

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND WORKPLACE INCLUSION FOR THE
UNDERSERVED



**The PhD Program in Strategic Leadership and
Administrative Studies**

Hidden Inequities:
A Qualitative Exploration of the Gaps in Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion Among
Underserved Employee Populations

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Ph.D. in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

Dedication

This research is dedicated to anyone who has ever felt excluded, looked down upon, ostracized, or judged because of their identity, the cards they were dealt, previous or current hardships they faced, or a combination of all three. Society isn't currently positioned to support the nuances of the human experience through life circumstances or individual characteristics, but I'm hoping this research can set individuals and organizations on a path forward to true inclusion, without the smoke and mirrors we're all so familiar with.

Acknowledgements

I would not be where I am today without the sincere enthusiasm, partnership, and collaboration of the participants who dedicated their time and energy to this study. I am incredibly appreciative of what was shared with me in each of these interviews. I want you all to know that you are right there with me trying to encourage individuals to further evolve their own perspectives on how they treat each other.

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Finally, thank you to my wonderful husband, Scott who gave me the perfect balance of "You can do this honey" and "Why don't you take a break? It's okay to rest."

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of underserved employees, focusing on their perceptions of support within their organizational contexts. Utilizing the phenomenological method, this research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the essence and meaning of feeling unsupported via feelings of psychological safety and workplace inclusion and the specific experience each participant had with their respective leader. In-depth interviews were conducted with underserved employees to gather rich, descriptive data. Through thematic analysis, this study identified the key factors contributing to feelings of unsupportiveness, ultimately informing strategies for promoting inclusivity and support within organizations. By amplifying the voices of underserved employees, this research sought to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment.

Keywords: employees, support, psychological safety, workplace inclusion, leadership, workplace, environment

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Chapter 1

The Statement of the Problem

Introduction

The modern workplace today looks much different than what it looked like twenty to thirty years ago, as the modern workforce has more diversity in personal backgrounds, lived experiences, demographics, abilities, and specific needs. In order for businesses to be effective, nurturing and investing in diversity is pivotal as it will enable companies to better understand their workforce and other stakeholders (McGinness, 2014). In an effort to better support a diverse workforce, modern companies and organizations in various industries are making conscious efforts to ensure that women, people of color, disabled, neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and otherwise disenfranchised communities are better represented, understood, and provided an equitable employee experience. One of many benefits of diversity in teams is that a diverse group of problem-solvers outperform groups of similar individuals (McGinness, 2014). Additionally, Minkin (2023) claims that half of workers say it is extremely or very important to them to work somewhere that is accessible for people with physical disabilities.

For the purposes of this study, diversity also encompasses neurodiversity. Neurodiversity “describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits (Baumer & Frueh, 2021).” Doctors Baumer & Frueh (2021) further explain that while neurodiversity refers to diversity of all people, it is often used within the

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context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in addition to other neurological or developmental conditions, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities. In support of neurodivergent employees, it is pivotal to create a workplace that gives all employees a sense of belonging. Accordingly, employers should train neurotypical workers, including managers, to understand the needs and behaviors of neurodivergent colleagues, including how behaviors by neurotypical employees can have detrimental effects on neurodivergent employees (“Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity: Drawing on a Wider Range of Cognitive Talents to Tackle National Security Challenges”, 2023).

The researcher believed that two major factors that characterize the modern employee experience are individual senses of psychological safety and workplace inclusion. In addition, the researcher posited that when evaluating the overall employee experience, the respective leadership styles and behaviors of employees’ managers plays a significant role in determining employees’ perceived senses of psychological safety and workplace inclusion. This research aimed to dive deeper into specific leadership styles and further explore their role in employees’ perceived senses of workplace inclusion and psychological safety. With regards to the shared phenomenon of feeling either supported or unsupported at work, the researcher attempted to obtain a better understanding of respective support levels through the means of personal experiences highlighting perceived senses of workplace inclusion and psychological safety paired with leader experiences. Thus, the three main components that will shape individual experiences of support perceptions include workplace inclusion, psychological safety, and leader experience.

To further explore these three elements, the interview questions sought out to assess how comfortable employees are to raise concerns and ask questions, understand what actions or

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behaviors help shape perceived senses of belonging, and compared varying leadership actions and behaviors to further understand the respective leader experiences.

Current research supports the researcher's claim that leadership involvement has a notable impact on the employee experience as it assesses the correlation between leadership styles, employee trust in their leaders, and senses of psychological safety and inclusion. Not only has it been found that the leader's level of transparency and psychological capital affects the followers' perceived trust in the leader (Walumbwa et al., 2011), but it has also been found that passive, apathetic leaders typically do not take proactive steps to reward appropriate conduct and are less likely to define and clarify behavioral expectations for their employees. This lack of engagement then contributes to an environment where workplace incivility emerges (Harold and Holtz, 2015). In a similar regard, Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) share that leader behavior influences interactions among team members as they posit that leader inclusiveness, characterized by words and deeds by leaders that invite and appreciate others' contributions, can help overcome status' inhibiting effects on psychological safety. Specifically, "if a leader takes an authoritarian, unsupportive, or defensive stance, team members are more likely to feel that speaking up in the team is unsafe. In contrast, if a leader is democratic, supportive, and welcomes questions and challenges, team members are likely to feel greater psychological safety in the team and in their interactions with each other (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006, pg. 947)."

Theoretical Framework

Existing theoretical research on individual perceptions of inclusion in the workplace has roots in philosophy and social psychology that explore how people relate to one another and how we make sense of our environments through the relationships we have with others (Green &

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Young, 2019). As an example, when someone is respected by their team members, it suggests that this person is valued (Ellemers et al., 2013). Ellemers et al. (2013) then conclude that in general, individuals who feel respected by other team members tend to engage psychologically and behaviorally within their team. This overlap between feelings of respect, value, and psychological engagement leads the researcher to identify a theoretical framework.

Current literature and research studies reveal that there are two prominent theories from the perspective of inclusion in the workplace and psychological safety as individual concepts (Green & Young, 2019), (Li & Tan, 2013). The researcher has found that the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory plays a role in determining perceived sense of workplace inclusion and Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work can be used to further understand employees perceived sense of psychological safety. Both Leader-Member Exchange Theory and William A. Kahn's theoretical conditions provide insights into the importance of creating an inclusive and psychologically safe workplace environment.

Leadership has been found to affect the functioning of employees but also how they perceive their work environment. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory has become one of the most useful ways to study the effects of leadership in the workplace and provides further insight into the relational dimension of leadership (Brimhall et al., 2016). LMX Theory predicts that through the quality of their interactions with followers, leaders can influence how employees evaluate themselves in their work environment. Specifically, as it relates to perceived sense of inclusion, the theory posits that when a leader treats a follower as an important member of the organization, other employees will be more likely to accept that individual as a valuable member of the group. Consequently, the more employees feel valued and accepted by their leaders and

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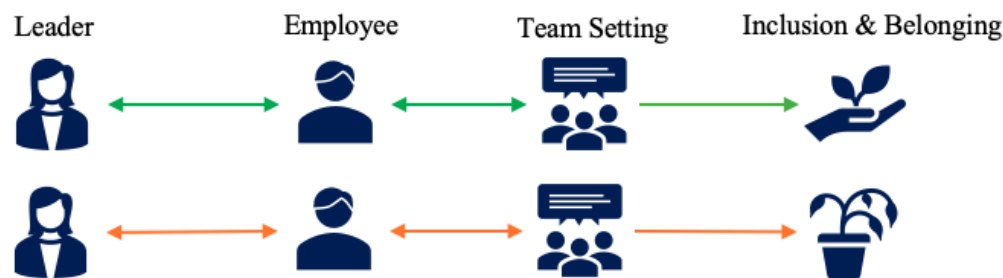
their peers, the more included they feel within their respective teams or organizations (Brimhall et al., 2016).

To better understand the exchanges between the leader and the follower, Brimhall et al. (2016) explain that interactions between the two parties are evaluated in terms of high-quality exchanges and low-quality exchanges. High-quality exchanges are characterized by mutual respect and trust where the leader treats the follower as an important member of the group, and trust is bidirectional. In contrast, low-quality exchanges are the result of a lack of mutual trust with followers feeling that they are not important within the group. Current research found that high-quality leader-member exchange can have an immediate positive influence on employee outcomes, such as performance, work attitudes, retention, and creativity (Brimhall et al., 2016). In their study, Brimhall and colleagues (2016) assessed the relationship between high-quality leader member exchange and perceptions of inclusion. They proposed that high-quality LMX will be positively associated with perceptions of inclusion over time. Findings from their study indicate that organizational leaders who dedicate time and resources to developing high-quality interactions will benefit by increasing employee perceptions of inclusion six and twelve months later. An overview of the idea of increased value leading to increased sense of inclusion is shown below.

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Theoretical Figure 1 of 2: Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (*Workplace Inclusion*)

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LEGEND

High-quality exchange: 

Low-quality exchange: 

The second theoretical framework brings us to William A. Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, which can be used to further understand employees' perceived sense of psychological safety. In a 1990 study, Li and Tan (2013) explain that Kahn asserted that three crucial psychological conditions shape the degree to which employees engage in job behaviors emotionally, cognitively, and physically, which include psychological meaningfulness, psychological availability, and psychological safety. Furthermore, according to Kahn, "psychological conditions are functions of the characteristics of work situations that shape employees' experiences of themselves, their roles, and the relations between the two. Psychological meaningfulness is associated with perceptions of work elements that create motivation for work, and psychological availability is associated with perceptions of the availability of resources with which to engage in role performance. Psychological safety is associated with elements of social systems that create varying levels of perceived safety (or lack of threats) in which to perform one's duties (Li & Tan, 2013).

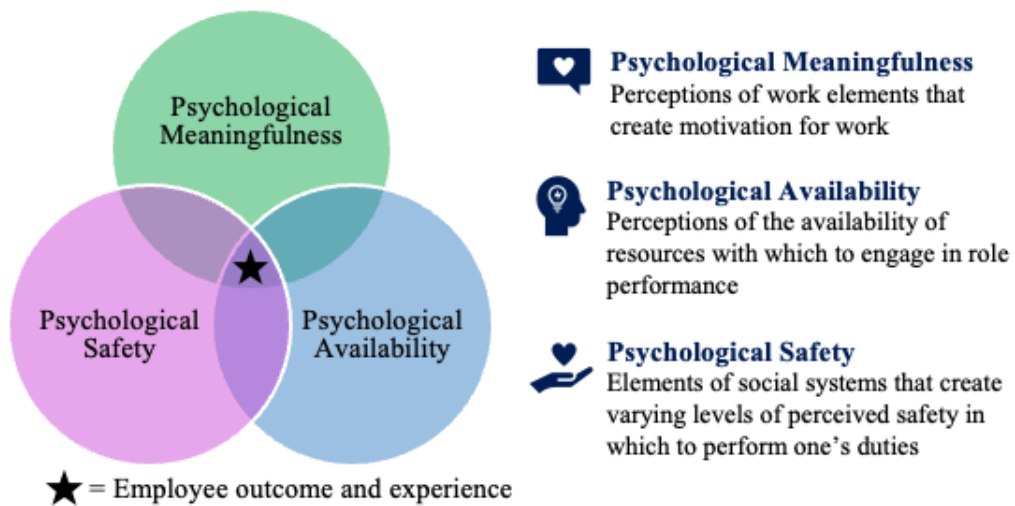
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Using Kahn's three psychological conditions as a foundation for their research, Li and Tan conducted a study to understand how trust in supervisors relates to individual job performance. Their overarching hypothesis was that the trust relationship between employees and supervisors creates different psychological conditions through generating positive perception about returns (psychological meaningfulness), resources (psychological availability), and assurance (psychological safety). With that, they hypothesized that each psychological condition uniquely affects job performance (Li & Tan, 2013). Li and Tan (2013) found that trust in supervisors affects employees' performance via promoting psychological availability as well as psychological safety. Edmondson (1999) reinforces this, as the data in her study suggests that team psychological safety goes beyond personal trust. Specifically, "there was evidence of a coherent interpersonal climate within each group characterized by the absence or presence of a blend of trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people. But building trust may be an important ingredient in creating a climate of psychological safety."

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Theoretical Figure 2 of 2: Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement (*Psychological Safety*)

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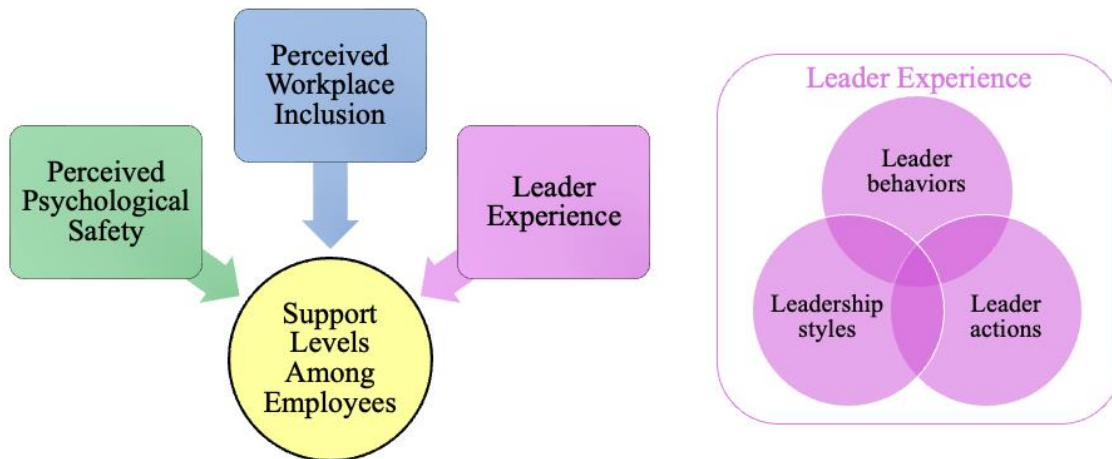
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework created specifically for this research includes the concepts of perceived psychological safety, perceived workplace inclusion, and individual leader experiences shaping support levels among employees. Specifically, a leader experience is further understood as the amalgamation of leader behaviors, styles, and actions.

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Conceptual Figure 1 of 1: Employee Support Levels Based on Perceptions and Leader Experience

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Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how underserved employees may feel unsupported, utilizing employee sentiments of psychological safety and workplace inclusion within their respective leader experiences. For the purposes of this study, “workplace inclusion” was generally defined as a sense of belonging and included in the workplace. “Psychological safety” was generally defined as feeling comfortable voicing concerns, asking questions, and sharing personal opinions. “Leader experience” was defined as the collection of leader actions, behaviors, and leadership styles.

Central Question

How do underserved employees throughout various industries describe their experiences around support, psychological safety, and inclusion in the workplace?

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Sub-Questions

- How supported do employees feel within varying levels of psychological safety?
- How supported do employees feel within varying levels of workplace inclusion?
- Which leadership actions or behaviors contribute to feelings of psychological safety?
- Which leadership actions or behaviors contribute to feelings of workplace inclusion?
- In terms of availability and management techniques, what are the leadership styles as perceived by the employees?
- What are the employees' demographics?

Definitions

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles include non-leadership (laissez-faire leadership), transactional leadership (management by exception, passive; management by exception, active; and contingent reward), and the transformational four I's (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) (Northouse, 2022). In this study, leadership styles are primarily categorized as laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational. The different leadership styles are measured by the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership style concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. It includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings. It involves an exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them. Transformational

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leadership factors include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2022). In this study, transformational leadership is defined as leading from a place of empathy, mutual trust, and the desire to motivate their employees.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a leadership style that focuses on the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers. The transactional leader does not individualize the needs of followers or focus on their personal development. Transactional leaders exchange things of value with followers to advance their own and their followers' agendas. Transactional leadership factors include contingent reward and management by exception. Management by exception takes two forms: active and passive. A leader using the active form of management-by-exception watches followers closely for mistakes or rule violations and then takes corrective action. A leader using the passive form intervenes only after standards have not been met or problems have arisen (Northouse, 2022). In this study, transactional leadership is defined as the prioritization of the employee's tasks/initiatives at hand without prioritizing the employee/leader connection as the central focus of the interpersonal dynamic.

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership, also known as non-leadership, represents the absence of leadership. This leader abdicates responsibility, delays decisions, gives no feedback, and makes little effort to help followers satisfy their needs. There is no exchange with followers or attempt to help them grow (Northouse, 2022). In this study, laissez-faire leadership is defined as the leadership style of a physically and/or emotionally absent leader who an employee only interacts with on the leader's terms on an as-needed basis.

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Employee

For purposes of the employer shared responsibility provisions, an employee is, for a calendar month, an employee employed on average at least 30 hours of service per week, or 130 hours of service per month (Internal Revenue Service, 2013). In this study, an employee is defined as an employee who works at least 37.5 hours and is paid an annual salary as a “full-time exempt” employee.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to a belief that one is able to express his or herself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). In this study, psychological safety is defined as the perceived sense sharing one’s thoughts and opinions while feeling open, honest, and vulnerable during situations of injustice or discomfort.

Workplace Inclusion

Workplace inclusion refers to employee perceptions of being included or subsumed in the workplace. A high level of workplace inclusion means employees can participate in many activities and feel they belong to and are valued in the workplace (Zhu et al., 2019). In this study, workplace inclusion is defined as a sense of inclusion employees feel when they experience feelings of value, worth, and appreciation in the workplace.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to full-time exempt employees with access to a computer and the internet, who categorize themselves as at least one of the following: a woman, a queer person/member of the LGBTQIA+ community, a person of color, a person with a disability, or a person who is neurodivergent. Employees who are contracted, temporary, interim, and per-diem

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did not qualify for this study. Employees that do not have a working knowledge of the English language or employees that do not have a direct day-to-day manager are also not eligible to participate.

Limitations

The instrumentation tools utilized in this research may not be able to accurately assess workplace inclusion, psychological safety, and leadership styles.

Limitations that impact on generalizability include:

- The study being limited to only full-time exempt employees
- The study being limited to those who are willing to self-identify as a member of one or more of the marginalized communities
- The sample scope being limited as this is a convenience sample

Assumptions

In this study, the researcher is assuming:

- Appropriate accommodations will be made for survey respondents who have physical, social, or mental limitations where needed.
- Participants will answer the interview questions as honestly as possible.
- Participants will be mentally capable of answering and completing the survey questions.
- All participants will have access to the interview software.
- The participants will know enough English to be able to comprehend and respond to the interview questions.

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Significance of the Study

With diverse backgrounds, demographics, abilities, talents, and specific needs, employees in any company or industry should feel as though they have a certain sense of psychological safety and sense of inclusion in their respective workplaces. The researcher believes that now, more than ever, the actions, styles, and behaviors of leaders of people heavily influence these perceptions of their employees and make up one part of the larger picture of the overall employee experience and corresponding attitudes towards their jobs and employers. This research aims to dive deeper into specific leadership styles and further explore their role in employees' perceived senses of workplace inclusion and psychological safety. In this study, leadership styles are assessed by identified levels of engagement, communication, and overall senses of personal investment in leader/employee relationships.

