The Role of Psychological Safety in Human Development

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Abstract

The degree to which individuals feel comfortable taking positive interpersonal risks (such as trying something new) is known as psychological safety. When individuals feel psychologically safe, they can exercise their agency to engage in experiences and interactions throughout life. This article describes existing research on psychological safety and situate it in the field of human development. Examples are presented that highlight the ways that individuals and their contexts come together to mutually create moments that may or may not be perceived as psychologically safe. By considering psychological safety's role in developmental research, we may gain new insights about ways to create contexts that increase the likelihood that individuals feel psychologically safe to engage, learn, and develop.

Psychological safety, the feeling that taking interpersonal risks will not result in embarrassment, ridicule, or shame, enables people to engage, connect, change, and learn (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Rather than being inhibited by anxiety and identity management, individuals can focus on activating and accomplishing goals, regardless of the discomfort that inevitably accompanies new experiences and ideas (English & Stengel, 2010). In studying human development, psychological safety may be particularly relevant because it enables individuals to utilize their agency, or their ability to make choices that influence the way they develop. Then, they are able to up-regulate, or actively engage, as they see fit. Agency is a critical aspect of conceptualizing individuals as capable of directing their development in concert with a nonlinear pathway of experiences and adaptations. In other words, feeling psychologically safe may decrease barriers to engagement and allow individuals to freely exercise agency to activate and interact with the world around them. Unfortunately, many individuals are in families (Cummings, George, McCoy, & Davies, 2012), schools (Holley & Steiner, 2005), and workplaces (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) that they do not perceive as psychologically safe. Living in these contexts may limit individuals' willingness to engage in experiences that would facilitate their development.

Although psychological safety has had a recent rebirth in the fields of business and organizational leadership (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), it has not, thus far, received the same attention in the field of human development. A review of current research, however, suggests that this construct may offer a useful conceptualization for contemporary researchers in this field. Considering the usefulness of this construct may begin by examining how existing research on psychological safety relates to key tenets in the human development field. In particular, this includes conceptualizing development as occurring in individual$\leftrightarrow$contextual relations (Overton, 2015). This conceptualization would make it less likely that researchers would study individual characteristics that lead to a greater sense of psychological safety, or the contextual characteristics that lead people to feel more psychologically safe. Instead, it would lead the

field to consider how individual and contextual characteristics work together to co-construct a moment that is perceived as psychologically safe or not. In this article, I describe psychological safety, relations to important developmental experiences, relevance to the study of human development, and implications for future practice and research in this and related fields. By bringing psychological safety to this field, developmentalists may be better able to understand why individuals make certain decisions that actively facilitate or hinder their experiences and opportunities for development (Wanless, this issue).

EXPERIENCING MORE OR LESS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY DURING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

When individuals feel psychologically safe, they expect that taking an interpersonal risk will not pose an intolerable level of threat to identity or sense of self (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This sense of safety may be critical for people to achieve optimal development, which necessitates feeling free to make decisions on when/how to engage with their contexts. If individuals are interested in engaging in an interaction, a perceived threat to their sense of psychological safety may inhibit them from acting on that desire to engage. Specifically, they may feel that the costs associated with taking interpersonal risks are too great to tolerate. Their fear of being embarrassed, losing face, feeling ashamed, or losing an aspect of their identity would be too great to be overcome by their desire to engage with others and to learn. In context, this may be operationalized in different ways across development. For young children, this might be an unwillingness to explore in new play situations (Paquette & Bigras, 2010). For adolescents or adults, being absent from work (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010) or changing jobs often (Chandrasekaran & Mishra, 2012) may indicate decisions to disengage. Taken together, when individuals do

not feel psychologically safe, they may end up unengaged in opportunities to learn and grow (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). As a result, positive human development is limited.

