**7 - An exploration of employee trust and belonging for those working in a PIE**

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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 Skills for Care reported that there were 165,000 vacant posts in adult social care. This study will investigate whether working in a psychologically informed environment can have a positive impact, not only on service-users in adult social care (Benson & Brennan, 2018) but also on employees resulting in higher levels of engagement.

**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 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 (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 (Ferris et al., 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2013; Writh 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 (Figley, 2002; Bride et al., 2004), which in turn could potentially leave employees vulnerable to stress and burn out (Maslach, 2003; 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. The suggestion by Ferris et al. (2016) is that identifying with the organisation gives employees 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) and trust and belonging (Searle et al., 2011).

**Theoretical Basis**

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger 1957) provides a theoretical basis for this research. This theory has been applied to support the understanding of workplace issues related to organisational behaviour (Bhave & Glomb, 2016). The proposition that employees who support adults with challenging and complex behaviour may have increased job satisfaction (Ferris et al., 2016) in an environment where there are potential negative effects on both physical and psychological well-being (Robinson, 2014) could be an example of how employees overcome the cognitive discrepancy i.e. the dissonance of the working situation (Hinojosa et al., 2017). A further theory applied to this research is organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) which is based on social exchange theory (Homans, 1961) and ideas of reciprocal behaviour. When an organisation values and treats its employees with respect, they will in turn increase their commitment towards that organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades, Eisenberger & Armeli, 2001).

**Research Design**

Initially, it was proposed that this research followed a mixed methods design which is consistent with a pragmatic approach (Biesta, 2010). However, as it is intended 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 more 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**

It is proposed that the research will be undertaken using semi-structured interviews (Di-Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) and focus groups (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). A pilot focus group has already been facilitated with thematic analysis utilised to analyse the data collected (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This pilot focus group will be used as a point of reflection to inform the rest of the study.

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