Extant literature on the topics of leadership styles and senses of workplace inclusion and psychological safety do not necessarily view the employees' experience as the result of leadership behavior or actions. For instance, psychological trust and safety has been studied in groups, however in those instances, leadership and management was not mentioned (Schulte et al., 2012). Psychological safety was also assessed for indications of employee performance and creative work output (Baer & Frese, 2003), but management chains were not included in this research. In other studies, trust in supervisors and management was evaluated, but only the relationship between supervisory trust and employee performance was assessed (Li & Tan, 2013). In terms of specific leadership styles, passive leadership styles' impact on workplace incivility was researched as well (Harold & Holtz, 2015). In terms of neurodivergence, the cognitive talents of neurodiversity are explored in the national security environment, however,

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specific relationships between leader-created environments and cognitive diversity were not explored (*Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity*, 2023).

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The primary concepts of disability, psychological safety, underserved communities, and workplace inclusion all have their own research efforts that were initiated in a vacuum, but not a lot of research has taken an interdisciplinary or cross-sectional approach on how specific marginalized groups are either set up to thrive in the workplace or are left hoping their leadership or company changes for the benefit of future employees. This research attempted to better understand what companies can offer as a whole to ensure that any marginalized population can feel supported in an environment that is more welcoming, inclusive, and positive for a healthier workplace experience.

The research pertaining to disability was focused primarily on physical disability (seen disabilities), with little on unseen disabilities. With the increasing awareness of unseen conditions, disorders, and disabilities, it is pivotal that modern research digs deeper into the inequities that may not be so obvious or apparent in everyday life within workplace contexts.

The concept of psychological safety was first introduced by Amy Edmondson in 1999, which was defined as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and models the effects of team psychological safety and team efficacy together on learning and performance in organizational work teams. Once the construct of psychological safety became better understood with respect to teams in the workplace, its application and exploration became increasingly more prominent. Aligned with this article's theoretical framework, Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and

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disengagement at work can be used to further understand employees' perceived sense of psychological safety. The conditions of psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability shape together to form the employee outcome and experience.

The earliest literature on underserved, marginalized, or otherwise underrepresented communities was not until 2000, and even then, the studies simply compared different work experiences and environments within the context of traditional gender roles (under a male/female dichotomy), not considering the gender spectrum as a whole. The emphasis on feminism appeared to blend naturally into the exploration of transgender communities; specifically trans women navigating practices that are gendered and cisgendered.

The concept of workplace inclusion was researched within the context of leader impact and behaviors and actions of colleagues, but not with respect to marginalized groups, specifically, which this research attempts to do. With regards to the correlation of perceived workplace inclusion and specific leader behavior that might impact these perceptions, the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory has become one of the most useful ways to study the effects of leadership in the workplace and provides further insight into the relational dimension of leadership (Brimhall et al., 2016). LMX Theory predicts that through the quality of their interactions with followers, leaders can influence how employees evaluate themselves in their work environment. organizational leaders who dedicate time and resources to developing high-quality interactions will benefit by increasing employee perceptions of inclusion six and twelve months later. Each of the topics summarized above are further elaborated upon.

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Disability

The disability-centered scholarly writings cited for this dissertation have publication dates that span over twenty years. The earliest article discovered in this literature review was examined within a contemporary capitalist workplace frame of reference and written in a 2003 *Science & Society Journal* article. Despite this article being written in 2003, the supporting literature includes references as far back as the 1970s and 1980s where the concept of disability became questioned. At that point in time, disability activists were remaking the field of disability studies and fought for relational definition of disability. This breakthrough formed the basis for what is often called the social model of disability oppression (Robert, 2003). With an emphasis on an economic structure's impact on the oppression that people with disabilities encounter, Robert (2003) explained that the capitalist framework of modern workplaces led to negative perceptions that went hand-in-hand with physical segregation, which ultimately resulted in alienation and exclusion. Individuals in and out of the workplace still subscribe to the capitalist ideology of individual responsibility.

To further illustrate the impact of the capitalist framework for people with disabilities, the operationalization and standardization of capitalism contributed to the norm of marginalization of people with disabilities. Capitalism created factory production, which separated home and workplace, and therefore segregated people with disabilities from family members who entered the waged labor force. Therefore, over time, the worth of individuals became tethered to new capitalist work roles. Capitalism is the premise of exclusionary practices among disabled communities, and this economic system is now the backbone of the American workplace today. Moreover, the capitalist ideology of individual responsibility suggests that members of historically oppressed groups are held responsible for their own oppression, and when they seek

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equitable or equal treatment, they are accused of seeking "special treatment." Specifically, Robert (2003) discovered that "tolerance of employees with disabilities is too commonplace, as little or nothing typically is done when employees with disabilities report being harassed. Those in charge commonly trivialize such reports as unimportant, dismiss them as emanating from inveterate complainers, or deflect them as concerning issues about which no one can do much of anything." These negative perceptions of people with disabilities became increasingly more apparent. Physical segregation was especially common where particular work units or spaces were set aside for employees with disabilities in the agencies examined in this specific study. The research in this article found that in some cases, dumping grounds were set up to keep people with disabilities hidden from other workers or the public. Moreover, perhaps as the result of their physical segregation, employees with disabilities were also alienated from others through social isolation in their workplace. Also, employees with disabilities were sometimes excluded because their co-workers would congregate at inaccessible places. "Employees with disabilities were alienated at work through physical segregation, social isolation, or separation from any labor process. Even though they were no longer out of work, they commonly remained outsiders at work (Robert, 2003)." This issue did not just manifest in this light in the United States; it was a global narrative that was being written. Even in Medieval Europe, "disability was often equated with demonic possession, and provided such attitudes with new impetus and rationales: people with disabilities were devalued as abnormal and unfit for work (Robert, 2003)."

The issue that prevails within the modern workplace is that employees with disabilities are undervalued as producers but provide companies with the opportunity to look good and make it seem like they are inclusive, understanding, and accommodating to the people in these communities. When in reality, modern work organizations operate under the construct of an ideal

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employee: a white, able-bodied male, against which non-whites, women, and people with disabilities are compared to. People who do not fit the ideal persona get hired but then are hired as tokens.

Three years later, Robert and Harlan (2006) expanded upon this idea by exploring the experience of people with disabilities perceiving themselves as incompetent and making that their identity. Specifically, their purpose was threefold: (1) to identify interpersonal and organizational mechanisms of disability discrimination in workplaces; (2) to specify the relationships between these types of mechanisms; and (3) to show how these mechanisms help produce and sustain workplace inequality linked to the ascriptive characteristic of "disability." When digging deeper into the concept of this perceived negative fictional identity, Robert and Harlan (2006) reveal that the most common and possibly most damaging fictional identity encountered by people with disabilities was the Incompetent. In terms of expectations, the bar was lowered and the stage was set for differential treatment of workers with disabilities. Workers with rare or less well-understood disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, mental illness, blindness, epilepsy, or organ transplants, were also frequently considered incompetent.

That said, once a person with a disability is viewed as incompetent or helpless, they become liabilities to the organization, where it is presumed that liability workers cannot compete with their peers that do not have disabilities. The act of identifying and labeling employees as liability workers allows work organizations and decision makers to legitimize the differential treatment of workers with disabilities, including the resulting negative outcomes (Robert & Harlan, 2006). From the researcher's perspective, when companies, and specifically executives and senior leaders of these companies, fail to adequately identify, confront, and challenge disability discrimination, it results in creating, sustaining, and emphasizing this type of

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discrimination. This then means that they are also discriminated against through organizational encouragement or tolerance. This results in job segregation, decreased promotion rates and reasonable accommodation rates, and ultimately, a more hostile work environment.

To synthesize the first two articles of the disability theme, we can deduce that capitalism led to negative perceptions which led to physical segregation, alienation, and exclusion, they were viewed as incompetent and were also expected to be responsible for their own oppression and how to deal with it. If leaders fail to take the time to become aware of the issue and address it head-on, the workplace culture is negatively impacted and gets worse over time, creating an unwelcoming and exclusionary environment for people with disabilities.

The research in this area continued for years, and thirteen years later, the focus then shifted to the emphasis of the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace so that the organizations can ultimately benefit from a more diverse workforce. In a research article published by Zhu and colleagues (2019), the study in scope was centered on the job self-efficacy of people with disabilities and investigated how employee disability interacts with inclusion and team-learning climate to affect job self-efficacy, in turn thriving at work. The issue identified at the time was that people with disabilities are disadvantaged compared to their peers without disabilities. Moreover, "People with disabilities are less likely to possess personal resources such as high core self-evaluation and psychological capital as nondisabled employees. As core self-evaluation, psychological capital, and an environment of trust and respect form the impetus for thriving, people with disabilities tend to thrive less than their counterparts (Zhu et al., 2019)." The results of the findings provided support for a cross-level three-way interaction effect of disability, inclusion, and team-learning climate on thriving at work through job self-efficacy.

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All of this to say that when employees (in general) have a high magnitude of job self-efficacy, they are confident they can perform well on their respective job tasks. However, people with disabilities are often socially oppressed with less social capital due to the barriers they face in the workplace. This is where inclusion comes into play. Inclusion has the ability to reduce the negative effects of disabilities on the magnitude of self-efficacy. Moreover, when people with disabilities are accepted by others in the workplace, they feel more supported and are confident that they can perform well on tasks. When they are socially accepted and are able to observe, imitate, and model colleagues under a strong team-learning environment, they better understand specific skills they can develop or contribute to the group which results in increased job self-efficacy. "Job self-efficacy is a key intervening mechanism linking disability to thriving at work... high workplace inclusion could buffer the negative effects of disability at the individual level. This buffering effect is further strengthened by high-level team-learning climates (Zhu et al., 2019)."

Not too long after the publication of this article, the culture around marginalized people further developed as the conversations started to shift from seen and visible disabilities to invisible differences, which is commonly known as neurodiversity. In a report (2023) entitled "Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity," insights are provided on how national security organizations can be strengthened by highlighting specific strengths of the neurodivergent community while detailing how aspects of the recruitment and hiring process can pose barriers to a neurodiverse workforce. While the report is written from the perspective of national security and the nature of this specific line of work, the benefits highlighted in the report can be applicable to a wide array of industries, job types, and organizations. For instance, fundamental

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strengths among neurodivergent individuals include problem-solving, pattern recognition, and visualization. These are highly desirable skills for multiple roles in the workplace.

The article highlights different challenges with current workplace practices for neurodivergent people. First and foremost, neurodivergence is treated as a disability - therefore, employees mask their neurodivergence to avoid the stigma associated with being disabled and all related discrimination, bullying, or exclusion that may happen (“Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity,” 2023). This ties back to some of the earliest literature examined in this literature review where disability was seen as a liability. Additionally, inadequate research data and metrics can hinder any current or future progress on solving these issues, as weak or missing information about the size of the neurodivergent population can lead government agencies/company executives to false interpretations or conclusions based on faulty or incomplete data. Aspects of recruitment and hiring can also pose barriers, where for instance, confusing job descriptions, complex applications, and job interviews that rely heavily on social and behavioral norms can cause unnecessary distress and lead applicants to become discouraged or unmotivated. Lastly, the workplace may not be designed with neurodivergent people in mind. This might manifest as sensory overload, rigid time schedules, oftentimes unattainable social expectations, unclear career progression paths, or low clarity in instructions.

Psychological Safety

In one of the most widely cited journal articles in this academic sector, Amy Edmondson first introduced the concept of psychological safety in her 1999 article entitled “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams.” Built off of the theory that feeling psychologically safe had an impact on how team members were able to learn, the concept was

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defined as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and models the effects of team psychological safety and team efficacy together on learning and performance in organizational work teams. Moreover, psychological safety was identified to be so crucial in work environments because fast-paced work environments require learning behavior to make sense of what is happening to take any action. Teams are therefore in a position to provide an important source of psychological safety for individuals at work (Edmondson, 1999). She further illustrated learning behavior examples as seeking feedback, sharing information, asking for help, talking about errors, and experimenting. These activities are where teams can detect changes in their environment and discover unexpected consequences of their previous actions. However, if employees do not feel psychologically safe enough to disclose their errors, ask for help, or seek feedback, the team and broader organization would be less likely to realize positive benefits. Edmondson (1999) also explores the link between psychological safety and trust as she states that team psychological safety involves but goes beyond interpersonal trust as it describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves. She also explored how management behaviors shape an environment of psychological safety that leads to high performance. Specifically, “Effective team leader coaching and context support, such as access to information and resources, appear to contribute to, but not to fully shape, an environment in which team members can develop shared beliefs that well-intentioned interpersonal risks will not be punished, and these beliefs enable team members to take proactive learning-oriented action, which in turn fosters effective performance.” The summation of Edmondson’s findings can be broken down into the following statements: Team psychological safety affects learning behavior, which has an impact on team performance. Learning behavior mediates between team psych

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safety and team performance. Team psych safety mediates the effects of context support and team leader coaching on learning behavior. People's beliefs about how others will respond if they engage in behavior for which the outcome is uncertain affects their willingness to take interpersonal risks.

A few years after Edmonson defined team psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for taking interpersonal risks, Baer and Frese (2003) turned the construct of team psychological safety to an organizational climate for psychological safety in their article entitled “Innovation Is Not Enough: Climates for Initiative and Psychological Safety, Process Innovations, and Firm Performance.” Moreover, the climate consisted of formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment, and the climate for psychological safety was defined as the work environment where employees are safe to speak up without being rejected or punished. Their study of 47 mid-size German companies examined the relationship between process innovations, climates for initiative and psychological safety, and firm performance. The findings revealed that companies that did not innovate were moderately profitable and successful. However, companies with a high degree of process innovativeness but with low levels of climates for initiative and psychological safety were actually worse off than if they had not innovated at all. Only companies with a high degree of process innovativeness and high levels of climates for initiative and psychological safety did better than those companies that did not innovate. Thus, innovation is not enough and needs to be complemented by climates for initiative and psychological safety to be brought to its full potential (Baer & Frese, 2003).

A short three years later in 2006, Nemhard partnered with Edmondson to introduce the construct of leader inclusiveness and its impact on teams overcoming the effects of status

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differences. In their study that investigated factors that promoted engagement in quality improvement work when status differences are present in teams, they examined the relationship between status and psychological safety and introduced the construct of leader inclusiveness as the moderator of the status-psychological safety relationship. They proposed that leader inclusiveness helped cross-disciplinary teams overcome the inhibiting effects of status differences, allowing members to collaborate in process improvement (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Within the confines of their research, high-status individuals assume that their voice is valued and are more likely to be asked for their opinion than those with low status. This then means that they are more likely to be asked for their opinion than those with low status, implying that they do not perceive the same level of interpersonal risk associated with self-expression experienced by those with a lower status.

The role of leader inclusiveness became significant, as the authors found that if a leader takes an authoritarian, unsupportive, or defensive stance, team members are more likely to feel that speaking up in the team is unsafe. In contrast, if a leader is democratic, supportive, and welcomes questions and challenges, team members are likely to feel greater psychological safety in the team and in their interactions with each other (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). In sum, leader inclusiveness predicted psychological safety as well as team engagement at the group level. When included in the same model, leader inclusiveness becomes insignificant while psychological safety remains significant. The data supports psychological safety as a mediator of the relationship between leader inclusiveness and team engagement in quality improvement work. This further suggested that leader inclusiveness can help to overcome role-based status' inhibiting effects on psychological safety.

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Further expanding upon the involvement of leader inclusiveness, the conditions of team members learning from failure was explored a few years later by Carmeli and Gittell, with honing in on the key differences between trust and psychological safety. They focused on relational coordination as a specific manifestation of high-quality relationships and examine how the relational dimensions of relational coordination - shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect - foster psychological safety and thus enable organizational members to engage in learning from failures (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).” Their findings showed that these dimensions of relational coordination do facilitate the development of psychological safety which enable organization members to learn from failure. Moreover, they revealed the consequence of not feeling psychologically safe being the potential for learning being reduced. Carmeli and Gittell (2009) illustrated the distinctions between trust and psychological safety. One distinction included the object of focus of trust being other individuals, whereas with psychological safety, the object of focus is self and the extent to which others will give someone the benefit of the doubt. Another key distinction is that trust pertains to anticipated consequences across a wide temporal range, while in contrast, psychological safety concerns relatively short-term interpersonal sequences that an individual expects from engaging in a specific action, such as reporting errors or discrepancies.

The next piece of literature, published by Walumbwa and peers (2011), built upon this construct by examining the role that collective psychological capital and trust might play in the relationship between authentic leadership and work groups’ desired outcomes. Their study (2011) found a significant relationship between their collective psychological capital and trust with their group-level performance and citizenship behavior. The two variables were also found to mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and the desired group outcomes, even

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when controlling for transformational leadership. They employed the definition of authentic leadership to be a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate to foster greater self-awareness, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, which fosters positive self-development. Walumbwa et al. (2011) also noted that when leaders use adaptive and positive approaches toward problem solving, they are more likely to motivate and challenge group members to do the same, which result in high levels of optimism and enhanced psychological capital. All in all, this study suggested that authentic leadership may enhance group members' psychological capital and trust levels, which in turn affect their citizenship behaviors and performance.

Shortly after in 2012, Roussin and Webber conducted a study to explore how perceived psychological safety in the work environment paired with the level of organizational identification influence initial perceptions of others' trustworthiness. Results demonstrated that disposition to trust and psychological safety both have positive relationships with initial perceptions of others' trustworthiness. Leaders impact and create team climate through their demonstrations of trusting behaviors and behavioral integrity which influence the perceptive tendencies and behaviors of employees. Ultimately, "leaders that improve the psychological safety of a work environment, for example by engaging in trust-building conversations with team members, can facilitate more positive perceptions of trustworthiness of new coworkers (Roussin & Webber, 2012)."

Also in 2012, perceptions of psychological safety were assessed as a factor that predict network ties. Schulte and colleagues (2012) argued that team members' social network ties and team members' climate perceptions coevolve over time as a function of six reciprocal and co-

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occurring processes, and they actually found that the more psychologically safe team members perceive their team to be, the more likely they are to ask their teammates for advice and to see them as friends. This then means they are less likely to report difficult relationships with them. More specifically, they claim that “The more positive an individual's perceptions and expectations of the team, the more likely he or she is to take constructive action, sending positive ties to his or her teammates in anticipation of their positive response to his or her overtures. The less positive an individual's perceptions of the team, the more likely he or she is to withdraw from social interaction, limiting the positive ties he or she sends and forming negative ties with teammates instead (Schute et al., 2012).” This specific research exhibits that friendship ties and perceptions of psychological safety coevolve as a function of prospective action, homophily, and assimilation.

