

Psychological Safety in the Doctoral Context

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

The significance of psychological safety for effective interpersonal learning and development, particularly in team settings, is widely acknowledged. However, there has been limited focus on the theoretical basis of psychological safety or its broader interpretation and application. This paper reports on a doctoral research project involving conceptual and empirical research to address this gap. The conceptual research argues that understanding the history and antecedents of psychological safety can reveal dimensions of the construct and associated phenomena relevant to the autonomous, higher-order learning and development required in the doctoral context. The empirical research, involving doctoral candidate volunteers, investigates the management of epistemic uncertainty and associated risk-taking in doctoral programs and seeks feedback on the benefits of implementing the conclusions drawn from the conceptual research. Overall, this research takes a new approach by focusing on what is working, rather than what is not working, contributing a new dimension to doctoral candidate support.

Full paper

Aim:

To investigate the utility of psychological safety in the management of epistemic uncertainty and the associated risk-taking in the doctoral learning and development context.

Background and context:

Organizational scholars recognise psychological safety as a positive factor for constructive interpersonal behaviour manifested in phenomena such as team psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), psychosocial safety climate (Dollard & Bakker, 2010), and psychological safety of the educational environment in Eastern European school settings (Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015). These phenomena are well-documented for their influence on proactive individual and group behaviour, especially regarding learning and development. These benefits encourage active engagement, which is noted to be beneficial in actively promoting enhanced individual and collective well-being. Psychological safety is thus an essential component of healthy interpersonal relationships. Its presence can empower stakeholders to

engage in behaviour that can lead to growth and development, even if it involves discomfort due to interpersonal risk and uncertainty. Psychological safety's presence in such situations assists stakeholders to feel confident that they will not experience psychological distress, regardless of the outcome, and that their contributions and identities will be valued.

Nonetheless, concerns remain regarding terminological clarity, and there is little research applying psychological safety beyond the organisational context (Taylor et al., 2022). The research reported in this paper addresses these opportunities.

Methodology and results:

This research project has two stages: a conceptual stage and an empirical stage, a combined approach that allows an iterative process to emerge between theory and application, allowing descriptive, theoretical frameworks to expand into explanatory conceptual frameworks, validated through evidenced-based application. Ultimately providing a basis for theory-building research rather than just theory-testing research (Meredith, 1993).

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, humanistic psychology, 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 conceptual research stage informs a theoretical, multi-level framework for psychological safety and a broader definition. Building on this definition, the phenomenon of intra-personal psychological safety is then proposed, with the potential to enhance an individual's capacity to function autonomously. The degree to which a person experiences intrapersonal psychological safety is determined to be influenced by the individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with epistemic uncertainty and risk. This insight offers the opportunity for psychological safety to be applied beyond the traditional team setting, for example in the context of doctoral learning and development in Higher Degree Research programs.

Findings of the conceptual research stage inform the empirical stage of the research project. The empirical stage employed a purposeful sampling approach to attract volunteers from a cohort of candidates who had submitted their thesis and who were either awaiting or only recently received examiner feedback. The data collection, in this stage of research, involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews utilising the vignette technique. The vignette technique utilises the sharing of short narratives by the interviewer about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation and experiences the interviewee is invited to respond. This technique enables the interviewee to define the meaning of the situation for him or herself, an approach that is useful in situations that may involve recounting difficult experiences or those that may cause discomfort for the interviewee and avoids the need for the interviewer to ask direct and intrusive questions to elicit personal information (Finch, 1987). The interviewee is the discerning voice and leads the interview discussion with only minimal input from the interviewer, for example providing prompts to support the interviewee in their narrative. Combined with the use of a semi-structured interview, the vignette technique allows for an open-ended exploration of candidate's unique experiences, gaining valuable insights into the proactive management of doctoral knowledge uncertainty and associated risk-taking to be gained. In the final stage of each interview, the researcher

shared the results of the conceptual research with the candidate and sought input on its relevance for application in the doctoral learning and development environment. The recorded interviews were transcribed, with analysis undertaken in the NVivo software environment using Braun, Clarke, and associates' approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). Conclusions drawn from this analysis will be shared as part of the paper presentation.

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