

Trust and Psychological Safety for Minority and Non-minority Employees

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Purpose: Past research on psychological safety has paid scant attention to how members of minority groups experience psychological safety, despite the emphasis on psychological safety as a climate where employees feel valued (Edmonson, 2004). Trust is directly related to an assessment of whether another is benevolent (has good intentions) and whether or not another is competent. Research looking at benevolence and competence in organizations has found that organizational roles (such as supervisor, co-worker) make a difference with respect to trust assessments. Trust is an integral component of psychological safety, and some research suggests that being a member of a minority group can impact trust in organizations, yet not much is known regarding how trust in various organizational targets impacts psychological safety for those who identify as minorities in their organization and those who do not. The present research sought to address this gap by examining how trust in the intentions and the actions of both peers and managers predicts psychological safety for minority and non-minority group members.

Procedure: Data were gathered from full time and part time employees across Canada using Amazon Mechanical Turk. After removing spurious data, 310 respondents (37% female, 61% male, 2% neither) comprised the final dataset, with 50% indicating that they feel as a minority member of their organization and 50% indicating they do not.

Results: Results of the employee survey demonstrated that trust in peer intentions, management intentions and management actions predicted psychological safety in the workplace for minority group members. However, only trust in manager intentions predicted psychological safety in the workplace for non-minority group members.

Conclusion: These results suggest that minority group members carry a heavier burden of assessing both peer and management intentions and actions when determining if their workplace is a safe environment, compared to majority group members, who benefit from the privilege of only considering management intentions. The additional emotional and cognitive labour involved in feelings of safety experienced by minority group members is consistent with research that demonstrates that employees from marginalized groups experience higher levels of work stress (Wadsworth et al, 2007). Furthermore, this work contributes to the existing research on psychological safety, by providing evidence that suggests that psychological safety is achieved differently, for individuals who perceive themselves to be part of the minority group, compared to the majority.