The last text assessed and utilized for this literature review is a 2013 journal article from the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* entitled “What happens when you trust your supervisor? Mediators of individual performance in trust relationships.” In this article, the authors, Li and Tan (2013), focus on the psychological outcomes of trust in a supervisor by integrating the relational, behavioral, and motivational perspectives in understanding how trust translates into individual job performance. They first introduce the concept of psychological availability as the perception of having physical, emotional, or intellectual resources to perform one's tasks at work. In essence, it captures the extent to which employees perceive themselves to be confident of coping with demands of both technical and social aspects. The main findings of this research include evidence that trust, confidence, and job performance are all linked. Specifically, when employees trust their managers more, they have higher levels of confidence, which leads to

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better job performance. Concurrently, trust in supervisors/management reduces the issue of social uncertainty and risk, which enables job performance (Li & Tan, 2013).

Underserved Communities

The topic of underserved communities spans twenty-five years, as the earliest literature on this topic, within the context of this research, was written in 2000. The most recent work being published in 2025. Beginning with Joyce Rothschild's article published in 2000 entitled "Creating a Just and Democratic Workplace: More Engagement, Less Hierarchy," Rothschild (2000) examined specific corporate practices, government policies, or worker activities that might have served as countertrends that helped develop workplaces where those who work in different fields feel they have a reasonable level of autonomy, engagement, and voice in their work processes. The ability to speak up and challenge workplace norms or expectations played a vital role here as well. In her research, she found that when evaluating the extent to which a team approach makes the American workplace more democratic for its employees, it is imperative to ask to what extent workers enjoy the right to dissent. Upon the analysis of several interviews conducted, Rothschild found that most employees intuitively recognize that freedom of speech, including the right to dissent, is central to whether they experience their workplace as empowering (Rothschild, 2000). However, beginning as far back in the 1970s, grassroots narratives on the concept of democracy, voice, and self-management were considered radical, and their practices of job rotation, consensus building, task sharing, and cross-training were considered too far out to be incorporated by conventional businesses (Rothschild, 2000). Political rights are closely linked to workplace rights and cannot be separated. As economies modernize, a more educated workforce emerges, which is essential for industries that rely on information and

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creativity. Research demonstrates that with increased education, workers begin to expect greater autonomy and democratic participation in their jobs. In workplaces that are entirely self-managed, employees take on both management and operational roles, ensuring that everyone is involved in both decision-making and day-to-day tasks. In organizations that function collectively, relationships among members are valued for their own sake, and all individuals are treated as equals. Decisions are only considered valid if every person affected by them has the chance to take part in the decision-making process (Rothschild, 2000).

Shortly after in 2003, racial segmentation in the workplace was highlighted in Tyrone A. Forman's *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* article entitled "The Social Psychological Costs of Racial Segmentation in the Workplace: A Study of African Americans Well-Being." Forman's (2003) study focused on racial segmentation, which was an under-studied form of race-related structural constraints. He specifically examined the association between perceived workplace racial segmentation and African Americans' psychological wellbeing. In this context, racial segmentation in the workplace was defined as the process whereby many black people are relegated to the least desirable jobs in terms of prestige, power, and chances for career advancement. He found that perceived racial segmentation is negatively related to African Americans' psychological wellbeing and that it matters more for higher status black people. African Americans who perceived their current jobs as "black jobs" had lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of psychological distress than their counterparts who do not perceive their jobs in this light. Therefore, black Americans who perceive racial segmentation in the workplace feel they have less control over their lives than those who self-report no racial segmentation in the workplace.

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Two years later, in a *California Law Review* article entitled “Work Culture and Discrimination,” Tristin Green framed an expanded anti-discrimination discourse that isolated work culture as a source of discrimination and put legal pressure on employers to devise meaningful platforms for reform. This work can be seen as a part of the larger movement towards conceptualizing discrimination as a problem with both human and organizational dimensions. While it is no secret that discriminatory work cultures are shaped and influenced by the larger organizational policies and structures within which individuals and groups interact, it’s important to understand the difference between the right and wrong corporate cultures. Specifically, “the right corporate culture will increase corporate performance and employee motivation, while the wrong corporate culture will lead to ethical wrongdoing, render mergers unsuccessful, and endanger a company’s survival (Green, 2005).” Ultimately, Green (2005) found that work culture is a central ingredient to the development of social connection among employees, and by delineating a map of behaviors that signal adherence to common work values and norms, work culture provides the relational foundation for connection at work while framing the relational structure on which to build important social bonds.

Over the next few years, the conversation begins to pivot towards the implicit gender bias women face in the rise of modern feminist ideologies and workplace practices. Specifically, in Christine Williams’ *Gender and Society* article entitled “The Glass Escalator, Revisited: Gender Inequality in Neoliberal Times, SWS Feminist Lecturer.” In this 2013 publication, Williams expands upon her previously published concept of the glass escalator, which is her term for the advantages that men receive in women’s professions, and argues that new concepts are needed to understand workplace gender inequality in the 21st century. Williams’ article reviewed three studies that demonstrated the importance of race, sexuality, and class for understanding gender

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inequality in the workplace. Williams (2013) emphasizes that while certain features of jobs and careers appear to be gender-neutral, traditional organizational culture of loyal service, hard work, and long hours is biased in favor of men. In other words, rewarding uninterrupted devotion to work implicitly discriminates against women who typically have competing family priorities and obligations. That said, managers draw on gendered stereotypes when developing organizational charts and job descriptions that reward characteristics associated with men and masculinity while devaluing those associated with femininity (Williams, 2013).

The concept of gender is further expanded upon by diving deeper into cisgender and transgender contexts in Jill Yavorsky's 2016 article entitled "Cisgendered Organizations: Trans Women and Inequality in the Workplace." In Yavorsky's (2016) article, she turned explicit theoretical and empirical attention towards the interlocking characteristic of cissexism and sexism, where cissexism is the belief and treatment of transgender people as inferior to cisgender people. As part of a broader effort to better understand how intersecting inequality regimes operate in organizations, Yavorsky's findings revealed unique double binds that transgender (trans) women face which dictate contradictory feminine and masculine ideal worker expectations with simultaneous expectations of gender authenticity (Yavorsky, 2016). Moreover, "by constraining and penalizing trans women's behaviors through double binds, enacting a flexible system of cissexism and sexism, and mobilizing cisgenderism, organizational actors promoted and enforced a culture that made it nearly impossible for trans women to achieve consistent esteem and respect (Yavorsky, 2016)."

Alongside the integration of gender constructs, the late 2010s stayed in this progressive space of assessing the younger generation and its role and impact on today's political climate. In her 2017 article entitled "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of

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Protest,” Ruth Milkman analyzed four of the largest social movements created by college-educated Millennials. These groups included the “Dreamers,” the 2011 Occupy Wall Street uprising, campus movements protesting sexual assault, and Black Lives Matter (BLM). In summary, she shared that not only are Millennials the most educated generation, but they are a new political generation where lived experiences and views make them unique in parallel with their racial and ethnic diversity (Milkman, 2017). The concept of intersectionality was also amplified by this generation, which is the interconnection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in social or socioeconomic settings. As youth, their world view is still being formed, and younger people are more susceptible to the influence of current events and systemic injustices (Milkman, 2017).

Aligned within the progressive and inclusive framework the late 2010s brought with racial, gender, and generational perspectives, employee resource groups (ERGs) or business resource groups (BRGs) became more prominent among employers. 2018, specifically, was a significant year for equitable work environments emphasizing these affinity groups and bringing diversity to the forefront of American workplaces. In a *US Black Engineer and Information Technology* piece on how ERGs provide diversity within companies, the authors explain: “In the corporate world, the utmost importance of having a common vision, mission, and purpose in thought and action across all levels of the organization cannot be overstated. It is the fundamental pillar to the bottom-line success of any corporate company. However, combining this with the celebration, validation, and respect of every individual within the organization would call for diligence, trust, and understanding from all parties. For this reason, many companies have bridged the gap with Employee Resource/Affinity Groups (ERG = Diversity, 2018).” Thus, ERGs lead to an inclusive and productive workplace where all cultures, people,

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and ideas are valued and respected. At the same time, in the *Reference & User Services Quarterly Journal*, Andrew R. Grissom understood the need for existing literature to support the modern workplace, as he explained that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than 38 million people will enter the labor force between 2016 and 2026, and over this decade, the composition of the labor force will become older and more racially and ethnically diverse (Grissom, 2018). In response, Grissom published a series of reference books, books, scholarly journals, magazines, and organizations as a sampling of published resources that organizations can leverage to change cultural norms and open conversations on diversity issues. Research from 2021 placed additional emphasis on socioeconomic effects of legal access to same-sex marriage on a range of family structure, employment, social, and health outcomes. Badget and colleagues (2021) analyzed survey data to describe the location choices, demographic and economic characteristics, and family structures of the queer population in the U.S. compared with cisgender heterosexual individuals. In their analysis, they found that the large majority of the studies found that queer applicants were significantly less likely to be invited for an interview or to be offered a job. The studies also suggested some of the underlying reasons for the discrimination observed, which include employers potentially displaying their distaste for employing queer people in their differential treatment of effectively identical applicants (Badget et al., 2021).

Employee resource groups are revisited in 2023 as Leger explores the benefits of ERGs as well as trends that will shape the programs' future in terms of advancing the collective understanding of ERGs. Leger (2023) explains that as workers advocate for better working conditions and a greater voice in their organizations, labor-union organizing has surged, and emphasis on workforce inclusion has increased. ERGs come into play when it comes to

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aggregating and refining worker perspectives. Specifically, “successful ERG programs have helped companies increase representation of diverse talent, boost underrepresented workers’ feelings of inclusion and belonging, and enhance recruitment and retention of diverse employees (Leger, 2023).” Not only can ERGs help employees feel connected to their coworkers and more engaged with their work, ERGs can drive strategic initiatives for leadership while creating a sense of purpose in employees’ work which strengthens organizational culture. Moreover, successful ERGs have effectively improved culture and strategy, and 91 percent of effective ERGs successfully improve company culture (Leger, 2023).

In 2024, the focus then shifts to the quality of equity work, meaning performative vs authentic equity. In their article, McCullough and Erasmus (2004) explain that performative equity refers to the actions, words, or gestures that claim to do equity work, but do not improve matters for those historically oppressed. This type of equity work tends to degrade the humanity of those who have borne the brunt of oppressive systems. On the other hand, authentic equity work improves the living conditions of historically oppressed communities as it centers dignity for all people’s humanity. Results indicated that performative equity work privileges the comfort and perspective of dominant groups, reinforces the status quo, stays in the realm of the rhetoric, and often results in superficial changes only. Authentic equity work centers the experience of Black people and people of color, embraces discomfort, transforms dominant culture, and results in measurable changes to the lives of those historically oppressed. The authors (2024) also introduce the idea of mobility justice, which is characterized as a construct where Black communities, communities of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, queer people, women, and youth can move freely and without fear of violence. Specifically, “mobility justice visions that longtime residents can afford to stay in place as their community receives long-overdue

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infrastructural improvements, and that communities are equal partners in creating infrastructural changes (McCullough & Erasmus, 2024).

The final piece of literature came one year later, in 2025, where Arterberry and Nukpezah examined how federal workplace programs meet employee satisfaction needs, especially for historically marginalized groups, which include black people, female employees, and people with disabilities. The article investigated ways to enhance employee satisfaction, with implications for employee performance, while recommending that the perceptions of various demographics regarding existing policies be considered in ensuring that all employee needs are met. Lastly, it called for continuous education through the professional development of various groups to enhance their sense of inclusion and belonging (Arterberry & Nukpezah, 2025). The article found that while diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs positively effect employee satisfaction, the effects of these programs on employee satisfaction are moderated by the historically marginalized groups examined. Overall, the article attests to the need for workplace policies to be fully aligned with the expectations of the various groups as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach (Arterberry & Nukpezah, 2025).

Concerns and issues of workplace exclusion are not a new problem, nor are they unfamiliar. Even in the 1990s, people knew managers needed to shift their mindset and way of leading. Research centering around the topic of workplace inclusion begins as early as the year of 1996. McGee Wanguri (1996) documented communication and interpersonal problems commonly experienced by organizational members who were perceived as being dissimilar and it supported a two-pronged approach to fostering a more equitable workplace. The article introduces the idea of microinequities, which are defined as small events that are ephemeral and hard to prove or are events that are covert, often unintentional. Subtle discrimination is

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perpetuated by microinequities. Not only do they exclude the person of difference, but they make that person less confident as well as less productive. Increases in work group diversity are associated with declines in communication effectiveness. A solution to ensure all employees view communicative equality is openness in superior-subordinate communication, where transparency is key. Managers who accidentally share more with one employee because they relate to them more can negatively impact team trust if they appear to be more transparent with some members of the team instead of all (McGee Wanguri, 1996).

The next piece of literature in the category of workplace inclusion did not emerge until 2015 where Harold and Holtz examined the effects of passive leadership on workplace incivility and concluded that higher levels of passiveness result in stronger effects of incivility. Specifically, Harold and Holtz (2015) posit that managers who display a passive leadership style model an apathetic, indifferent mode of behavior consistent with the “whatever” mentality that allows incivility to flourish. Managers need to be clear about what is acceptable and what is not. Incivility will be enabled if managers are more passive. Typically, passive leaders are not going to hold team members accountable and remind them of expectations of what is appropriate and inappropriate. Both social information processing and social learning theories argue that individuals gather context clues from their social environment for acceptable behavior cues and consequences associated with a behavior are important when establishing norms. Employees who experienced incivility and worked under passive managers are more likely to engage in withdrawal behaviors (Harold & Holtz, 2015).

A few years later, Green and Young (2019) revisit the idea of inclusive workplaces. Their research explored scientific literature to better define inclusion, understand how inclusion relates to workplace outcomes, and how professionals, line managers, and business leaders can

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contribute to the development of more inclusive workplaces. It found that workplace inclusion involves valuing difference which allows all employees the chance to make a difference. This then results in enhanced team knowledge-sharing, innovation, and creativity. The article also forces the audience to re-think what “inclusion” really is: “Organizations need to take a systemic approach to inclusion, appreciating that inclusion isn’t about allowing ‘different’ people to ‘fit in’. Instead, inclusion is about creating an environment where everyone is appreciated for being individual. Practically, this means putting systems and practices in place that tackle bias and structural issues that result in different perspectives failing to be valued if they are different from the status quo, or from the ‘majority’ (Green & Young, 2019).”

Then, in 2023, Minkin’s article explores how adults in the United States think about diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace which focuses on the comparison of men and women as well as perceptions of disability accommodations at work for people with disabilities. In sum, Minkin (2023) found that relatively small shares of workers place a lot of importance on diversity at their workplace. More than half of workers say their company or organization pays about the right amount of attention to increasing DEI, and women are more likely than men to value DEI at work. Also, there are wide partisan differences in views of workplace DEI. Half of workers say it is extremely or very important to them to work somewhere that is accessible for people with physical disabilities. Many say being a man or being white is an advantage where they work. Further expanding on the political dimension of this, democratic workers are much more likely than republican workers to say working somewhere that is diverse when it comes to gender, race and ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation is extremely or very important to them. Half of democrats place great importance on having a mix of employees of different races and ethnicities where they work compared with

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13% of republicans (Minkin, 2023). Given the U.S.'s political climate within the context of its ultra-conservative administration, these findings are not surprising, as progressive politicians more apparently prioritize equitable programs, grants, and efforts than their republican counterparts.

We conclude the literature pieces for workplace inclusion with an analysis conducted by Corbett and colleagues in 2024 with a piece that focused on how gender and racial bias based on desired attributes and mannerisms are embedded within promotions. They found an intersectional performance-reward bias in patterns that help maintain the racialized gendered hierarchy so commonly observed in organizations: white men being overrepresented at the top, women of color being overrepresented at the bottom, and white women overrepresented in midlevel management positions (Corbett et al., 2024). Specifically, with women of color, “research has noted the presence of a ‘concrete ceiling’ for Black women that both obscures and impedes advancement and a ‘bamboo ceiling’ for women of Asian descent who may be viewed as desirable workers but not suitable leaders (Corbett et al., 2024).” In sum, the authors (2024) note that when organizations fail to monitor and evaluate promotion into specific jobs by gender and race, the advantage White men have in most organizations is upheld, and a racial gendered hierarchy is likely to be created and maintained.

Leader Impact

The final topic of how leaders impact the experience of their teams and employees in the workplace was first introduced in 1996, with three different articles contributing to the literature. The first research article in 1996 examined the relationship between sex-role identity and leadership style by developing an androgynous leadership style model. Prior to the 1990s, the

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correlation between leadership styles and sex-role identity was explored. Leadership studies indicated that stereotypically masculine behaviors characterized task-oriented leadership styles while stereotypically feminine behaviors, or relations-oriented leadership styles, were devalued. It appeared that effective leaders and managers should exhibit the best qualities of both masculine and feminine leadership styles. Therefore, Park's study suggested that an androgynous leadership style could be the most appropriate for achieving high performance and effectiveness in many organizations (Park, 1996). In a world where gender identity and gender as a construct remains complex, it is especially insightful to consider these findings. Given that not all leaders assigned female at birth have a feminine leadership style, and similar, not all leaders assigned male at birth have a masculine leadership style, perhaps an androgynous and/or gender-non-conforming leadership style is ideal in different industries, contexts, or organizations.

The next piece of literature within this theme was not published until 2020, where Saleem and colleagues found that servant leadership strongly predicted affective trust, organizational citizenship behaviors, and task performance of employees. Affective trust mediated servant leadership's effect on task performance while partially mandating servant leadership's effect on employees' organizational citizenship behavior. More specifically, the authors (2020) found that a deep connection between servant leadership and compassionate love results in the modesty, gratitude, tolerance, and selflessness of a servant leader. Additionally, "by explicitly emphasizing the needs of followers, instead of an authoritative power distance, servant leadership shifted the focus notably from an economic man to a humanistic model with governance based on viewing individuals as pro-organizational, self-actualizing, and trustworthy (Saleem et al., 2020)." The research also leads the readers to suggest that the best managers have actual subject matter knowledge of the work that they are leading, they are close to this work,

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they are able to be in the proverbial trenches with their team, and they have an appreciation for what their team does. When a leader is further removed from the work, it might be harder to connect with the team executing the work.

The final research conducted in 2024 by Friedrich and colleagues explored the relationship between a team's shared leadership and a formal leader's collective leadership style and their joint impact on team performance. They further discovered the connection to how leaders can actually set the culture of the inner-circle or not: no inner-circles will be formed if collective leadership is in place and hierarchical relationships are not emphasized (Friedrich et al., 2024). This collective leadership style fosters a sense of autonomy, where self-directed teams are successful and feel empowered under their leadership of servant leaders. Collective leadership styles also enable leadership identity creation among the team as well. Finally, the researchers observed gender differences as well, as male leaders are more agentic whereas female leaders are seen as more communal. Female leaders who act in a more agentic way are evaluated more harshly, and male leaders who seek input are perceived as incompetent. This is a clear example of how reverse gender norms negatively impact a leader's performance and perception in the workplace.

