

## Original Research Article

### **Participation in Decision-Making and Perceived Organizational Support as Predictors of Psychological Safety among Secondary School Staff**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Psychological safety, employee participation in decision-making, and organizational support have become key issues in organizational behavior literature. Consequent to the aforementioned, this study examined employee participation in decision-making and perceived organizational support as predictors of psychological safety among the staff of secondary schools. A quantitative cross-sectional survey and the predictive design were utilized for investigating the direct nexus between the variables. Data were collected from 150 employees working in secondary schools in Awka and Amawbia of Anambra State, Nigeria, using the simple random sampling technique. The participants comprise 78 females (51.8%) and 72 males (48.2%) with a mean age of 30.2 years and a standard deviation of 8.1. Three standardized self-report measures of psychological safety, perceived organizational support, and participation in decision-making were used for collecting the data while regression analysis was used for testing the two research hypotheses via the IBM-SPSS version 23. The result of the study showed that perceived organizational support significantly and positively predicted psychological safety ( $\beta = .081$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Also, employee participation in decision-making was not a significant predictor of psychological safety ( $\beta = -.014$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This implies that an increase in organization support promotes psychological safety, while an increase or decrease in participation in decision-making does not facilitate psychological safety in the organization. Hence, it is recommended that policies governing engagement in management and managerial support should be reformed for employees in secondary schools because of the positive impact it has on psychological safety in the workplace.

**Keywords:** perceived organizational support; participation in decision-making; psychological safety; secondary schools

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Today's work climate has gone beyond just human labor, productivity, and commitment to a workplace that is highly focused on the social climate and interpersonal risk behaviors, and the conditions under which these behaviors can be exhibited. This is described as the feeling of psychological safety in the workplace. Edmondson (1999), described a psychologically safe work environment as an environment where employees have high regard for each other's level of

competence, have positive intentions for one another, are interested in each other as people, feel that it is safe to experiment, and take risks in the workplace, can engage in constructive conflict or confrontation, and feel that their colleagues will not reject them for being themselves or saying what they think. Ogunlana et al. (2016) noted that a considerable percentage of workers in manufacturing, servicing, and administrative organizations in Nigeria do not enjoy the desirable level of psychological safety and well-being in their workplace. This is because of the decrease in workplace welfare, and organizational and interpersonal trust. A work environment that is free of negative reactions when employees make mistakes and give constructive opinions is favorable for work performance.

In the Nigeria workplace, employers and employees are consistently faced with the apprehensions of rising costs, corruption, cut-throat contest from sister organizations, job insecurity, and dissatisfaction due to the psychological division that they feel at work, and more with the organizations, they find themselves in (Nkinebari, 2014; Ogunlana et al., 2016). These occurrences usually break the link between employees' work and the goals of the organization; thereby reducing psychological safety in the workplace (Akinyemi, 2014; Schulte et al., 2012). These factors are evident in the Nigerian secondary schools' work climate. The secondary schools' work climate has been one of the focal areas in organizational and personnel research in Nigeria (e.g., Adigun, 2020; Ajayi & Olatunji, 2019), but little is probably known about the influence of its employees' participation in decision-making and organizational support on employees' psychological safety. Secondary schools' employees are beset with workplace silence and not comfortable expressing ideas, opinions, and contributions without the fear of being blacklisted for disrespect to management, job security chances, not being promoted, not being paid their salary, not being met with positive team reactions, and being tagged a rebel or miscreant in the work environment. This problem has to be addressed as it concerns the workforce of the Nigerian secondary schools and possible intervention for school personnel policies.

Empirical efforts have been made on the nexus existing **between the variables under consideration** (participation in decision-making, organizational support, and psychological safety). These studies have been highly focused on participative leadership and its impact on the psychological safety of team members in organizations outside the educational sector (e.g., Chen

et al., 2020; Lee & Ha, 2020; Sax & Torp, 2015), with less emphasis being attributed to general policies made by the organization to include workers in the decision-making process. Also, studies on organizational support and psychological safety are highly appreciable. The literature indicates that studies in this area have concentrated more on how organizational support influences the psychological safety of healthcare workers in a complex mediation model (e.g., Appelbaum et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021). Little is known about how these constructs manifest in the educational sector. It becomes highly necessary to explore the likely antecedents of psychological safety in the Nigerian work context. Therefore, this study examines participation in decision-making and organizational support as predictors of psychological safety among employees in secondary school in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. As a result, this study is guided by the following research objectives: (a) to examine the predictive relationship between participation in decision-making and psychological safety, and (b) to examine the predictive relationship between perceived organizational support and psychological safety.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES**

### **2.1. Conservation of Resources Theory**

The conservation of resources (COR) theory as propounded by Hobfoll (1989) is based on the premise that stress occurs primarily because of loss of resources or when the coping resources are limited at the time the host is threatened. According to this theory, when there are inadequate or loss of coping resources, the host may be unable to withstand the threat before him or her. As proposed in the systematic review of literature on psychological safety by Newman et al. (2017), there is a scarcity of research exploring theoretical explanations to the concept of psychological safety. Hence, the conservation of resource theory is adopted and applied in this study to explain and further discuss the concept and how it is influenced by other workplace variables. The COR theory provided a clear explanation regarding how workplace resources such as workplace relationship networks and supportive organizational practices positively influence work outcomes (Newman et al., 2017).