A positive feeling of psychological safety, however, can encourage individuals to participate and be active agents: feeling the freedom to choose when, with whom, and in which contexts to co-construct meaningful and productive experiences. The feeling that it is safe to not only engage, but also to engage in authentic ways that align with personal motivations, may produce ongoing benefits. This type of engagement may generate a sense of empowerment and affirmation of one's identity (Simonet, Narayan, & Nelson, 2015). Previous research suggests that when individuals feel psychologically safe they are more likely to enact self-regulated strategies such as offering ideas, admitting and learning from mistakes, asking for help, engaging in learning opportunities, providing feedback to others, and speaking up (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012; Holley & Steiner, 2005). Indeed, previous research suggests that creating environments that feel warm and responsive (more psychologically safe) may help children exhibit greater self-regulation (Merritt, Wanless, Rimm-Kaufman, Cameron, & Peugh, 2012). Speaking up, as an example, may be particularly important for individuals in abusive or discriminatory situations who may need to feel safe enough to engage in this critical step to advance their situations (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009).

Situations that Increase the Need for Psychological Safety

Many situations do not pose a threat to psychological safety, but in others, the perception of risk can be high. In these situations, individuals have the sense that they will not be given the benefit of the doubt and are

left with uncertainty and hesitancy to engage (Kahn, 1990). Some factors that may make moments feel higher stakes are when they are more public, more unclear, have more pronounced hierarchies, or have more salient or identity-related issues at play (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). One reason that public risk taking can feel high stakes is the sense that the people watching may be evaluating the risk taker (Edmondson, 2002). In fact, this phenomenon can be seen in public virtual spaces where individuals are increasingly feeling the need to manage the way others perceive them and decreasingly feel psychologically safe to take interpersonal risks (Netzley & Rath, 2012). Being in situations that are enmeshed in issues that are salient to an individual's identity, such as gender, race, and perceived status in a group, also has implications. When people feel they have low status within a group, for example, they are less likely to feel psychologically safe to engage in the group. This is less likely, however, when the group leader conveys the importance of everyone's contributions (Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). In sum, risk-taking moments that are public, unclear, have pronounced hierarchies, or challenge identities may necessitate greater psychological safety to foster individuals' active engagement in developmental opportunities.

Throughout development, individuals are faced with the need to grow, maintain resilience, and regulate loss (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). Across the life span, individuals need to take interpersonal risks during major life transitions (e.g., divorce, having a baby, beginning a new job, losing a parent), and during the typical tasks of daily life (e.g., classroom learning activities, workplace professional development opportunities, social gatherings with unfamiliar others). In these moments, a sense of psychological safety may decrease the need to focus on self-protection and identity management (Bradley et al., 2012;

Schein, 1993). Examples of this are evident in research that focuses on human change, such as a study describing teachers who were asked to change their teaching strategies to align with a new intervention approach. This change could have threatened their identity as competent professionals. Teachers said that feeling psychologically safe eased their concerns about colleagues viewing them as incompetent, particularly when they made mistakes when trying out new practices (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, & Deutsch, 2013). In other words, significant and day-to-day life situations may be easier to optimize when individuals feel a positive sense of psychologically safety.

SITUATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN INDIVIDUAL↔CONTEXT PROCESSES

Interindividual Differences in Perceptions of Psychological Safety

People develop as whole systems that are constantly co-acting with their contexts. Meanings that are created in those interactions are based on the interplay between the person experiencing them and the context in which they occur (Overton, 2015). As such, multiple people may perceive the same moment, in the same context, as having different degrees of risk and thus have different needs for psychological safety. Although individuals and contexts are not a dichotomy to be pulled apart and examined separately, there are individual characteristics that inform perceptions of how much of a risk is present, and how much psychological safety is needed.

As a field, human development researchers are interested in interindividual differences in experiences and development. In other words, the aim is to understand not only what the pathway of human development looks like over time, but how that pathway may differ across people. Previous research is mixed about the way that sociodemographic characteristics such

as gender and race may play a role in perceptions of psychological safety. For example, research found that males often perceive less risk than females (Wang, Kruger, & Wilke, 2009), and Blacks are often less tolerant of risks than Whites (Sahm, 2012). Another study however, did not find any differences across gender and race (Holley & Steiner, 2005). These mixed findings may suggest that though race and gender may be related to perceptions of psychological safety, there may be other factors to consider. More specifically, developmental profiles cannot always be defined by gender or other typically used demographic categories (Wanless et al., 2016). There may be other individual characteristics, groups of characteristics, or combinations of characteristics and ecological assets that are more salient and worthy of future research.