Literature Gaps & Future Research Recommendations

It is apparent that there is varying research conducted for the topics of people with disabilities, psychological safety, underserved communities, workplace inclusion, and leader impact. While this may be true, there are ample opportunities to either further elaborate on what was already conducted or expand upon the scope of this existing research. Beginning with the topic of disabilities, it is evident that there is more research and literature on physical or "seen"

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disabilities as opposed to hidden or “unseen” disabilities, which might include developmental or mental differences including neurodivergence. With the increasing understanding and awareness of neurodivergence in the workplace, there is an important need to fill this research gap. Other topics in the disability space include the idea of accommodation versus integration as well as disability discrimination. Specifically, studies on people with disabilities have focused on company practices to accommodate the disabled, but there is a limited understanding of factors affecting psychological integration of people with disabilities into the workplace (Zhu et al., 2019). There is also a need to better explore disability discrimination, as there is a lack of systematic research on breaking barriers for the disabled (Robert, 2003). Specifically, researchers should explore which mechanisms disability discrimination operates within larger and bureaucratic organizations. Work is needed to develop sociological interpretations of patterns of disability discrimination in the workplace and of the role that organizations play in helping to create and sustain these patterns (Robert and Harlan, 2006). Finally, the researcher would like to see more discussion of disabilities with an intersectional lens. Based on the literature assessed for this research, there is an apparent lack of research that explores the experience of individuals with either seen or unseen disabilities moderated through sociological or socioeconomic factors such as race, gender identity, wealth and income, education levels, access to higher education, and geographical barriers. For instance, workplaces may benefit from more research on people with disabilities who live in more rural or isolated areas where access to special services, programs, or resources may be limited solely based on their physical or geographic location.

Similar to the topic of disabilities and people with disabilities, the topic of psychological safety was explored in ample amounts of research, however, there is still opportunity to dig deeper on areas such as learning behavior, trust, authentic leadership, and failure. More research

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is needed to explore factors that promote team psychological safety and also to understand how psychological safety develops or erodes with changes in leadership or context (Edmondson, 1999). This is exactly what this study seeks to do: explore factors of leader behavior and styles that promote team psychological safety. Regarding trust, there is not a lot of research that explores trust and performance in a team context to play a moderating role rather than a mediating role in motivation and performance factors (Li and Tan, 2013). Similarly, researchers interested in initial perceptions of others' trustworthiness in social settings should examine the possible extension of psychological safety and its impact (Roussin & Webber, 2012). It is also worth noting that the result of team psychological safety has been documented, however, the dynamic mechanisms through which individuals' perceptions of their team's psychological safety develop and influence team members' interactions have received little attention (Schulte et al., 2012). Regarding the leadership style of authentic leadership, more empirical evidence is needed to contend that psychological capital and trust are fundamental to link leader behavior to follower behaviors (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Finally, regarding the dimension of failure, even though previous studies have noted the significance of psychological safety for fostering learning in organizations, previous research has not detailed how positive work relationships enable learning from failures in organizations, which would then enable learning from failures to occur in organizations (Carmeli and Gittell, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to investigate how leader-member relationships help the collective to better learn from failure.

The next major theme of underserved communities also has a significant amount of modern research, however, more focused research would be beneficial within the spaces of gender inequities, the queer community, enterprise resource groups, and social-structural constraints. Regarding gender inequities, more attention is needed to understand how orgs

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distribute work, enact policies, and recruit, hire, promote, and fire employees based on cisgendered principles. Future research should examine how cissexism and sexism varies across heterogeneous workplace contexts (Yavorsky, 2016). Similarly, more research is needed on transgender populations. We are not aware of any studies that use nationally representative samples to examine economic outcomes for transgender people, and we are aware of only one study with nationally representative samples looking at economic patterns before and after transitions. Large surveys are required to include questions on gender identity (Badgett et al., 2021). At a broader level, additional research is needed concerning public policies relating to LGBTQ populations. While literature on the effects of marriage equality is growing, more research is needed to understand the effects of legal access to same-sex marriage on savings and investment behavior, wealth, family formation (and divorce rates), and physical and mental health. With that, there is also a need for research on queer communities in developing countries where policy changes have gone in various different directions (Badgett et al., 2021). When assessing the current landscape of enterprise resource groups (ERGs), academic and empirical research on ERGs is limited, as there are no longitudinal studies to help employers identify and implement best practices or understand long-term benefits and challenges. Despite industry leaders and practitioners writing publicly on using ERGs, the articles remain limited in scope and do not provide deep insight or widely applicable guidance (Leger, 2023). Lastly, despite the progress that has been made on race and race-related inequities within the workplace, few studies have considered how race-related structural constraints impair African Americans' psychological functioning. Future research should explore some of the health-enhancing cultural and psychosocial resources that African Americans may organize in order to cope with the negative social-psychological consequences of institutional discrimination (Forman, 2003).

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Moving to the next major theme of workplace inclusion, more research is needed that centers around leadership styles, inclusive environments, and transparency, as managers and leaders play a pivotal role on the impact of an overall sense of workplace inclusion. Regarding leadership styles, research should identify more processes through which passive leadership affects behavioral incivility. Scholars should also continue investigations into the effects of the full range of leadership behaviors (e.g., passive, ethical, and abusive) on the prevalence of workplace incivility to enhance our understanding of the factors that either contribute to or deter the spread of incivility (Harold & Holtz, 2015). Moving to inclusive environments, while they can contribute to reduced absenteeism, enhanced creativity, and the reduction of barriers to inclusion for underrepresented groups, more evidence would benefit the causal mechanism regarding inclusion in addition to more exploration of how individual feelings of inclusion are impacted by organizational practices (Green & Young, 2019). Lastly, as we have seen the topic of transparency become increasingly more pivotal in the workplace, the parameters for acceptable and unacceptable supervisory disclosure of job-related information have not been very clearly defined. Therefore, future research is needed to investigate what constitutes appropriate downward task-relevant information disclosure in interactions between a superior and a subordinate (McGee Wanguri, 1996).

The research gaps within the last theme of leader impact are organized within two sub-categories of leadership identity and servant leadership. Beginning with leadership identity, shared leadership should be examined as a feature of team context which may influence how formal leaders adopt a leadership identity within the team. With that, future research should measure specific perceptions of male and female leaders using the collective leadership style to understand the underlying mechanisms (Friedrich et al., 2024). Regarding leadership identity

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viewed through the lens of gender norms, we need more research on androgynous leaders who blend task-oriented and relations-oriented leadership styles during attempts to nurture and shape employee behavior, and furthermore, balance concern for people with a concern for the bottom-line (Park, 1996). Lastly, despite the amount of research that currently focuses on servant leadership, there remains a need to better understand the underlying mechanisms for servant leadership to positively influence performance within an organization. In addition, a much greater understanding of the role of bidimensional trust in servant leadership is needed, especially considering that trust is a central element in the servant leadership style (Saleem et al., 2020).

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological study was selected for this study since the researcher's intent was to better understand the shared phenomenon of feeling unsupported in the workplace. The research method employed was conducting one-on-one, private interviews. Conducted via the Zoom videoconferencing software, fifteen different participants were interviewed. Each interview was recorded (both audio and video) for transcription purposes.

Inclusion Criteria

For this study, participant criteria included full-time exempt adult employees 18 years of age or older or the legal adult age in their jurisdiction with access to a computer and the internet who categorize themselves as at least one of the following: a woman, a queer person/member of the LGBTQIA+ community, a person of color, a person with a disability, or a person who is neurodivergent.

Exclusion Criteria

However, exclusion criteria were in place for participants who were rendered ineligible for the study. These criteria included the employee type; contracted, temporary, interim, and per-diem employees were not eligible for this study. Participants that did not have a working knowledge of the English language were not eligible for the study. Employees that did not have a direct day-to-day manager were also not eligible to participate.

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Recruitment

The recruitment for this study began with a research flyer or advertisement that was shared on social media (LinkedIn, Instagram, and Meta). The flyer/advertisement was shared on Meta and LinkedIn two total times to ensure maximum exposure for potential interest. The researcher still needed additional interest to round out the population of participants, so close friends and family helped distribute the research opportunity in hopes of increased interest and engagement. As such, this study resulted in being a convenience sample, as most of the research participants either knew the researcher directly or tangentially via shared or mutual connections.

Instruments

The instruments included the initial research screening and interest form, a set of demographic questions, and three different questionnaires created by the researcher. To detail, based on responses to this initial post, an online screening form (created in Google Forms) was presented to anyone who expressed interest in the study. This gave potential participants the opportunity to provide information that would determine their eligibility for the study. Specifically, in this form, they provided details on which of the inclusion criteria applied to them, and to ensure they did not possess any of the exclusion criteria. The questions asked which community(ies) the individual identified with, if they were a full-time employee, and if they had a direct day-to-day manager. Upon completion of the Google Form submission, the researcher displayed a confirmation message thanking the individual for their interest and advising them that the researcher will be following up with next steps, contacting them at the email address provided in this form. The demographic questions asked the respondent for their respective generation classification, their pronouns, the nationality or nationalities they identified with, their

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current work arrangement (fully remote, hybrid, fully in-office), the industry they are currently employed in, and if they are employed by a non-profit or for-profit organization. This then led the researcher to the preliminary question that determined what the participant opted to talk about: either a time they felt supported, a time they did not feel supported, or share experiences that reflected both scenarios. It was noted that the scenarios may apply to either a current or previous manager. Based on what they decided to discuss in the interview, the corresponding questionnaire was leveraged to conduct the primary research within this study. If the participant chose to only elaborate on an interaction resulting in feeling unsupported, Questionnaire A was used. If the participant chose to only elaborate on an interaction that resulted in them feeling supported, Questionnaire B was used. Finally, if the participant chose to elaborate on BOTH interactions that resulted in feeling supported and unsupported (respectfully), Questionnaire C was used. *The exact forms, questions, and questionnaires can be found in the Appendix of this paper.*

Procedure

If one were to replicate this study, they could leverage this procedure as a frame of reference. First, a flyer was created to express interest. For this study, the researcher used Microsoft PowerPoint and exported the PowerPoint file to a PDF. This was the best option for ease of access, readability, and resolution as the flyer was shared and distributed via electronic channels only. The next step was obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval within Marywood University. Upon approval, the flyer was posted on social media platforms. For this study, LinkedIn was used as the primary site, with Meta (Facebook and Instagram) as the secondary sites. The social media approach did not render as successful as desired, so the

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researcher asked individuals directly if they were interested in participating. They also requested if others within their social circles (friends, family) could assist with sharing the research flyer and study opportunity. After posting the flyer, the researcher confirmed that the appropriate or required technology was acquired and configured for this study. In this case, Zoom was leveraged, and a subscription was acquired to ensure that each interview did not have a time limit and could be transcribed. The researcher ensured that the ability to record the interviews with corresponding transcriptions was present. This was especially beneficial for the extraction of the data, themes, and critical concepts from the interviews. Next, the researcher created a booking mechanism for the participants with the researcher's availability. For this research, the Calendly software was acquired as the booking mechanism. The researcher configured the details of their personalized booking page and customized the details as they saw fit. Once potential participants expressed initial interest, the researcher sent the individuals the initial intake form to ensure that they qualified for the study. If they did not qualify, the researcher would have followed up with the individual(s) and informed them of this, thanking them for their expressed interest to participate in the study. However, all individuals who expressed interest qualified for the study. Once the participants selected a time and date for their interview, they received an email from Calendly confirming receipt of their interviews. At the time of the scheduled Zoom interview, the researcher joined the scheduled call. After the initial greeting, the researcher informed the participants that the researcher would like to record the interview. The researcher did note that the participant had the option to decline or opt-out of the recorded interview, and if so, the researcher would not have recorded the interview. In that case, the researcher would have taken notes that were as comprehensive and detailed as possible. However, for this study, all participants agreed to be recorded. During the initial notice of the recording feature, the

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disclaimer was added that the recording was only for transcription and research purposes, was not to be shared with any other individual, and will be deleted once the dissertation has been successfully defended. Once the participant agreed to being recorded, the researcher started recording the interview and began with the instruments, including the recording disclaimer, demographic questions, and giving each participant the option to choose what they would like to share in the interview (which would drive which questionnaire the researcher would utilize for each interview). Upon conclusion of the interview, the researcher thanked them for their time prior to ending the call. The recorded meeting was saved in the recording software for future use and access.

Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis work, the researcher re-watched all recorded interviews and started taking notes. For this study, the researcher utilized Microsoft OneNote to capture the answers to all of the questions to effectively set them up for a more in-depth analysis of the interview data.

Data Integrity and Research Objectivity

To ensure integrity of the data, remain objective throughout the research, and limit bias, specific actions were taken throughout the core phases of this research. In the early phases of designing the study, the researcher designed neutral instruments. All three interview versions included non-leading, open-ended questions to prevent instrument bias. This gave the participants the most freedom and independence when providing responses to the questions. It was critical to ensure the questions were non-leading, as any preconceived notions, judgments, or theories could have been included that might have influenced the respondents' answers. Within

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the next phase of data collection, the researcher maintained neutral, non-judgmental and non-reactive interactions. This was characterized by allowing the participants to fully answer each question, regardless of how long it took or how much color or context they wanted to provide. With this, the researcher did not interject or add additional commentary or judgments in their responses to the participants' answers. In the later stage of data analysis, an audit trail was conducted to ensure a clear, direct line of thinking was retained. The researcher documented every strategic decision that went into displaying the analysis process. This included documenting the participants' survey responses (both demographic data and the responses to the core interview questions). It also consisted of the retention of the recorded interview files to reference for re-watching the interviews, which included noting sentiments, quotes, and body language. Once the data was thoroughly captured, an initial list of comprehensive codes was identified. From there, the codes were sorted by higher-level themes. These themes were then further refined into more specific concepts that turned into the final major themes and subthemes.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Results

Introduction

Before sharing the findings and corresponding themes of this study, it is pivotal to understand the purpose and benefits of a thematic analysis and all subsequent actions taken at this point in the research. For phenomenological research studies, once individualized and in-depth interviews are conducted to collect the data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, the next step is to generate themes from the analysis of significant statements.

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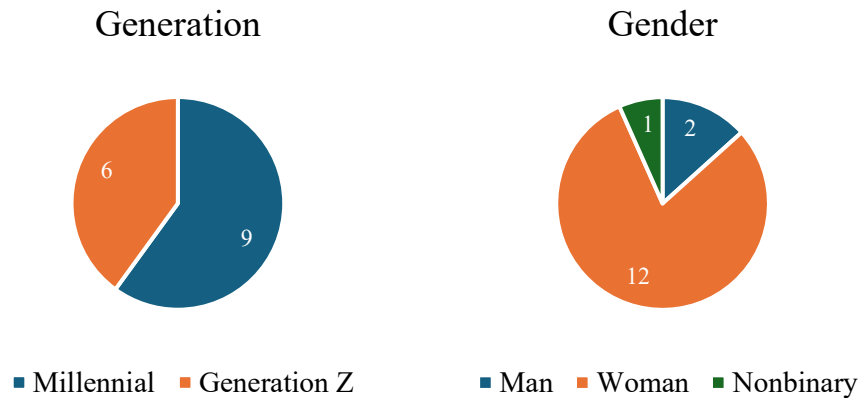
Specifically, “Building on the data from the first and second research questions, data analysts go through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Then, the researcher develops clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 70).”

Now that the purpose of the thematic analysis was detailed, specifically within the context of this research study, this chapter details the qualitative findings from fifteen interviews with full-time employees working in both public and private sectors and within various industries. Based upon the interviews conducted, the findings were categorized based on six high-level themes, each with at least one sub-theme or focus area. The six high-level themes included the following: (1) Insufficient DEI Culture and Mindset; (2) Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity; (3) Presence of a Safe Space for All; (4) Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee; (5) Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment; (6) Leading Effectively with Authenticity.

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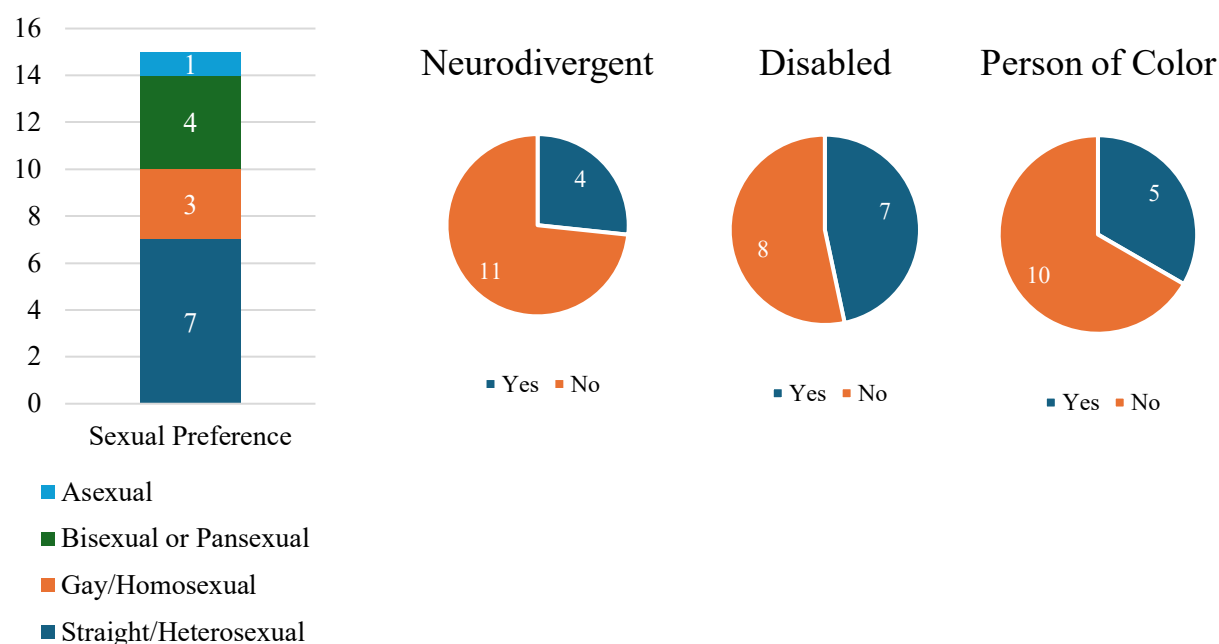
Participant Demographics

This study consisted of fifteen participants, all within the millennial or Generation Z generations; nine millennials and six Gen Z. The gender breakdown for participants was two men, twelve women, and one nonbinary person.

