

Giving Consideration to Psychological Safety in the Doctoral Program

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Successful doctoral candidates' will contribute new or additional discipline knowledge and show progress toward becoming an autonomous researcher as an outcome of their doctoral program. This will involve the doctoral candidate in a transformational process involving experiences of uncertainty and risk taking, as part of the doctoral learning and development journey, often accompanied by negative emotions and self-doubt. A reality which is demonstrated by the reporting of low levels of wellbeing and high levels of attrition and non-completions in doctoral programs globally.

Within workplace literature psychological safety has been well documented for its positive influence toward adult learning and change. Yet, to date, there is little recognition to the positive benefit psychological safety can contribute to overcoming the challenges of the doctoral journey. This paper gives attention to this gap reporting on a body of conceptual research investigating psychological safety in the context of doctoral learning and development.

Full paper

This paper gives consideration to psychological safety and the potential of this construct to inform doctoral learning and development. Psychological safety gained prominence in the late

1990's and is widely credited as bringing positive benefit to individuals, teams and wider collectives, through enhancing task and role engagement and performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Klinger & Forghani, 2018; Newman et al., 2017). Most of the cited research, however, has focused on the group or team in workplace settings; a focus that has tended to narrow the scope of consideration and definition of the construct. There is therefore, an underutilisation of psychological safety in other settings and contexts, not least in doctoral education, along with alternate theoretical framings to be considered in connection with the educational context, most notably work by Schein (2009) and Kahn (1990).

In light of issues such as persistent candidate attrition, escalating concerns for student well-being, and the sheer cognitive and emotional challenge of doing a doctoral degree, this work is part of a wider doctoral research project; contributing a new dimension in respect of supporting doctoral candidates. This research project has two stages: a conceptual stage and an empirical stage. The conceptual research stage informs this paper. The empirical stage, to be conducted in 2023, will involve in depth interviews with doctoral candidates. Conceptual research can be understood as a theoretical approach focusing on the systematic analysis and understanding of existing concepts or theories relating to a topic, construct or phenomenon of study (Xin et al., 2013). The work draws on literature in psychological safety, adult workplace learning and change, and doctoral learning and development, identifying theoretical concepts that contribute to our understanding of an individual's positive growth and development.

The term 'team psychological safety', was introduced by Edmondson (1999) and defined as 'a shared belief held by members of a team, that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking' (p. 350). This definition was an outcome of research showing a significant difference between the error reporting rates of workplace teams. Further investigation revealed these variations related to the interpersonal relationships within the teams, allowing Edmondson to conclude that teams with open and collaborative relationships are more likely to report errors than teams without. Edmondson's utilisation of psychological safety focuses on 'in the moment'

intrapersonal decisions that individuals make regarding the degree of risk involved in their future action within a team environment. Edmondson (2003) acknowledges her research is specific to the workplace, at a team level, though recognising the opportunity and potential a wider exploration of psychological safety across levels and contexts could afford (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Psychological safety was previously introduced in the workplace literature by Schein in the 1960s. Working in the field of organisational psychology, Schein's earlier scholarship (Schein et al., 1964; Schein & Bennis, 1965) focused on how adults manage change in the workplace. Identifying that for change to be successful the adult must pass through three stages; motivation to change, initiating change, and internalising change, with the presence of psychological safety recognised as a supportive element toward the acceptance of change. Progressively, Schein expanded this three stage process to a theoretical model of organisational learning and change (2009); suggesting that this model can be utilised across contexts involving learning and change for adults. Schein's model enables a broader exploration of psychological safety, recognising the influence of psychological safety in the individual's current and ongoing actions and experiences within their environment. With similarity to Schein's theorisation, Kahn's (1990) research on employee workplace engagement, also bought realisation to the positive contribution the presence of psychological safety can offer. In contrast to Edmondson (1999), both Schein (2009) and Kahn (1990) consider psychological safety at the individual employee level in the workplace.

Within the Australian Higher Degree Research environment, the focus of the doctoral program is to develop candidates toward becoming autonomous researchers through contributing to discipline knowledge. This is a journey of collaboration involving the candidate, their supervisors, and the wider academic community. It is acknowledged that there is ongoing uncertainty and anxiety associated with taking intellectual risks in the doctoral journey which can present significant challenges, impacting engagement and task completion. To address that situation, the paper's presentation will provide an overview and discussion of Edmondson's (1999), Schein's (2009) and Kahn's (1990) psychological safety theoretical

frameworks, highlighting the potential benefits that consideration of psychological safety at both the collective and individual level can bring to the context of doctoral learning.

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