It is important to note however, that race and gender may be more relevant in moments that directly devalue this part of their identity. Feeling a dissonance between an aspect of identity and the likelihood of being successful can be particularly threatening. One example of this is being a Black male in institutions with norms that do not align with those identities. Research has found that Black male adolescents may feel the need to "act White" or distance themselves from their own identities and peers to be academically successful in school (Fryer & Torelli, 2010). This connection between "acting White" and grades was particularly pronounced in public schools, for children from families with low-educational attainment, and in schools with greater inter-racial contact. Although this research did not explicitly assess psychological safety, the findings and their variation across contexts might suggest that Black males may not feel psychologically safe to engage with academic learning when they are trying to maintain their racial and gender identities. Aligning developmental tasks (e.g., opportunities to learn in school) and contextual messages about the value of an individual's identities (e.g., being Black and male) may decrease dissonance and increase adolescents' sense of psychological safety to engage in learning at school.

A related phenomenon was found in work settings such as in recent research of adults in a production organization. When the organization had a more accepting stance on racial diversity, all employees, regardless of their race, felt greater psychological safety and were more engaged at work (Singh, Winkel, & Selvarajan, 2013). These relations were even stronger for racial minorities, possibility due to a sense of identity threat or misalignment between their race and likelihood of being valued and accepted in their organization. In other words, accepting diversity climates contribute to racial minority employees' perceptions of greater psychological safety. This sense of psychological safety at work had a more profound effect on increasing work engagement for racial minority employees than their counterparts. By attending to the distinct experiences of individuals of different identities, particularly when aspects of their identities may lead to dissonance in certain contexts, it may be possible to address interindividual differences in development.

Other individual factors, beyond sociodemographic characteristics, may also play a role in perceptions of psychological safety. A history of secure attachment in early childhood, for example, may relate to being more likely to trust and give others the benefit of the doubt (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). A history of insecure attachment, however, can lead to heightened sensitivity to cues about whether to feel psychologically safe, like negatively perceiving others' emotions (Fang, Hoge, Heinrichs, & Hofmann, 2014). Other early experiences are also relevant. In one study, researchers found that individuals who lived in more dangerous neighborhoods as children perceived a greater

amount of risk in their adult neighborhoods (Sherman, Minich, Langen, Skufca, & Wilke, 2015). Those adults may have calibrated their judgments of how much risk is present, based on experiences in early childhood. Later experiences such as becoming a parent may decrease risk tolerance (Wang et al., 2009), and completing postgraduate education or getting married may increase risk tolerance (Sahm, 2012). More stable characteristics such as personality (Simonet et al., 2015) may also influence how much risk individuals can tolerate (Gilaie-Dotan et al., 2014; Sahm, 2012). Taken together, these characteristics cannot solely drive perceptions of psychological safety, but they can contribute to a feedback loop wherein an individual perceives a situation in one way, determines whether the amount of risk is tolerable enough to safely engage in the situation, and then is continually influenced by the developing meaning of that moment.

Contextual Differences in Perceptions of Psychological Safety

Individuals in the same moment and setting may also have different perceptions of psychological safety because of their different access to relationships and resources. Ideally, there would be alignment between a person's perceived need for psychological safety and the availability of relationships and resources in their contexts (i.e., ecological assets). For example, young children sometimes exhibit challenging behaviors as a way to express their feelings of unsafety. Pairing these children with caregivers or teachers who make an extra effort to build a warm and responsive relationship might increase the child's sense of psychological safety (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). The resulting "mutually beneficial exchanges" between the child and his or her context (Lerner et al., 2012, p. 293) may decrease the symptomatic challenging behaviors and enable the child to focus on freely engaging with peers and activities. As another example,

adolescents with less secure attachment histories respond more positively than their peers to having a strong, trusting, working alliance with adults (Zack et al., 2015). This finding suggests a particularly fruitful alignment between adolescents and the sense of psychological safety felt in their relationship with an adult: an ecological asset. For adults, having stronger relationships with colleagues makes them more comfortable speaking up in workplace discussions (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009). This interplay between individual characteristics and aspects of the context demonstrates that it may be important to view psychological safety holistically: as the productive accumulation of many factors, generating a perception of safety that is qualitatively distinct from the sum of its parts.