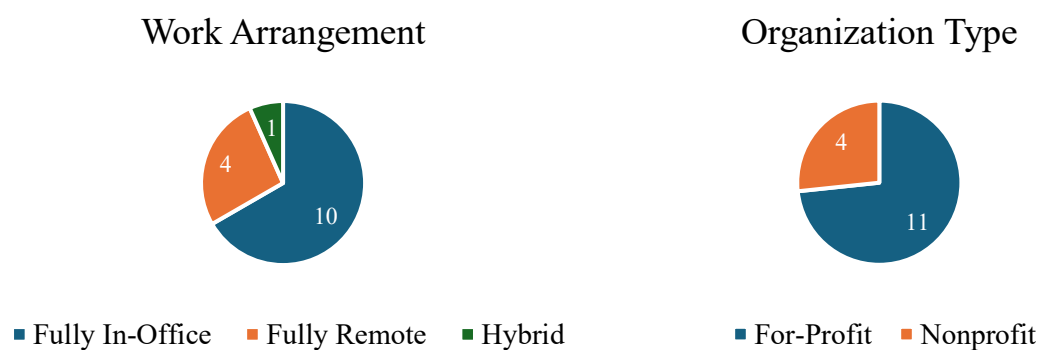


Out of the fifteen participants, eight self-identified as queer (gay/homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and/or asexual); four self-identified as being neurodivergent (OCD, PTSD, ADHD, autism, or both autism and ADHD); seven self-identified as having a disability; and five were people of color.

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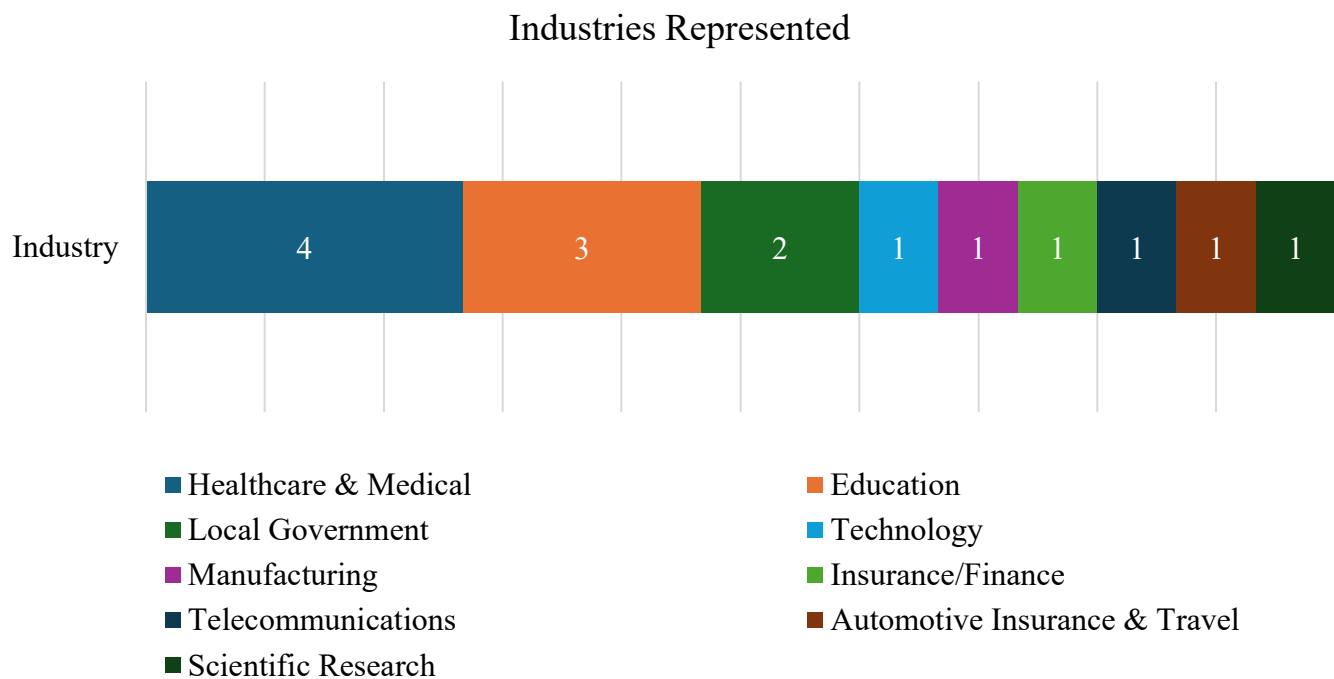


Regarding individual work arrangements, ten participants are solely in-office on a regular basis; four participants work completely remotely as employees who work from home; one participant has a hybrid work arrangement: half of the week working remotely with the remaining half working in the office. With regards to organization types, eleven participants work for for-profit organizations, and the remaining four participants work for nonprofit organizations.



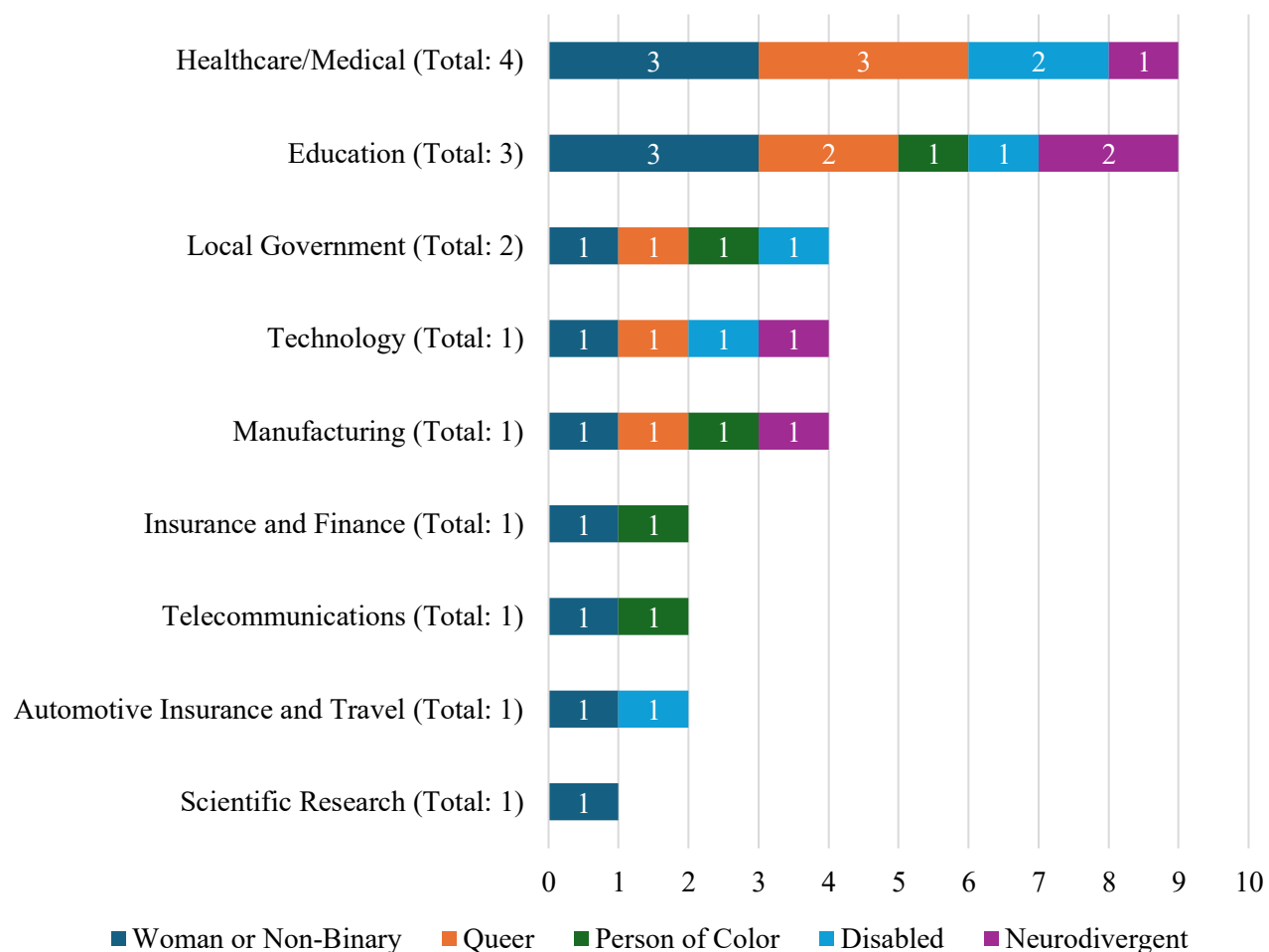
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The industries of this study's participants included healthcare/medical, education, technology, manufacturing, healthcare diagnostics, insurance and financial services, telecommunications, local governments and municipalities, automotive insurance and travel, scientific research, medical, and pharmaceuticals.



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Comprehensive Summary: Demographics by Industry



Thematic Analysis Findings: Core Themes and Subthemes

The below table describes the previously detailed themes with corresponding subthemes of each. This view provides a summarized overview identified through the coding and thematic analysis conducted based on the participants' responses. A thorough discussion with supplementing quotes and references are provided.

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Thematic Analysis Figure 1 of 1: Findings Organized as Themes and Subthemes

Note: Created by author from qualitative interviews.

THEME	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION
1. Insufficient DEI Culture and Mindset	1.1 Misdirected Focus and Perspectives	Participants described their workplaces implementing DEI initiatives as performative with insincere efforts and a blindness for marginalized communities other than military veterans. Influence within the current political administration was highlighted as well.
2. Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity	2.1 The Weaponization of Personal Demographics, Abilities, Disorders, and Lived Traumas	Participants detailed adverse outcomes with their leadership as weaponizations of homophobia, rejection sensitivity and dysphoria, gender, sexuality, race, disabilities and limitations, political stances, and sexual trauma responses.
3. Presence of a Safe Space for All	3.1 The Growth of a Welcoming Environment with Equal Treatment	Participants articulated their appreciation for leaders that created and nurtured a welcoming environment with no inner circles or favoritism and a genuine attitude to all where each employee is equally valued and appreciated.
4. Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee	4.1 Employees are Humans Primarily, Resources Secondly	Perceptions of being solely viewed as a means to an end without being viewed as actual people resulted in feelings of unappreciation and neglect. However, evidence of leaders remembering details about employees and considering individual struggles outside of work resulted in increased trust with the leaders.
	4.2 Basic Support is Needed to Optimize Employees' Business Value	Participants underscored the importance of flexible work arrangements, individualized support plans, healthy problem-solving in times of duress, and the consideration of seen and unseen limitations.
5. Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment	5.1 Inherently Negative Leader Qualities and Actions	Participants illustrated negative environments created by their leaders with behaviors that were controlling, insensitive, dismissive as well as management styles that were transactional, exclusionary, and unsupportive.
6. Leading Effectively with Authenticity	6.1 Leading with Authenticity Drives Increased Feelings of Trust and Security	Encouraging behaviors such as active listening, being available without micromanaging, collaborating, adequate engagement, and high emotional intelligence led to participants feeling empowered.

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Theme 1: Insufficient DEI Culture and Mindset

Specific Subtheme: Misdirected Focus and Perspectives

When asking the participants to share their individual perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the workplace, a number of responses had the same recurring themes. Specifically, the impact on the federal government and current administration, displaced priorities, an exclusionary focus on quotas, and a warped perspective on special treatment were identified as common concepts reflected on by participants.

Regarding political influence, seven participants specifically mentioned today's current political climate and how this administration's decisions at the federal level have impacted DEI efforts at smaller, more local levels. One participant who worked for a local government (referred to as Tom for the purposes of this study) acknowledged that "Before the first Trump administration, organizations valued and prioritized DEI, but now, these companies no longer care, which most likely aligns with the immigration restrictions and increased job losses." One participant in a healthcare setting, Carmen, echoed this sentiment and shared "DEI efforts are becoming less of a priority due to the current political regime. It's sad to see that companies are deprioritizing DEI policies because our government has deprioritized them." Another participant in manufacturing, Sarah, added that after the 2024 election, DEI policies were being eliminated if not rolled back, and people that were hired as part of DEI initiatives were being terminated. One participant in the technology industry, Ash, shared, "I would almost rather go back to an environment where DEI was the expectation or the standard and now all DEI efforts are being undone." A different participant, Shannon, went as far as sharing that the current climate is making leaders less afraid to decrease their support of DEI initiatives, and another participant, Cora, believed that people with disabilities, specifically, will be even more marginalized as this

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administration advances. Two different participants specifically noted how private companies are currently impacted. One participant, Natalie, claimed: “Interestingly enough, private schools have more freedom running diversity programs the way that they want, whether it’s more or less emphasis and funding on DEI efforts,” whereas Ash explained that companies no longer felt the pressure to conform with federal actions so they were more eager to eliminate their DEI policies and practices.

Another shared DEI perspective included the theme of organizations having misdirected or inaccurate DEI priorities. Natalie expressed her frustration with how organizations as a whole talk a lot of talk, but take much less action, meaning that they only really care about optics and the perception of being inclusive. On the other hand, her workplace at the time referred to DEI efforts as DEIJ, where the “J” represents justice. In this case, she shared that “the environment was particularly inclusive and understood that the concept of justice was the perfect supplement to a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace.” It is critical to note that this school’s purpose was for children who are on the spectrum and/or who have additional needs or abilities. Natalie shared that because the school’s mission was already laser-focused on marginalized students, they were better positioned to create and nurture a DEIJ program. Sarah shared that DEI efforts are missing the point of making sure everyone has the resources they need to succeed, which looks different for every community. Moreover, with a superficial exterior of an inclusive workplace, a core principle of why DEI policies and practices were implemented in the first place are being forgotten. Another participant in a more science-oriented industry, Mary, expressed that “Straight, white men are still the ones primarily in leadership roles, so we are a long way away from putting more women and queer people in positions of leadership.” Additionally, Mary shared that a man delivered a special informational session on women’s

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benefits in the workplace: “I couldn’t believe they did that; this would have been the perfect opportunity to ask a woman to speak about women’s benefits.” On a more personal level, a South-Asian participant, Heather, working in information security expressed her disappointment and frustration with being used as a stat in previous contexts. She indicated that these attempts were deliberate, not well-hidden, and felt ingenuine. She also shared that the topic of diversity means more than “not white.” The importance of advocacy and education emerged as additional concepts when referring to misdirected priorities in the workplace. Two participants with physical disabilities shared specific thoughts on this. Tom mentioned that the lack of allyship and understanding is an inherent gap in the DEI space, and another participant, Kristy, reiterated that “there is a lack of education in general, especially regarding what should be asked and discussed versus not asked or discussed.” Moreover, more time and effort need to be invested in DEI education throughout workplaces in general.

Another topic within this theme includes the focus on quotas that ultimately manifests as more exclusionary than inclusionary. Five different participants, all who identify as women, offered their insights. Kara shared that she has a difficult time determining how genuine companies are with their DEI efforts and policies. She asked: “Are they just following a trend, or do they follow up on their policies with real, concerted efforts? I’m skeptical when I hear that companies go out of their way to be inclusive.” Other participants referenced the topic of poster children that is often used within workplaces: either their own or workplaces in general. Shannon suggested that companies emphasize the ability to highlight different experiences and backgrounds without relying on the façade of poster children. Moreover, learning from these different experiences and backgrounds in a respectful and meaningful way for business purposes or contexts. Heather stressed the importance of companies needing to ensure that “inclusion and

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belonging” also refers to the core value that people are hired as the right fit, as opposed to “solely relying on meeting the quota or quantifiable metric for hiring and employment practices or policies.” Mary shared a similar sentiment and said “Society should not just hire people because they are queer, or women, or disabled. It should happen naturally and should be built on a foundation of equal or equitable opportunity.” Lastly, Cora shared that as much progress as DEI values, policies, and mindsets have made in more recent times, “DEI unfortunately does little to nothing for people with mental differences. If employees have specific conditions that are not explicitly protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it can be even more challenging for workplaces to not only create an environment that is nurturing and welcoming for these employees, but to also have the resources and abilities to support employees who fall within this population.”

The final concept within this theme of misdirected DEI focus and perspectives is the warped perspective of special treatment. Three different participants cited both personal and general anecdotes of the concept of “special treatment.” Mary said that “When people typically think about DEI, it’s easy to naturally think about someone’s race, nationality, disability status, or age. However, few people consider military veterans as part of the community that DEI efforts and policies support.” This is where things begin to shift, as most people have no issues with any special benefits or opportunities that veterans receive. Tom expressed his frustration with how many politically conservative people have an ill-informed perspective of what DEI encompasses in its totality. To illustrate, this participant shared an experience of when he was talking to a colleague with politically conservative values. During this exchange, the conservative colleague was downplaying the need for DEI policies, and while he was attempting to make his case, the participant responded with the statement that DEI gave him the ability to go to college and

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pursue his current job as a person with a physical impairment. Of course, this then resulted in his conservative colleague pausing and ultimately re-considering what he understood to be “DEI.”

Tom said, “Once I told my friend I wouldn’t have been able to go to college, his attitude changed and he started to understand what I was really saying.” Similarly, Cora expressed that DEI only ever means racial differences, as they are fueled by their misconception of what DEI consists of as a whole.

Theme 2: Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity

Specific Subtheme: The Weaponization of Personal Demographics, Abilities, Disorders, and Lived Traumas

The next subtheme identified throughout the interview responses is employee mistreatment and adversity as the result of their individual identities. Specifically, the weaponization of their personal demographics, abilities, disorders, and lived traumas. The factors of sexual orientation, neurodivergence, traumatic lived experiences, race, gender, and disability were explicitly referenced throughout the interviews. Beginning with sexual orientation, one participant working in healthcare, Carmen, identifying as a gay man, shared the experience of a previous manager pushing her conservative values on his team; especially him. He shared that he felt indoctrinated over time, and especially when Trump was deemed the winner in 2016, “My leader deliberately divided people by seeing who would agree with her, and treated those who opposed her views poorly.” Consequently, his non-conservative colleagues who would disagree with her would then be targeted. Carmen admitted that this manager had a negative perspective of marginalized people in general and had no issues sharing these opinions with the team. She also felt comfortable marginalizing those that she did not like or agree with.

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The next topic that was addressed throughout participant interviews was neurodivergence and mental differences, which consisted of autism, ADHD, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Natalie shared an experience where her ADHD, autism, and crippling anxiety manifested into the primary factor that contributed to an adverse experience with her employer at the time. Specifically, “When I was out on vacation, a ton of random changes were made to my environment without my consent, I had no idea what was happening or why, and it made me make significant adjustments when I came back to work which resulted in me having a meltdown.” What was especially disappointing in this instance was that her employer was aware that significant and unplanned changes or deviation from her everyday structure was a trigger for her and knew that she would be sensitive about it and have a negative response. Unfortunately, when Natalie responded the way she did, her leadership asked her why she was responding in this manner and manipulated her into feeling as though she was overreacting or inappropriately reacting to the action that they deliberately caused. Additionally, this leader told her that she was an inconvenience and told her that there was nothing they can do to resolve the issue as they simply did not have time for the drama of this situation. Natalie shared that she felt discouraged, excluded, and ended up leaving her role three months earlier than she originally planned which negatively impacted her ability to go to future managers for help or support.

