

Compassionate employees: An exploration of working in a psychologically informed environment and the impact this has on engagement?

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1. 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. According to a recent survey by Skills for Care (2022) the study reported that there were 165,000 vacant posts in adult social care.

The aim of my study will be to investigate the impact that working in a psychologically informed environment has on employees whose role is to support vulnerable service-users in adult social care (Benson & Brennan 2018) and whether this results in higher levels of engagement.

2. Relevance and Impact of Research (research setting)

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 (PIE) (Benson & Brennan, 2018). The largest of the three organisations has 180 employees and has been using Cognitive Analytical Therapy (CAT) (Tyrer and Masterson, 2019) since 2014 for working with service-users. The other two organisations are smaller with approximately 60 employees each; one has been moving towards working in a PIE since 2018 and the other more recently, since 2021. All three organisations provide supported accommodation and housing for people who have been identified as homeless.

Several studies have focussed on the impact that working in a psychologically informed environment has on service-users (Phipps et al, 2017; Schneider et al, 2022) but very little research has been undertaken looking specifically at the impact on employees who provide the trauma informed care and support. There are currently approximately 1.5 million people employed in adult social care in England (Foster, 2022) and it is reported that there are significant challenges with recruitment in this sector (Skills for Care, 2022). Establishing a correlation between working in a psychologically informed environment with increased employee engagement and retention has the potential for this to be developed into a model for best practice employment within the adult social care sector and beyond. There is also potential for adapting a psychological working environment to other employers whose business involves employees dealing with challenging service-users or customers. This research will also contribute to achievement of several of the PRME UN Sustainable Development Goals

3. Literature Review

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 (Thompson et al,

2013). 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 (Wirth et al, 2019). However, this can lead to high levels of emotional exhaustion (Stalker et al, 2007) and the potential for front-line workers to suffer secondary traumatic stress (Bride et al, 2004), which in turn could potentially leave employees vulnerable to stress and burn out (Maslach, 2003).

Other areas considered in the literature review for this study will be the concept of reflective practice (Schon, 1994), employee engagement (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008) and trust and belonging (Searle et al, 2011).

4. Theoretical Basis

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) provides a theoretical basis for my research which seeks to extend the theory that has already been applied to support the understanding of workplace issues related to organisational behaviour (Bhave & Glomb, 2016) and aspects of human resource management (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). I propose to further develop this theory by investigating how working in a psychologically informed environment reduces the dissonance that occurs for employees who support adults with challenging and complex behaviour i.e., the dissonance of the working situation (Hinojosa et al, 2017). In an environment where there are potential negative effects on both physical and psychological well-being (Robinson, 2014) studies have reported that employees may have increased job satisfaction (Ferris et al, 2016); this suggests that there is a cognitive discrepancy for those working in these support roles and an opportunity to extend the theory of how this discrepancy is reduced to improve employee engagement and retention.

5. Research Design

This research will follow a mixed methods design which is consistent with a pragmatic approach (Biesta, 2010). Pragmatism is based on the premise that ‘theories can be contextual and generalisable by analysing them for “transferability” to another situation’ (Shannon-Baker, 2015 p4). This approach, therefore, fits with the premise that the findings from the study will be transferrable and relevant to other organisations. It is proposed that the quantitative research will take the form of a questionnaire to be completed by employees in the three identified organisations. This will amount to an approximate sample of 300 employees. The findings identified by the questionnaire will then be used as a basis for either interviews or focus groups with relevant employees, and, while this stage of the research is dependent on the first quantitative stage it is estimated that interviews or focus groups will be held with employees across all three identified organisations. Undertaking this qualitative element of the research will help with understanding the experience and beliefs of those working within a psychologically informed environment (Wisker, 2007). Analysis of both the questionnaire and the qualitative research stage will take the form of thematic analysis (Saunders 2016)

6. References

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