Two Different Worlds? Psychological Safety for Minority and Non-Minority Group Members

Purpose: Psychological safety reflects a climate where individuals feel free to speak up and take risks without fear of a negative impact on themselves or their career (Edmondson, 1999). Speaking up and having a voice have been highlighted as particularly important to psychological safety in the literature, however some recent work suggests that voice may not be valued equally by those of different cultural backgrounds (Kwon & Farndale, 2002). Further, being a member of a minority societal group may also impact how voice is perceived and therefore impact that individual's experience of psychological safety (Woodson, 2020). Given that we know voice may not be a universal hallmark of psychological safety, this research project sought to gain an initial understanding of what aspects of psychological safety may be equally important for all employees and which may differ in importance depending on an employee's
status as a minority organizational member or not. Based on the literature, four categories for psychological safety at work were assessed: belongingness, appreciation/self-esteem, authenticity, voice. A fifth category, mental health, was added later based on the frequency with which this was mentioned.

Procedure:

Data were gathered from full time and part time employees across Canada using Amazon Mechanical Turk. After removing spurious data, 310 respondents comprised the final dataset, with 50% indicating that they feel as a minority member of their organization and 50% indicating they do not. Data consisted of responses to the question "What does psychological safety mean to you?" The two trained research assistants developed a codebook for themes from existing literature on psychological safety, and an additional category "mental health" emerged from the responses. How frequently each theme was mentioned formed the basis for further analyses.

Results:

A One-Way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there were differences between those who identified as minority members in their organizations and those who did not. No differences were found between the frequency with which respondents referred to mental health, authenticity or appreciation when indicating what PS means, however, belongingness was mentioned significantly more frequently for minority organizational members and voice for non-minority organizational members.

Conclusion: Minority organizational members describe psychological safety differently than non-minorities. While the facets of psychological safety are acknowledged by members of both groups, there are differences with respect to the importance of the different facets.