Similarly, Mary shared her experience with severe executive dysfunction and how debilitating it has been for her in the workplace. She shared that there were many instances where she was unable to get up for work on time, and therefore, went into work late. Her leadership showed no empathy, compassion, or consideration for her when they said that they could not help her with this struggle and that she needed to get her act together. The participant shared that she felt like she was being brushed off and not taken seriously. Not only did this

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contribute to a negative dynamic with her leader, but the relationship with her coworkers were negatively impacted as well. Her coworkers would make comments such as “She’s not here, she can’t get her work done,” and “Why can’t she get here like everyone else?”

Another participant, Cora, shared an experience where her OCD contributed to insensitive, rude, and disrespectful comments from her manager. For context, her OCD diagnosis led to her having compulsions with work hours and her schedule, which manifested as double checking her hours and her schedule to ensure she had an adequate understanding of her schedule. Within this specific experience, her manager responded by humiliating her, came off as annoyed and inconvenienced that she was compulsively checking her schedule, and ended up calling her a slur that is typically associated with mental or developmental delays or disabilities. As expected, after this instance she was no longer in her manager’s inner-circle, and consequently, she changed departments completely. Cora stated, “I can’t completely conceal my OCD and neurodivergence, but since this experience, I’ve been trying to hide my OCD a lot more due to the fallout of what happened with this former manager.”

Two different participants highlighted experiences where trauma responses stemming from previous traumatic events resulted in negative and unsupportive behavior and comments from their respective leaders. Ash shared that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from traumatic childhood events manifested as rejection sensitivity dysphoria as an adult. Illustratively, in one instance, “I got a Slack message from my manager saying that their performance was unsatisfactory for different metrics. I laid down on my couch and went into a complete shutdown. I struggle a lot with rejection sensitivity dysphoria due to my PTSD and just felt completely stuck in this negative doom spiral.” To make the matter even worse, they were met with hostile, negative, and unsupportive comments and behaviors when attempting to

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discuss the negative performance evaluation with their manager. Overall, Ash felt ostracized, excluded, and discarded in this specific situation.

Another participant, Krystal, shared the experience of her first full-time job out of college, where her response to a sexual assault was used against her and ultimately costed her her entire job. She shared “I took a three-week leave of absence after a traumatic experience of being sexually assaulted. When I came back, I had severe anxiety and had a really hard time doing my job. Since my job could have been done from home, I asked for an accommodation or extra support, but my manager shot everything down and did not provide any resources to help me.” The totality of Krystal’s responses resulted in her manager asking her to resign. Krystal did not challenge it or fight back and ended up resigning. To make things worse, she was not allowed to retrieve things from her desk when she quit, her access to the building was severely limited, and she had to rely on her coworkers to retrieve her personal items. She was shut out from her workplace, emotionally and physically, and felt totally alone.

The next personal characteristics that were weaponized within adverse situations were race and gender, both in the context of participants and their coworkers as well as participants and their leaders. Beginning with Heather, she shared examples of racial microaggressions from her colleagues and coworkers as an Indian woman in a white, male-dominated environment. “At one environment, they told me contractors were not allowed at the event as it was for full-time employees only. A lot of times, people think I’m just a contractor due to my race.” Additionally, “People sometimes tell me how good my English is and are impressed that I don’t have an accent and then would be surprised that I’m as good of a communicator as I am.” Despite the fact that she has consistently performed amongst the highest employees within her team, due to her race, ethnicity, and gender, she ultimately feels as though she needs to prove herself even further to be

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as respected as her white male colleagues who have these privileges that are inherently unattainable for her. Similarly, Shannon detailed her negative experience as a Dominican woman in a predominantly white, male-dominated space. Instead of an adverse experience with her coworkers, she was negatively impacted by her leader. She expressed how she had a micromanager who was both racist and misogynistic. “This guy would go out of his way to make me feel uncomfortable, he would steal all of my ideas and claim them as his own, and would even message me outside of work hours and would expect a reply. I would get so triggered when I heard the instant message notification go off, even if it wasn’t him.” She consistently felt targeted, singled out, and ultimately excluded as she was the only woman in the company, who just so happened to be a woman of color in a predominantly white geographic region.

Two other participants shared adverse experiences with their managers and cited their gender as being the driving factor for the mistreatment and hostility within their previous workplaces. The first of the two participants, Kara, is a person of color, however, she did not cite her race or ethnicity as a contributing factor in this instance. From her personal experience, she had a misogynistic manager who completely disregarded specific concerns she brought to him when she was disrespected, mocked, and belittled about a deliverable. Her manager did not take it seriously at all and even went as far as saying that a man was speaking down to her because she is a woman. “He laughed in my face, didn’t say a word about the injustice, never confronted the male colleague who disrespected me, and brushed it all away as if it was nothing.” She further elaborated and said, “If my lack of industry knowledge or relevant work experience was used as a factor against me for getting a job or something, I could understand that, but my identity as a woman is something I can’t control, which makes situations like these especially frustrating.” The other participant, Rhiannon, who felt that her gender was used against her and

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contributed to an unhealthy dynamic was a progressive woman who felt ostracized and disrespected by her more conservative manager who did not support modern feminist ideals or values. “I definitely feel that the combination of me being a progressive and also a woman resulted in her manager having a lower tolerance for her and a significantly shorter fuse because of her personal and political values, especially during the pandemic when opinions on COVID-19 vaccinations were so controversial and the topic of many heated discussions. For a woman scientist, she really wasn’t much of a feminist which was surprising and disappointing to me.”

The final personal characteristic that was weaponized against Tom was that of a physical disability. Tom has the visual impairment of central vision. He recalled a specific experience in a previous position. “I was given the assignment to travel around the county I was living in at the time, but since I can’t drive, I would need to take the public buses or pay for rideshares. So traveling for work was simply not a feasible option. When they gave me this travel assignment, I expressed my concerns and frustrations, and they said that they ‘forgot’ about my disability.” His leadership then made it apparent that they did not care about his inability to travel to the extent that they required. As expected, this contributed to an overall exclusionary work environment, and ultimately, a hostile relationship between Tom and his leader at the time.

Theme 3: Presence of a Safe Space for All

Specific Subtheme: The Growth of a Welcoming Environment with Equal Treatment

When asking participants questions that would speak to different environments that were curated in a way that made them feel safe, included, and welcomed, the concept of equal treatment emerged as a prominent subtheme. Specifically, 75% of participants with a positive experience said there were no inner circles. Out of 12 participants that decided to speak about a

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positive experience, either in isolation or paired with a negative experience, nine said there were no inner-circles or special treatment that came with exclusionary practices. Some feelings expressed during these interviews were feelings of being friendly to all, treating everyone the same, no covert or overt favoritism, no obvious presence of an in-crowd, giving everyone a fair opportunity, and not treating anyone differently based on geographic location. As a result, this played a significant factor in deeming these experiences as positive for each participant.

Alternatively, 77% of participants with a negative experience said there was very obviously an inner circle of favorites. Out of 13 participants that chose to speak about a negative experience, either in isolation or paired with a positive experience, ten said there was obviously an inner circle of favorites. Sentiments included participants feeling othered, excluded because of personal demographics or traits, only being in the inner circle because they were top performers. Others detailed these environments as very cliquy and toxic, and furthermore, cliques led to a participant staying away from the breakroom because she was so apparently excluded.

Theme 4: Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee

Specific Subtheme #1: Employees are Humans Primarily, Resources Secondarily

The next overarching theme identified throughout the participant responses was the specific evolved mindset of “person first, then employee.” Specifically, the first subtheme being that organizations and their ability to remember that employees are humans first and foremost, and resources secondarily. Six different participants illustrated different examples of when their employers and/or leaders viewed them solely as resources and employees without considering the humanity of employing them as individuals. Natalie shared that her leader had the mindset of: “You are just a body, and we need you to do your job the way you are told.” She stated, “Me

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working there was nothing more than a business transaction, where leadership would actually make comments such as ‘We just need to get through the day and we don’t have time for drama or special accommodations.’” Ash illustrated a time where they were penalized for work that was incorrectly automatically flagged as poor or insufficient, and then even after treating them like machines, responded to them as if they were defective when they brought their questions and concerns to their leadership. Mary elaborated on her experience of struggling with mental health issues that negatively impacted her ability to maintain a consistent start time and perceived her leadership’s mindset to just be “get your work done, nobody cares about what’s actually happening or what your explanation is.” Two other participants shared similar experiences where their leadership needed something done, they did not care about anything else, and the leader was only available when they needed something from the participant but could not make themselves available when the participant needed their assistance, support, or guidance in most situations. The last participant, Krystal, shared that her leader was upset and resentful that she needed to take a leave of absence as the result of her sexual assault. Naturally, on top of feeling like her leader did not even perceive her as a human being who just endured an incredibly traumatic event, Krystal said, “I just couldn’t believe how unwanted and rejected they made me feel for having a natural human response to an event like this.”

Specific Subtheme #2: Basic Support is Needed to Optimize Employees’ Business Value

On the other side of this spectrum was the subtheme of employees actually feeling supported and valued which resulted in their overall productivity, performance, and value to the company. Four different participants highlighted different experiences of when they either did feel supported or would have felt more supported. Sarah was offered flexible work arrangements for personal reasons, whether they were health-related or not. She stated that she felt supported,

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valued, and appreciated. As a result of this positive response to her leadership's empathy and flexibility, she felt more encouraged to make an effort in the workplace because she felt that she had the physical, emotional, and mental resources to do so. Similarly, Natalie detailed her experience as feeling more comfortable, motivated, and engaged within their job when their leadership not only acknowledged but nurtured their limitations: either seen, unseen, or both. Amelia described her experience coming back from medical leave after a serious illness diagnosis and treatment. Upon her return, "My manager implemented a thorough and organized plan for me to return to work and reassured me that she is there to support me. She also said that she would be flexible with any appointments I had, no questions asked, without needing to use any of my own personal time." As expected, this gave Amelia a boost at work, making her want to do a better job at work and focus even more on her workload. Lastly, the participant who experienced a traumatic assault, Krystal, shared that she would have felt more productive and overall better about working if additional breaks or accommodations were in place for her. She did not receive the basic support she needed at the time, which directly correlated to a negative experience and her resignation from the position.

Theme 5: Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment

Specific Subtheme: Inherently Negative Leader Qualities and Actions

When diving deeper into the fifth overarching theme of creating or contributing to an unsupportive environment, participants highlighted inherently negative leader qualities and actions within their individual experiences. Overall, participants illustrated negative environments created by their leaders with behaviors that were controlling, insensitive, dismissive as well as management styles that were transactional, exclusionary, and unsupportive.

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Out of 13 participants who shared a negative experience, six characterized their leadership styles as transactional and three characterized their leadership styles as helicopter leaders or micromanagers. Four characterized their leadership styles as laissez-faire, hands-off, or avoidant. One participant shared that his manager, who already was a micromanager and was intrusive for no reason, had the mindset of: “I can do whatever I want, I’m in charge, and you shouldn’t be so sensitive and reactive to other peoples’ comments.” Other participants shared experiences of their leaders dismissing them and repeatedly demonstrating that they would not hear or empathize with their participants. The lack of advocacy, support, and communication led to another participant who started feeling incredibly discouraged and ultimately became resentful and adopted the mindset of not wanting to work as efficiently or productively. Ash shared that their transactional, apathetic leader exhibited signs of extreme control and never addressed the context of metrics or specific circumstances when representing team performance or productivity data. Ash’s leader also never gave credit where it was due and would take credit for others’ success. Heather, who is very evidently a top performer in her department, shared that despite her discipline, ambition, and performance in the workplace, she was still viewed as vocal and too outgoing. Consequently, she was perceived as a complainer or problem child, and her manager even told her team that he was going to talk to his therapist about his own team. Other participants highlighted times where any semblance of work-life balance was completely disregarded and disrespected, leaders being consistently dismissive, and some trying to scare their own employees by intimidating and threatening them. For example, Amelia’s former leader fired one employee and then turned to the rest of the team and stated that they all would be next.

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Theme 6: Leading Effectively with Authenticity

Specific Subtheme: Leading with Authenticity Drives Increased Feelings of Trust and Security

The final theme identified throughout this study was leading effectively with authenticity, and specifically, how it drives increased feelings of trust and security. In general, participants shared the positive impact of leaders being able to prioritize active listening, the ability to respond and engage in the conversation, and ease of being able to problem-solve. Natalie reminisced on how meaningful it was that their leader remembered personal details about her diagnoses and knew its impact in certain situations. Additionally, they advocated for Natalie to be able to get up and move throughout the day as she has issues sitting still. Natalie also shared “that leader’s ability to give us a collaborative leadership style was encouraging and comforting, as the shared goal, regardless of how complex a situation was, was to be able to solve the problem together as one team. It was never anyone against anyone else, it was all of us coming together to solve the problem as a team, with her supporting us fully.” Ash reflected on how meaningful it was that a senior leader carved out specific time in their schedule to conduct several private, individual meetings with the participant and their coworkers to learn more about their thoughts and hear their feedback on contract changes. “I was in awe of how he set up one on one meetings with us, took so much time in learning what our concerns were, and took notes throughout it too after saying that he did not know where to start if not meeting with all of us to learn more.” This exemplified this leader’s ability to prioritize and value advocacy, especially when they were not personally impacted by negative downstream changes that would ever have the potential to affect him or people like him. This leader stated that he wanted the people that work for him to have the tools and resources that they need be successful, which ultimately resulted in Ash feeling more empowered to do their work. This leader was especially engaged in

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the private meeting, took notes, asked questions, and at the conclusion of all meetings made sure that everyone had a voice. Kara stressed the importance of how the management style of leading from behind allowed her to feel empowered as it instilled a sense of independence and confidence which created a work environment where she could thrive. Another leader noticed the mood shift of a different participant, Sarah, asked if she was okay, and then provided Sarah with a resource that was incredibly helpful. She felt that this was clear proof that the leader cared about her as a person and leaned into prioritizing her work-life balance. “It might sound silly, but that conversation, as minor as it was, really did something to my soul. I wasn’t at all used to leaders caring about me in that regard.”

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The overarching themes, subthemes, and findings from the fifteen interviews conducted within this research study led to an array of insights that readers could glean. Prior to diving into a summarized view of these insights, it is helpful to circle back to the core of this study: The purpose and central question. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how underserved employees may feel either supported and/or unsupported utilizing employee sentiments of psychological safety and workplace inclusion within their respective leader experiences. Specifically, workplace inclusion was characterized as a sense of belonging, inclusion, and respective roles within inner or outer circles, whereas psychological safety was characterized as feeling comfortable enough with leaders in terms of voicing concerns, asking questions, and sharing opinions, experiences, or general life updates. Leader experience was then characterized as the collection of leader actions, behaviors, and leadership styles. Summarizing the primary focus of this study, the research's central question was: "How do underserved employees throughout various industries describe their experiences around support, psychological safety, and inclusion in the workplace?" To answer this question, the study's interview questions were designed around the conceptual framework of perceived workplace inclusion, psychological safety, and leader experience to paint the full picture of the respective experiences of marginalized or underserved employees.

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Discussion

To first summarize the results: based upon the interviews conducted, the respective findings were categorized on six high-level themes, each with at least one sub-theme or focus area. The six high-level themes included the following: (1) Insufficient DEI Culture and Mindset; (2) Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity; (3) Presence of a Safe Space for All; (4) Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee; (5) Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment; (6) Leading Effectively with Authenticity.

When asking the participants to share their individual perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the workplace, a number of responses had the same recurring themes. Specifically, the impact on the federal government and current administration, displaced priorities, an exclusionary focus on quotas, and a warped perspective on special treatment were identified as common concepts reflected on by participants. The next subtheme identified throughout the interview responses is employee mistreatment and adversity as the result of their individual identities. Specifically, the weaponization of their personal demographics, abilities, disorders, and lived traumas. The factors of sexual orientation, neurodivergence, traumatic lived experiences, race, gender, and disability were explicitly referenced throughout the interviews. When asking participants questions that would speak to different environments that were curated in a way that made them feel safe, included, and welcomed, the concept of equal treatment emerged as a prominent subtheme. The next overarching theme identified throughout the participant responses was the specific evolved mindset of “person first, then employee.” Specifically, the first subtheme being that organizations and their ability to remember that employees are humans first and foremost, and resources secondarily. On the other side of this spectrum was the subtheme of employees actually feeling supported and valued which resulted

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in their overall productivity, performance, and value to the company. When diving deeper into the fifth overarching theme of creating or contributing to an unsupportive environment, participants highlighted inherently negative leader qualities and actions within their individual experiences. Overall, participants illustrated negative environments created by their leaders with behaviors that were controlling, insensitive, dismissive as well as management styles that were transactional, exclusionary, and unsupportive. The final theme identified throughout this study was leading effectively with authenticity, and specifically, how it drives increased feelings of trust and security. In general, participants shared the positive impact of leaders being able to prioritize active listening, the ability to respond and engage in the conversation, and ease of being able to problem-solve.

Interpretation of Theme 1: Insufficient DEI Culture and Mindset

Interview responses lead the researcher to deduce that people in marginalized communities are either skeptical of current efforts, not hopeful for future efforts, or a combination of both. This may imply at a broader scale that organizations are not aware of how discouraged marginalized communities are. Companies may even publicly say: "Look at all we're doing, it's written right here in the policy, what's the problem?" This means nothing if the executive leadership is not living in alignment with what their policies are or if they are unable to prove or demonstrate that they are actively trying to create an equitable environment. If either of these are the reality within organizations, chances are slim that the organizations' employees are never going to be on board or fully believe that they are making genuine and thoughtful attempts to ensure equity. This may lead to these employees becoming discouraged and overall having their productivity decrease as they would not be as motivated. The relevance of this first theme is also supported by the literature referenced within this research. Grissom (2018) detailed that the

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that more than 38 million people will enter the workforce between 2016 and 2026 alone, where the composition of the labor force will become older and more racially and ethnically diverse. The researcher acknowledged that workplace diversity is only going to increase and become more prevalent over time, which is why this study is centered around how workplaces support diverse communities and populations. The participants of this study cited the relevance and applicability of American politics as well. Based on the responses gathered during this research, companies can try to be as bipartisan or apolitical as possible, but employees are especially aware of the attitude, mindset, and perspective of the current administration. If it is obvious that their leadership at work is aligned with the views of the current U.S. government administration, or if they are not outwardly opposed to it, this then tells the employees that the employer has chosen a side, even if the employer is convinced that they have remained a neutral party. As such, employees could potentially distance themselves away from organizations whose core values do not align with their own. Rothschild's article (2000) supports these claims the participants made, as it was noted that political rights are closely linked to workplace rights and cannot be separated. The article explained that as economies modernize, a more educated workforce emerges, which is essential for industries that rely on information and creativity. Research demonstrates that with increased education, workers begin to expect greater autonomy and democratic participation in their jobs (Rothschild, 2000). This claim is aligned with the findings of this study, as participants within this research had at least a bachelor's degree within their respective academic fields. Also, they all stated that they would expect all workplaces to become more inclusive of marginalized communities. Aligned with this, Ruth Milkman (2017) emphasized how Millennials are the most educated generation as well as a new political generation where lived experiences and views

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make them unique in parallel with their racial and ethnic diversity. As mentioned, nine participants within this study self-endorsed as millennials who were members of one or more marginalized communities. They all understood the impact on DEI efforts in the workplace, regardless of the extent to which they felt impacted due to their differences from their peers.

