn can have a negative impact on that person's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and self-image (Bride, 2004). For front line support workers, working in this environment can be challenging, both in terms of the actual work but also through the impact on them as individuals (Schneider et al., 2022).

There is evidence that employees working in this sector have a deep motivation and compassion to seek job satisfaction through helping those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged (Kulkarni et al., 2013; Wirth et al., 2019). However, this can lead to high levels of emotional exhaustion (Lemieux-Cumberlege et al., 2023) and the potential for front-line workers to suffer secondary traumatic stress (Bride, 2004), which in turn could potentially leave employees vulnerable to stress and burn out (Ferris et al., 2016).

Having identified the potential vulnerability of employees whose main focus is supporting vulnerable people in these challenging environments Ferris et al. (2016) termed this "the Florence Nightingale effect". They put forward the proposition that recognising the significant challenges that service-users face could potentially increase job satisfaction and reduce burnout for those employees when they have a shared solidarity with their colleagues and have a strong identification with the organisation in which they work. This organisational identification provides employees with an additional resource to deal with the challenges they face together with other colleagues, leading to increased positivity in workplace outcomes.

Other areas considered in the literature review for this study will be the concept of reflective practice (Schon, 1994), employee engagement (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008), kindness and prosocial behaviour (Hart & Hart, 2023) and trust and belonging (Searle et al., 2011). Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) are the two theories being used to explore the research themes.

Research Design

As this study is to explore the feelings and experience of people working in a psychologically informed environment and whether this does impact on trust and belonging, it was felt that a subjective ontological approach (Cassell et al., 2019) alongside an interpretivist epistemological approach (Grix, 2019) was appropriate to the study. Having identified the philosophical approach, the methodology for conducting research for this study will take a qualitative approach (Scotland, 2012) and will help with understanding the experience and beliefs of those working within a psychologically informed environment (Wisker, 2007)

Research Method

Research has been undertaken using semi-structured interviews (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A pilot focus group was initially facilitated with thematic analysis utilised to analyse the data collected (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The pilot focus group has been used as a point of reflection to inform the rest of the study and over twenty semi-structured interviews have now been undertaken.

Initial Findings

Interviews have been conducted across two organisations with themes emerging including the importance and impact of kindness in the workplace; the need for organisational support including senior leadership and direct management; and how feelings of trust and belonging contribute to individual and team performance, psychological safety, and employee wellbeing. Initial findings are showing that where certain conditions as outlined above are in place employees in these difficult-to-recruit roles have a stronger intention to remain in their roles and within the specific organisation.

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