Although individual strengths and ecological assets relate to perceptions of psychological safety, this is not a unidirectional phenomenon. It seems more likely that there are feedback loops in place, in which individual strengths and developmental assets contribute to perceptions of psychological safety. In turn, a sense of psychological safety contributes to the presence of individual strengths and developmental assets. For example, in a recent study of psychological safety and social support, researchers found the relation between the two to be reciprocal. Having a feeling of psychological safety helped individuals seek out their peers for advice and friendship. And having positive relationships with peers generated a more like-minded perception of the degree of psychological safety in the group (Schulte, Cohen, & Klein, 2012). The authors of this study characterized this process as coevolution, and it seems possible that its multidirectionality may apply in other situations as well.

INCORPORATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

There are research and practice considerations for bringing psychological safety to the field of human development. In terms of research, the most pressing considerations may have to do with measurement. The question is how to develop measures that capture the interaction between the individual's perception and contextual features. Although it may be possible to develop observational measures of psychologically safe moves, strategies, or resources in the context, these measures would be limited because they could not capture the way they are perceived differently across individuals. It is those perceptions, situated in a certain place and time, that generate meaning and have implications for development. Conceptualizing psychological safety as generated in individual↔context exchanges requires thinking about measures that are designed to capture this interplay and its nonlinearity and are flexible enough to detect person-centered changes over time and across contexts (adaptations). Questionnaires might be used for this purpose, but items must be intentionally created to capture person ↔ context interactions (e.g., see Hilliard et al., 2014) and may be supplemented with other types of measures.

Frequently used psychological safety measures are often self-report questionnaires with 10 or fewer items, created for adults in workplace situations (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). Only measuring individuals' perceptions, however, may lead to problems detecting change over time because individuals' frame of reference likely shifts. Their "high" may mean something different when they are younger than it would later in life. Therefore, incorporating mixed methods may be one useful approach to assessing the perceived quantitative degree of psychological safety, as well as the individual's qualitative definition of what it means to be "high" or "low" at that time and place in their life (Tolan & Deutsch, 2015). Difference in frames of reference is also an issue across sociodemographic categories and other factors that define interindiviudual differences in developmental pathways (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002).

In terms of practice, research has begun to outline specific strategies or moves that may increase individuals' perceptions of psychological safety. One underlying theme across these findings is particularly consistent and noteworthy: positive relationships. One critical function of authentic and empathetic relationships is that they provide individuals with a sense of trust and belonging (Gong, Cheung, Wang, & Huang, 2012; Seligson & MacPhee, 2004). Providing training and professional development for adults that work with children and adolescents, workplace leaders, and others to cultivate their ability to empathize may be one step to enhancing positive relationships across contexts. Engaging in mindfulness practices, role-playing, fiction reading, and mirroring of experiences are some promising ways to develop these skills (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011).

In addition to access to positive relationships, it is also possible to increase psychological safety by limiting the potential risks and threats that individuals perceive in a given context. Two areas of research in schools that describe ways to do this are through Restorative Practices (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2015) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Cholewa, Goodman, West-Olatunji, & Amatea, 2014). For example, an effective classroom practice for increasing overall psychological safety is to show students that the teacher is aware of their emotional state. When a teacher accurately states that the class seems tired, overwhelmed, or excited, the teacher lets them know that he or she is attuned to their perspective and experience and will keep them in mind when deciding how to proceed with the lesson.

Knowing the teacher is aware of their perception and responsive decreases student concerns about their psychological safety in this classroom.

It may also be possible to increase individuals' tolerance for taking risk in the face of low psychological safety. For example, research found that providing opportunities for self-affirmations may increase tolerance for taking risks, even when feeling psychologically unsafe in the presence of identity threats (Sherman et al., 2013). These findings point to the fact that though psychological safety is a co-creation between individuals and contexts, there is much that can be done to influence this interaction.

CONCLUSION

In sum, burgeoning focus on the benefits of psychological safety for organizational development (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) may also encourage scholars to consider how this construct is beneficial for human development. Ultimately, if our goal is to support individuals' active engagement in shaping their development, studying psychological safety may advance understanding of how that process unfolds differently for individuals with particular characteristics, across portions of the life span, in specific contexts, and with access to unique ecological assets.

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