When thinking about this concept in application, one participant shared that at their school for neurodivergent children, leadership included the "J" in "DEIJ" to include the concept of justice. In this case, the school's leadership and administration understood the importance of justice simply as the result of equitable and fair education being a core value. Creating and driving a culture with intention and careful consideration can start off with something as simple as asking a woman or panel of women to speak on an HR-led webinar focusing on women's benefits. Appointing a man to speak about the topic of women's benefits does not instill much confidence in workplace employees that their leadership is intentional about gender equality. In Green's (2005) article, it was discovered that work culture is a central ingredient to the development of social connection among employees. As a result, work culture provides the relational foundation for connection at work while framing the relational structure on which to build important social bonds. As illustrated in this study, Shannon's leadership asked her to share her experiences growing up in a low-income household to better understand the effectiveness of their processes and deliverables at work. This ultimately set a precedence for her colleagues to better understand her more, which led them to supporting her.

At a minimum, organizations would benefit from aligning their strategic efforts and plans with their core values: what they believe in, what topics or beliefs are nonnegotiable, how they would like to be remembered, etc. Then, based upon this established foundation, they can focus on bridging the gap between their enterprise strategy and core values by ensuring that the

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appropriate level of expertise is acquired or obtained. As such, subject matter experts, industry leaders, researchers, or other professionals in the DEI space can be pursued. From there, companies can work towards intentionally building out their DEI programs as opposed to simply having a program for the sake of having one. In this study, several participants expressed how a lot of DEI initiatives are performative or only going through the motions to say that they are inclusive and have a diverse workforce. They shared that the reality is that very rarely do these organizations truly live in alignment with principles of authentic inclusion and support of marginalized communities that are operationalized within their workplaces. In their article regarding performative vs authentic equity, McCullough and Erasmus (2004) explained that performative equity referred to the actions, words, or gestures that claimed to do equity work, but do not improve matters for those historically oppressed. Results indicated that performative equity work privileges the comfort and perspective of dominant groups, reinforces the status quo, stays in the realm of the rhetoric, and often results in superficial changes only. On the other hand, authentic equity work centers the experience of Black people and people of color, embraces discomfort, transforms dominant culture, and results in measurable changes to the lives of those historically oppressed.

Interpretation of Theme 2: Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity

The overarching deduction of this theme was revealed to be that any part of someone's identity that does not match their leaders' or employers' identity may not only be misunderstood or neglected but can also be used against them. While organizations can offer all of the resources, help, and support through special sessions, newsletters, or articles, they must dig deeper and take the appropriate measures to ensure that understanding and embracing these differences is built into the operations supporting their overall culture. This may look like

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ensuring that leadership training includes acknowledging and supporting differences and gauging if employees are feeling any direct negative impacts from their managers within this context. An effective starting point would be to determine if current leadership or management trainings are addressing this topic, and if so, examining their efficacy, relevancy, and overall success. To begin to examine this, executive leaders can begin exploring potential gaps or areas of opportunities. The opportunities might include considering if a lack of training, education, or awareness is the root of why employees are feeling discriminated against or further marginalized. If not a direct root cause, they can explore if this shortcoming potentially contributes to the issue. They can also examine if current leadership training teaches management to understand how employees may have traumatic backgrounds or other types of factors in their personal lives. Another consideration is if leaders throughout the organization are taught about microaggressions and the impact on their teams. Or, even more specifically, if they are taught how impactful their individual responses are based on attitudes or certain language they might use, even if they perceive their language as neutral, fair, or appropriate. Additionally, it would be helpful to assess if leaders are taught how to separate their own personal political, religious, or philosophical beliefs from others, and furthermore, not letting those differences impact the relationship between the leader and their team members. On an even broader perspective, the company should reflect on if they are prioritizing leadership training quality and relevance the same way they are prioritizing conversations centered around employee productivity, efficiency, and cost-saving measures. The core sentiment is that organizations must prioritize leadership trainings so that their leaders are able to know their team members, better understand their backgrounds and what they may need, and have the ability to respond accordingly, rather than reacting or mindlessly responding based on their own individual beliefs or perspectives. If the

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support does not start from the leaders of the teams, the teams themselves will not have a solid foundation to further build upon when situations become challenging, or uncomfortable changes become increasingly prevalent.

The literature referenced throughout this study brought the concept of capitalism to the forefront and its role in modern workforces. Robert (2003) stated that the capitalist framework of modern workplaces led to negative perceptions that aligned with physical segregation, thus resulting in alienation and exclusion. Individuals still subscribe to the capitalist ideology of individual responsibility (Robert, 2003), which was shown in this study via Tom's example of feeling othered, excluded, and neglected during times where his physical disability was not considered. Similar to this, the modern workplace is not always designed with neurodivergent individuals in mind, and neurodivergent employees often need to mask or hide their neurodivergence to avoid stigmas associated with being disabled or different ("Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity," 2023). In this study, three participants, Mary, Natalie, and Cora, shared how their neurodivergent conditions and disabilities were the foundation of the negative experiences they illustrated within their respective interviews. The symptoms of their conditions were weaponized against them and resulted in an apparent mistreatment and disrespect to them as employees.

Interpretation of Theme 3: Presence of a Safe Space for All

The next theme was identified after evaluating the responses of different interview questions that spoke to what makes a work environment a safe or unsafe space; either for one, few, many, or all. This was depicted by the significance of an inner circle (if there was one at all), to what extent leaders played favorites, or if there were any factors (either directly or indirectly) that would result in any team members feeling particularly excluded, left out, or

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discredited. As one would expect, the answers varied. However, one concept to note was that a majority of people who spoke about positive experiences shared that there was no inner-circle at all. Conversely, when other participants shared experiences of them feeling isolated, rejected, or excluded in any way, it was common for the presence of an inner circle or group of favorites to be prominent. Aligned with the research analyzed for this study, McGee Wanguri (1996) introduced the idea of microinequities that may inadvertently arise within leader-subordinate communication and how subtle discrimination is perpetuated by these microinequities. The article explains that a solution to ensure all employees view communicative equality is openness in superior-subordination communication. Specifically, leaders who accidentally share ore with one employee than another can negatively impact the team as a whole if they pick and choose who they are most transparent with.

An additional insight gleaned from the interviews was the difference in treatment among top performers. Specifically, it appeared to be easy and perhaps even natural for leadership to put top performers on a pedestal from the perspective of giving them a greater sense of inclusion, sharing more details or information with them, and treating them more like friends than employees working on their respective teams. In work environments like this, those who know they are top performers (and consequently, a favorite or someone who is part of their leader's inner circle) may take advantage of this position on their team relative to their colleagues or may end up with an inflated sense of importance or status that may enable them to decrease their productivity. Even if a leader truly believes they have no inner circle, if they are obviously favoring higher performers over others, the results of this study indicate that inner circles can still be inadvertently created. In fact, research conducted by Friedrich and colleagues (2024) discovered that no inner-circles will be formed if collective leadership is in place and

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hierarchical relationships are not emphasized. Within the context of this qualitative study, the researcher deduced that managers that deliberately did not have inner circles treated everyone the same and actually solved problems with them instead of giving marching orders. They were the same leaders that led from behind and took a genuine interest in their team members, as opposed to a more hands-off or transactional leadership style.

These insights lead the researcher to wonder if organizations are highlighting the concept of fair and equitable treatment and consideration of others within their core values, guiding principles, or leadership training curriculum. Moreover, where does it show up in an organizational culture? The hope would be that living out the values of fair and equitable treatment would start at the top of an organization and then cascade down to the most granular level: the day-to-day operations and staff that keep the broader organization running. In general, any single individual or group of individuals can feel excluded, whether they are marginalized by race, gender, ability status, ethnicity, or political beliefs or not. Therefore, organizations must ensure that inclusion is not only a focus but a priority for all employees: regardless of which communities they may or may not be a part of.

Interpretation of Theme 4: Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee

The next theme identified throughout the participants' responses centered around valuing employees as humans first. Outside of a job, life throws curveballs. Illnesses present themselves or adverse experiences happen, and employees have no choice but to deal with those curveballs. At the same time, they are also focusing on maintaining their work performance, remaining kind, collaborative, and helpful, and ultimately, keeping their jobs throughout it all. The human experience is nothing if not filled with twists, turns, and changes that we are constantly assessing, navigating, and working through with intention. One study referenced in this research

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concluded that “leaders that improve the psychological safety of a work environment, for example by engaging in trust-building conversations with team members, can facilitate more positive perceptions of trustworthiness of new coworkers (Roussin & Webber, 2012).” Another article illustrated that there is a direct correlation between leadership styles and psychological safety. Specifically, “The role of leader inclusiveness became significant, as the authors found that if a leader takes an authoritarian, unsupportive, or defensive stance, team members are more likely to feel that speaking up in the team is unsafe. In contrast, if a leader is democratic, supportive, and welcomes questions and challenges, team members are likely to feel greater psychological safety in the team and in their interactions with each other (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).”

In this study, it was found that leaders who either created or contributed to positive work environments intentionally made explicit efforts to prove that the participants were humans first before being their employees. Examples of this included offering participants more individualized support from more personal, non-work-related perspectives, such as their mental health, physical health, scheduling conflicts, family life or obligations, or other personal factors. As a result, the participants who felt valued as humans and not just as workers were happy to put forth the extra effort throughout their work obligations or commitments because they genuinely felt appreciated and considered.

These insights lead the researcher to deduce that organizations will not have a company of productive employees if the employees are unilaterally and strictly treated as employees only. From an objective, business perspective, while employees serve a purpose for an organization, they are neither machines nor robots. No employee has the ability to completely turn off all non-work-related thoughts or problems when they start their workday, nor do they have the ability to

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block them out of their lives during the duration of their working hours. So why do leaders keep operating under the assumption that they should be able to? Aligned with this idea of trust employees have for their leaders, a study conducted by Carmeli and Gittell explored the conditions of team members learning from failure, focusing on the key differences between trust and psychological safety. They discovered that shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect facilitate the development of psychological safety which enable individuals to learn from failure. Within this study, it was apparent that participants really had no interest to invest in their jobs, learn more, take on additional work, or challenge themselves if they didn't feel psychologically safe under their respective leaders, which may, in turn, limit their opportunities to learn from failure or moments of discomfort that would ultimately help them grow and flourish within their roles.

Additionally, participants shared the overwhelmingly positive impact of when their leaders would be available for them if they needed any type of support, work-related or not, as opposed to only interacting with the participants when they needed something from them. This transactional, surface-level style of support only affirms any perceptions of employees feeling as though they are seen as a means to an end within the company, rather than being valued as whole individuals. Conversely, if employees choose to open up and share personal aspects of their lives outside of the workplace, leaders should make more deliberate attempts to listen to and understand what is impacting employees in their personal lives. When doing so, they should “zoom out” – take a broader perspective of the full picture of what might be happening within a work context. What leadership should learn to understand, if they do not already, is that there is always a way to come up with a solution, but it starts with making deliberate attempts to invest in the person, understand as much as you can about them or their situations, and employ an

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individualized approach of tailoring a solution for them. Leaders must consider how they would want a family member to be treated in the workplace, and if they would either want or expect their personal needs as a human to be discarded when in the workplace, solely because they are employees and nothing more to a company.

Interpretation of Theme 5: Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment

The fifth major theme identified throughout the responses was the different ways in which leadership can either create or contribute to an unsupportive environment. Moreover, inherently negative qualities and attributes being a key variable to an unsupportive environment. Some participants admitted that the negative experiences their leaders caused or created were either some or all of the reasons for them to resign from their positions and/or transfer to a different team with different leadership. One participant, Mary, even stated that her limitations were not only rejected and disrespected by her leaders, but her team members started acting and behaving the same way. The upstream support she needed was lacking, which resulted in her receiving downstream negativity and hostility. This is reinforced in the literature, where Harold and Holtz (2015) examined the effects of passive leadership on workplace incivility. They found that higher levels of passiveness result in stronger effects of incivility, and employees who experienced incivility were more likely to engage in withdrawal behaviors (Harold & Holtz, 2015).

Based on the participants' responses, it is clear that leaders need to be self-aware or learn how to become self-aware before they manage a team and become an official leader of people. This type of introspection can look like leaders determining if they want to ensure their team members are empowered and set up for success or if all they want is to be in total control. It can also look like them asking themselves what kind of leadership style they want to employ: do they

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want to be overbearing? Available? Helpful? Supportive in a deliberate way? What about recognition; does the leader want to give credit where credit is due? Or are they highlighting their people the way they should when it comes time for promotions, bonuses, or other accolades or acknowledgements? Also, leaders need to understand what their relationship is with trust. The responses within this survey concluded that being a micromanager was always more harmful than helpful and actually held participants back. If leaders feel that they need to micromanage to get work done, that means that they do not trust that their teams can get the work done. In that case, more thought needs to be given to why the leader cannot trust their team enough to support them from behind, as the issue is further rooted and should be identified. Additionally, leading from a strictly transactional and distance or withdrawn perspective is not the right combination to employ for a stable, high-performing, and reliable team. Some participants referenced that their leaders were nowhere to be found when they needed them, which ultimately hindered how psychologically safe the participants felt. On the other hand, the leaders that were more boots-on-the-ground and understood the complexity and intricacies of the work were easier to trust, confide in, and bring issues to. Saleem and colleagues (2020) reinforced this phenomenon as they concluded that the best managers have actual subject matter knowledge of the work they are leading and have an appreciation for what their team does. With that, when a leader is further removed from the work, it may be harder to connect with the team executing the work (Saleem et al., 2020).

Interpretation of Theme 6: Leading Effectively with Authenticity

The last major theme identified throughout the responses was the concept of leaders leading effectively with authenticity. The participants specifically noted different actions that leaders either do or do not do that would determine if they were genuine leaders who value

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authenticity. In this study, participants mentioned that when leaders were actively engaged, active listeners, took notes, and expressed a genuine interest in them, they became increasingly more trusting of their leaders. This conclusion is supported by Walumbwa and colleagues' (2011) study that suggested that authentic leadership may enhance team members' psychological capital and trust levels, which ultimately affect their citizenship behaviors and performance (Walumbwa et al., 2011). The topic of servant leadership correlated with authentic leadership and empathetic behaviors in this study as well. Based on the interview responses within this survey, participants felt the most empowered, trusted, and confident when they had servant leaders who led from behind. The study performed by Saleem and colleagues found that "by explicitly emphasizing the needs of followers, instead of an authoritative power distance, servant leadership shifted the focus notably from an economic man to a humanistic model with governance based on viewing individuals as pro-organizational, self-actualizing, and trustworthy (Saleem et al., 2020)."

It would behoove organizations to incorporate thoughtful perspectives into their leadership trainings that encourage and promote authenticity. These might include prompting leaders to look inward and introspectively consider what they are doing on a daily basis to contribute to a supportive and safe environment which may include proving that their actions match their words, determining if they are supporting and encouraging their team members in genuine ways, identifying if they are honest with their team, noticing if they connect with their team members, or if they are creating a comfortable team environment that makes the team comfortable before they settle in and work towards any shared goals or objectives. On the other hand, they should also ask themselves if they only view their role as a leader as transactional:

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they support their team as much as needed for them to keep doing the work, or if the leader is doing the bare minimum to keep the team afloat.

Taking this a step further, leaders should carefully consider how they are showing up for their teams on a day-to-day basis. Do they only care about concerns or sensitive topics if they are impacted by them or if they can relate to them? Are they advocating for their people when they need it? Are they remembering specific details about their people, work-related or not? Are they going out of their way to invest in the lives of their employees even if it might not have a direct business impact on the team? Does support and understanding tend to only be reciprocal, or do they want to genuinely offer a safe psychological and emotional space for them to flourish in the workplace?

Theoretical Framework Perspective

This research explains that workplace inclusion and psychological safety are rooted in theories from philosophy and social psychology that emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships. Research suggests that when employees feel respected and valued by their leaders, they are more likely to become psychologically engaged and actively participate within their teams. The text highlights two key theoretical frameworks for understanding inclusion and psychological safety at work: Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement. Together, these frameworks emphasize the importance of creating workplace environments where employees feel accepted, valued, and safe. LMX Theory focuses on the quality of relationships between leaders and employees. It proposes that leaders influence employees' perceptions of themselves and their workplace through their interactions. When leaders treat employees as important

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members of the organization, others are more likely to view them as valuable contributors, increasing employees' sense of inclusion.

Regardless of which questionnaire was leveraged for each interview, the core of the interview questions were written with a direct correlation to the two theoretical frameworks that served as a foundational pillar for this research. Specifically, questions focused on leadership style and individual perceptions of leader authenticity were the result of the understanding of the LMX Theory, and questions focused on comfort with managers and any inner-circles of favorites were mapped to Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement (psychological safety).

LMX Theory and the concept of high-quality exchanges were prominent throughout themes three, four, and six: Presence of a Safe Space for All; Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee; and Leading Effectively with Authenticity, respectively. Specifically, participants articulated their appreciation for leaders that created and nurtured a welcoming environment with no inner circles or favoritism and a genuine attitude to all where each employee is equally valued and appreciated. Brimhall and colleagues (2016) found that high-quality leader-member exchange can have an immediate positive influence on employee outcomes such as work attitudes, performance, retention, and creativity. Additionally, organizational leaders who dedicate time and resources to developing high-quality interactions will benefit by increasing employee perceptions of inclusion six and twelve months later (Brimhall et al., 2016).

To supplement this, William A. Kahn's theory of personal engagement and disengagement explains that employee engagement is shaped by three key psychological conditions: psychological meaningfulness, psychological availability, and psychological safety.

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Psychological meaningfulness refers to feeling that work is worthwhile and motivating, psychological availability relates to having the resources and capacity needed to perform effectively, and psychological safety involves feeling secure and free from threats when carrying out job responsibilities. Building on Kahn's framework, Li and Tan (2013) examined how trust in supervisors influences employee performance. They proposed that trusting relationships with supervisors create positive perceptions about work rewards, available resources, and assurance, which strengthen the three psychological conditions. Their findings showed that trust in supervisors improves employee performance primarily by enhancing psychological availability and psychological safety (Li and Tan, 2013). Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement were prominent throughout themes two, four and five: Mistreatment and Adversity as the Result of Identity; Evolved Mindset: Person First, Then Employee; and Creating or Contributing to an Unsupportive Environment, respectively. Between the two theories that consisted of this research's theoretical framework, the study can be summarized with one takeaway: Employees are more likely to perform effectively and engage fully in their work when they trust their supervisors, feel supported with adequate resources, and experience a workplace culture built on trust, respect, and psychological safety.

Conceptual Framework Perspective

The conceptual framework curated for this study combines the concept of perceived psychological safety based on Kahn's psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement, perceived workplace inclusion based on questions crafted around feelings of being excluded, othered, neglected, or dismissed, and the leader experience, which for the purposes of this study comprises of leader behaviors, leadership styles, and leader actions based

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on the Leader-Member Exchange Theory. The totality of each participant's experience with their leader included indications of either high-quality member exchanges or low-quality member exchanges.

Limitations & Future Research

While this research spanned different communities and work settings, there were some limitations of the study that should be noted and considered for future research. First, the participant survey data was collected from a small sample that ended up being a convenience sample. The sample was also not as diverse or as cross-sectional as many workplaces or communities are today. Only a few participants identified as people of color or have physical limitations, both of which were mutually exclusive, so intersectionality was limited within this context. Intersectionality is critical, as oftentimes marginalized or underserved communities fall under several different demographics that are underserved, so more research is needed based on that factor alone. As such, while this research was a sufficient way to begin this area of study, it would neither be fair nor meaningful to generalize my results to the broader population.

Additionally, not a lot of industries were included in the study. All research participants work in "white-collar" or jobs with office settings, so the findings are even further limited as individuals employed in trades or more "blue-collar" settings were inadvertently excluded from this sample. Related research studies in the future should represent a broader range of industries, including trades, positions in the medical field, and other lines of work that fall outside of a typical corporate or office setting. All in all, future research should be more diverse from the perspectives of industries, work settings, intersectionality, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and physical limitations.

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Recommendation

Fifteen interviews sharing details of some of the best and worst leadership recollections led to various themes that were analyzed to extract meaningful insights, theories, and recommendations. Based on the findings of this research, the author recommends that companies begin by doing a metaphorical pulse check of the employees within their current environments. They should ask meaningful questions to determine how the company is doing overall, which might include asking how employees feel at work, if they perceive the workplace to be inclusive, if leadership is effective and genuine, or if the culture is welcoming and safe. Oftentimes, employees are not too forthcoming with these surveys, so it may be more difficult to gauge what might be really happening from the employee experience perspective.

That being said, the author's findings highlight the need for change and developments to occur at the top so they can effectively be cascaded downwards. This can be done in different ways, however, leaders need to be taught how to become impactful and positive leaders, not just bosses. Management should be encouraged to lead from a place of empathy, kindness, and consideration for others, which includes not inserting their own beliefs into how they lead, or simply viewing their relationships with their team members as transactional. An improved or more robust leadership training program or curriculum should be rolled out to leaders within the organization so that leaders at any level, among any team can serve their employees in the most authentic, inclusive, and equitable ways possible. A company without genuine care, consideration, and support for its most valuable asset, its people, will not be best positioned for success.

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APPENDIX

Research Screening & Interest Form

Thank you for an expressing an interest to participate in this research! This screening form will assist the researcher identify participants for the subsequent interviews/data collection. All responses collected in this form will not be shared with any third-party/entity and will only be used for the purposes of this study.

Dissertation research title:

Hidden Inequities: A Qualitative Exploration of the Gaps in Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion Among Underserved Employee Populations

What is your first and last name?

What is your preferred email address?

Which of the following community or communities do you identify with? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Queer person/member of the LGBTQIA+
- ☐ A person of color
- ☐ A woman
- ☐ A person with a disability
- ☐ A person with a neurodivergence (includes but is not limited to autism, ADHD, etc.)

Are you a full-time employee?

Note: For the purposes of this study, full-time is defined as working 35-40 hours per week, every week.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

Do you have a direct day-to-day manager? If you selected “Other,” please provide details.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

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Recruitment Email

Hi *(first name)*!

I appreciate your interest in participating in my research study, and I look forward to working with you! **Please use the following link to my calendar to select a day and time for our interview:**

(link to principal investigator's calendar software).

The interview should only take about 30 minutes, but I gave us a 45-minute window for extra time if needed. You will receive a confirmation email from Calendly with a direct link to the Zoom call.

I am also attaching the Informed Consent Form for this study for your reference. No signatures are required, and you may keep this form for your records. Please let me know if any questions or concerns arise at any point in time.

Thank you again! Speak with you soon.

Best regards,
Nicole Grassi

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Recruitment Poster

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Hidden Inequities: A Qualitative Exploration of the Gaps in Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion Among Underserved Employee Populations

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

Participants are being sought for a study to explore the lived experiences of underserved employee populations, focusing on their perceptions of support within their organizations.

 Psychological Safety
  Workplace Inclusion
  Leader Experience

 Employee Support Levels

STUDY DETAILS

- One 30-minute virtual interview (via Zoom)
- Interview questions focused on individual experiences of psychological safety & workplace inclusion under their respective management/leadership
- ✓ Research benefit: gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that may contribute to underserved employees feeling supported, safe, and included in the workplace.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Full-time employees with access to a computer and the internet and a direct manager who categorize themselves as at least one of the following:

- A person of color
- A person with a disability
- A woman
- A queer person/member of the LGBTQIA+ community
- A person with a neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, etc.)

Nicole Grassi, Principal Investigator

Ph.D. Candidate at Marywood University

Email: nagrassi@m.marywood.edu

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND WORKPLACE INCLUSION FOR THE UNDERSERVED

Informed Consent Form

ERC Informed Consent Form

Title: Hidden Inequities: A Qualitative Exploration of the Gaps in Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion Among Underserved Employee Populations

Principal Investigator (PI): Nicole Grassi, Ph.D. student at Marywood University

Principal Investigator Contact Information: (570) 878-3999; nagrassi@m.marywood.edu

Research Advisor: Yerodin Lucas, PhD, Marywood University

Research Advisor Contact Information: School of Social Work, Immaculata Hall 203. (570) 340-6042; ylucas@marywood.edu

Invitation for a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study about the lived experiences of underserved employee populations, focusing on their perceptions of support within their organizations. You were chosen because you are a full-time employee with access to a computer and the internet and a direct manager. You also categorize yourself as at least one of the following: a person of color, a person with a disability, a woman, a queer person/member of the LGBTQIA+ community, or a person with a neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, etc.). Please read this form. Ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose – About the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how underserved employees may feel unsupported utilizing employee sentiments of psychological safety and workplace inclusion within their respective leader experiences. For the purposes of this study, “workplace inclusion” will be generally defined as a sense of belonging and included in the workplace. “Psychological safety” will be generally defined as feeling comfortable voicing concerns, asking questions, and sharing personal opinions. “Leader experience” is defined as the collection of leader actions, behaviors, and leadership styles.

Procedures - What You Will Do

You will meet with the researcher for a virtual interview, conducted via Zoom. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes but may vary based on level of detail provided in responses. The interview will be recorded and will be transcribed via the Evernote software application. The output of these interviews will be stored in Microsoft Word documents and the Evernote software. You will first indicate if you would like to share a positive experience, a negative experience, or both experiences, and the remaining interview questions will be based on your response to that initial inquiry.

Risks and Benefits

The risks are no greater than the risks in daily life or activities.

A benefit may be that this study will identify the key factors contributing to feelings of unsupportiveness, ultimately informing strategies for promoting inclusivity and support within organizations. By amplifying the voices of underserved employees, this research endeavors to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the primary investigator (Nicole Grassi) will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a secured file. Records will be kept for 1 year. Then they will be electronically deleted.

No web-based action is perfectly secure. However, reasonable efforts will be made to protect your transmission from third-party access.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the investigator[s]. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University. You may withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty. To withdraw, simply tell the investigator you no longer wish to proceed. Your information will be deleted.

Contacts and Questions

If you have questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator. Her contact information appears at the top of this form.

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact the Institutional Review Board at (570) 961-4782 or irbhelp@marywood.edu.

You may save or print a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

By proceeding:

- You understand what the study involves.
- You have asked questions if you had them.

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- You agree to participate in the study.

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Interview Questionnaires

BACKGROUND: This study seeks to understand how underserved employee populations describe experiences of feeling supported or unsupported by means of psychological safety and workplace inclusion with their respective managers. For all questions asked in this interview, you may answer with any level of detail that you are most comfortable with. The experiences you share with me today can apply to a former manager or your current manager. First, I'm going to start with some demographic questions.

- Which generation are you a part of?
 - Boomer: 1946-1964
 - Gen X: 1965-1980
 - Millennial/Y: 1981-1996
 - Gen Z: 1997-2010
- What are your pronouns?
- Which nationality or nationalities do you identify with?
- What is your current work arrangement? Fully remote, hybrid, or fully in-office?
- Which industry are you currently employed in?
- Are you employed by a non-profit or for-profit organization?

PRELIMINARY QUESTION: The questions I will be asking are based on what you would like to talk about today. You have three options: you may talk about a time you felt supported, a time you did not feel supported, or you can talk about both of those situations. Take a moment to think about what you'd like to discuss and let me know how you'd like to proceed.

Now that we've identified which path we're going down, we're only going to talk about those specific managers/scenarios. Please keep in mind that the scenarios can be for either a current or previous manager.

- *If the participant chooses to only elaborate on an interaction resulting in feeling unsupported, proceed to Questionnaire A.*
- *If the participant chooses to only elaborate on an interaction resulting in feeling supported, proceed to Questionnaire B.*
- *If the participant chooses to elaborate on BOTH interactions that resulted in feeling supported and unsupported, proceed to Questionnaire C.*

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Questionnaire A

1. Briefly describe the situation that made you feel unsupported at work.
2. Either during the interaction or looking back on it now in retrospect, did you feel any of the following: de-prioritized, neglected, excluded, or treated as an afterthought by your manager?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. Did any other feelings arise for you?
3. Were there any specific actions or behaviors your manager made that made you feel any of the above feelings?
 - a. If yes, please describe the nature of these actions or behaviors.
4. Were there any specific comments your manager made that contributed to you feeling any of the above feelings?
 - a. If yes, please describe the nature of these comments.

FOR QUESTIONS 3 & 4: If no specific details are provided (answers are both NO):
Please summarize the overall nature of this interaction. You may want to think about this in the context of answering what made you walk away from the interaction feeling unsupported the way you mentioned.
5. What would have made you feel more supported in this situation? (Can include job characteristics, the setting, manager behavior/actions, etc.)
6. Did this specific interaction/exchange have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with this manager?
7. What is/was the typical leadership style of this manager? Were they very involved in your day-to-day, nowhere to be found, did you only hear from them when they needed you, or a mix of the two depending on the circumstance?
8. Did this interaction that left you feeling unsupported feel in-character or out-of-character for this manager? Feel free to elaborate as you see fit.
9. Either at the time of the situation or shortly thereafter, did you feel comfortable addressing the discomfort and negative feelings this interaction caused with this manager?
10. In general, to what extent did/do you feel comfortable asking questions or voicing concerns to this manager?
11. Did/do you feel as though this manager has/had an inner circle of favorites?
 - a. If so, are/were you in that inner circle?
12. Did this specific interaction/exchange have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with your coworkers?
13. If you ever were to confide in your coworkers/team members about this situation, would you have felt comfortable doing so?
14. Would your coworkers be surprised to learn about this situation or its outcomes?
15. Would you have felt better about the outcome of this interaction if any aspects of your job or work arrangement were different?
 - a. If so, which aspects, and how?
16. Do you refer back to this interaction/exchange when deciding what to say or do in present-day situations?
17. Did you feel excluded or de-valued by your coworkers after this situation?
18. Do you have any lived experiences prior to the event that may have influenced your reactions to this/these events?
 - a. If yes, how so?
19. Do you believe any parts of your identity, background, or personality contributed in any way to your managers' conduct, either behaviorally or verbally?
 - a. If so, which one(s), and how so?
20. What aspects of the workplace would help you feel more included at work or help your workplace feel more equitable?
21. Please share your personal thoughts on current diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace. (*Is there currently too much emphasis on it, too little? Are we focused on the right things? What are we missing?*)

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Questionnaire B

1. Briefly describe the situation that made you feel supported at work.
 2. Either during the interaction or looking back on it now in retrospect, did you feel any of the following: nurtured, included, prioritized, or valued by your manager?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. Did any other feelings arise for you?
 3. Were there any specific actions or behaviors this manager made that made you feel any of the above feelings?
 - a. If yes, please describe the nature of these actions or behaviors.
 4. Were there any specific comments your manager made that contributed to you feeling any of the above feelings?
 - a. If yes, please describe the nature of these comments.
- FOR QUESTIONS 3 & 4: If no specific details are provided (they answered NO to both):
 Please summarize the overall nature of this interaction. You may want to think about this in the context of answering what made you walk away from the interaction feeling supported the way you mentioned.
5. Did this specific interaction/exchange have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with this manager?
 6. What is/was the typical leadership style of this manager? Were they very involved in your day-to-day, nowhere to be found, did you only hear from them when they needed you, or a mix of the two depending on the circumstance?
 7. Did this interaction that left you feeling supported feel in-character or out-of-character for your manager? Feel free to elaborate as you see fit.
 8. In general, to what extent do you feel comfortable asking questions or voicing concerns to this manager?
 9. Did/do you feel as though your manager has an inner circle of favorites?
 - a. Are you in that inner circle?
 10. Did this specific interaction/exchange have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with your coworkers?
 11. If you ever were to confide in your coworkers/team members about this situation, would you have felt comfortable doing so?
 12. Would your coworkers be surprised to learn about this situation or its outcomes?
 13. Do you refer back to this interaction/exchange when deciding what to say or do in present-day situations?
 14. Do you have any lived experiences prior to the event that may have influenced your reactions to this/these events?
 - a. If yes, how so?
 15. Do you believe any parts of your identity, background, or personality contributed in any way to this managers' conduct, either behaviorally or verbally?
 - a. If so, which one(s), and how so?
 16. What aspects of the workplace would help you feel more included at work or help your workplace feel more equitable?
 17. Please share your personal thoughts on current diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace. (*Is there currently too much emphasis on it, too little? Are we focused on the right things? What are we missing?*)

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Questionnaire C

1. Briefly describe the situations that made you feel supported and unsupported at work.
2. What were the similarities and differences between the two situations? This can include the nature or context of the situation, the setting, audience, and your feelings during and after the situation.
3. What specific comments or behaviors from your manager made you feel valued, prioritized, seen, heard, and supported?
4. What specific comments or behaviors from your manager made you feel de-prioritized, neglected, or excluded?
5. Did either (or both) of these interactions/exchanges have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with your manager?
 - a. Which one(s) and how?
6. What is/was the typical leadership style of this manager? Were they very involved in your day-to-day, nowhere to be found, did you only hear from them when they needed you, or a mix of the two depending on the circumstance?
7. Did either (or both) of these interactions feel in-character or out-of-character for your manager? Feel free to elaborate as you see fit.
 - a. Which one(s) and how?
8. In general, to what extent did/do you feel comfortable asking questions or voicing concerns to this manager?
9. Did/do you feel as though your manager has an inner circle of favorites?
 - a. Are you in that inner circle?
10. Did either (or both) of these interactions have any impact on the future nature of the relationship with your coworkers?
11. If you ever were to confide in your coworkers/team members about either or both of these situations, would you have felt comfortable doing so?
12. Would your coworkers be surprised to learn about either (or both) of these situations or their outcomes?
13. Do you refer back to either of these interactions/exchanges when deciding what to say or do in present-day situations?
14. How did these interactions impact you? Was one more memorable, intense, etc.?
15. Do you have any lived experiences prior to the event that may have influenced your reactions to this/these events?
 - a. If yes, how so?
16. Do you believe any parts of your identity, background, or personality contributed in any way to your managers' conduct, either behaviorally or verbally?
 - a. If so, which one(s), and how so?
17. What aspects of the workplace would help you feel more included at work or help your workplace feel more equitable?
18. Please share your personal thoughts on current diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the workplace. (*Is there currently too much emphasis on it, too little? Are we focused on the right things? What are we missing?*)

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IRB Approval Letter from the Exempt Review Committee



MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY EXEMPT REVIEW COMMITTEE

Immaculata Hall, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

DATE: May 13, 2025

TO: Nicole Grassi, PhD

FROM: Marywood University Exempt Review Committee

STUDY TITLE: [2313409-2] *Doctoral Dissertation: Hidden Inequities: A Qualitative Exploration of the Gaps in Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion Among Underserved Employee Populations*

MU ERC #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: May 13, 2025

CHECK IN DUE DATE: May 13, 2026

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review EXEMPT CATEGORY: 45 CFR 46.104(d)()

Dear Mr./Mrs/Ms./Dr. Grassi:

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials to your Exemption Request for this research study. Marywood University's ERC has APPROVED your submission. The project meets federal exemption criteria and involves minimal risk to subjects participating in the research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a complete description of the study and assurance of subject understanding.

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We have applied the ERC's approval stamp to the following documents, which have been uploaded with this letter in IRBNet. The stamp must appear on versions shared with subjects wherever possible. If it is not feasible to use the stamped versions online (e.g. some email systems or survey platforms), please ensure that the language in the transmitted versions is identical to the stamped versions.

1. Informed Consent Form
2. Advertisement

Please also note that:

- **CLOSURE REPORTING:** Upon completion of the research, you must file a closure report form via IRBNet.
- **CHECK IN REPORTING:** While there is no expiration date for exempted studies, the ERC maintains oversight of open projects. If activities will continue beyond your approval's one-year anniversary of _05/13/26_, file a check in form by that date.
- **RECORDS RETENTION:** While there is no minimum retention period for exempted studies, you must retain records for the length of time stated in your application and informed consent form.
- **DEVIATION, UNANTICIPATED PROBLEM OR SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENT REPORTING:** If any of these events occur, you must file the appropriate form immediately via IRBNet.
- **REVISION REQUESTS:** If you decide to make procedural or document changes to your approved project, you must file a revision request form for review and approval prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent, immediate hazards to the subjects. In hazardous situations, you must file the form immediately afterward.
- Forms for the reports mentioned above may be found on the [ERC's website](#) or in IRBNet's Forms library. The library appears after you begin a follow-up package within your existing project and then click the Designer button on the left menu, followed by the blue "Need forms" link on the main screen (opens library under Step 1).

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Office at 570-348-6211, x.2418 or irbhelp@marywood.edu. Please include your study title and IRBNet number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research! Regards,
Exempt Review Committee