As mentioned earlier, the core tenet of COR theory is that employees seek to gain resources to protect against resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). These resources may include; rewards, social support, autonomy, or job security. In accordance with the propositions of the COR theory,

individuals with access to greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and are more capable of orchestrating resource gain through the use of existing resources (Hobfoll, 2011). According to Halbesleben et al. (2014), employees are better equipped to meet the demands of their job and achieve their work goals by obtaining additional resources. In application to the current study, when provided with adequate support and participatory role in the workplace, employees will feel psychologically safe to share their ideas and knowledge with others, engage in positive and constructive workplace behaviors in the belief that this will help them in obtaining more resources (e.g., positive feedback and suggestions from co-workers). This will enable them to attain their work goals and is likely to foster an environment where individual and team learning occurs.

## **2.2. Participation in Decision-Making and Psychological Safety**

Psychological safety is an employee's perceived consequences of taking interpersonal risks in the organization which is usually tied to how others (including the organization) will respond to specific actions by an employee such as seeking feedback on work-related activities, proposing new ideas in the workplace, or reporting errors during the work process (Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; Edmondson, 2004). The literature indicates that psychological safety promotes behaviors such as open communication, constructive voice, and seeking feedback from colleagues and the organization (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Pearsall & Ellis, 2011). Hirak et al. (2012) noted that supportive and non-threatening management has a crucial role in developing psychological safety in the organization. This is because an environment where proposing a new idea will not lead to an attack, being censored, ridiculed, or penalized may enable employees to come up with new ideas and information and as a result engage in behaviors that are beneficial to the organization. Research has shown that factors of employee inclusiveness in the workplace, healthy work climate, and managerial support determine employees' perceived trust and ability to speak up without fear and take interpersonal risks in the workplace. (Kura et al., 2016; Sax & Torp, 2015). This gives justification to exploring the role of participation in decision-making on psychological safety.

Participative decision-making is a crucial factor for employees' inclusiveness in the organization. It is defined as the encouragement and utilization of the inputs of employees when making important decisions in the workplace (Arnold et al., 2000). It implies that the processes involved

in decision-making are not concentrated and reserved for a few employees in managerial positions, but that each employee has the opportunity to participate by making valid and constructive contributions to the organization's work procedures (Bouwman et al., 2017). This tends to influence the feeling of safety in the workplace. According to Higgins (1982), employees' participation in the decision-making process can foster the fulfillment of individual and organizational goals, especially if supported by the organization's climate. Appelbaum et al. (2000) posit that by allowing employees to participate in decision-making, an atmosphere of trust between the employees and their managers is developed. This trustworthiness enhances psychological safety since the employee can freely take interpersonal risks in an organization that practices inclusiveness, rather than in an organization that does not. The argument that participation in decision-making will predict psychological safety is based on the notion that involvement in decision-making facilitates the feeling of belonging and love, and prevents the feeling of alienation in the workplace (Silla et al., 2020). Studies have shown that allowing workers to participate in decision-making enhances job performance, team learning, and increased ability to speak up without fear of scrutiny, threat, and consequences (Bouwman et al., 2017; Omobude & Igbudu, 2012; Silla et al., 2020). Against this background, it is hypothesized that:

H<sub>1</sub>: participation in decision-making will positively and significantly predict psychological safety among staff in secondary schools.

### **2.3. Perceived Organizational Support and Psychological Safety**

Perceived organizational support is regarded as a vital concept in organizational behavior literature. For the past decades, perceived organizational support- its consequences and antecedents-have been a subject of constant investigation. According to Rhoades et al. (2006), it is the employees' global beliefs regarding the extent to which their organization values their contributions and shows concern for their well-being. It denotes the employee's confidence that their organization has their best interest, and is ready to provide the necessary assistance when the need arises (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to Eisenberger et al. (2020), organizational support is strongly felt when the workers have a favorable experience in the work environment and when these favorable experiences are attributed to the organization's voluntary actions toward making the condition of their work better. Through previous practices

in the organization, employees subconsciously question the extent to which the organization acts out of concern for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2020). This is the basis of perceived organizational support. It is a concept that has been used to describe and examine how organizations treat their employees. It is an indicator of the support an organization gives its employees, and the value it has for their contributions at work.

Perceived organizational support is an important area that determines workers' motivation as well as their feeling of safety in the workplace. Because perceived organizational support indicates a supportive work environment that cares about the contributions and well-being of its employees, it seems it would have a relationship with psychological safety since employees with a high perception of organizational support are going to take risky behaviors that are beneficial to the organization such as voicing their concerns, constructively criticizing work procedures, and suggesting new and better ways of conducting work activities (Kura et al., 2016). Studies have examined the role of perceived organizational support on psychological safety. For example, Appelbaum et al. (2018) examined psychological safety and support among residents in a clinical learning environment. Residents were surveyed from 19 training programs using a standardized instrument. The researchers found that a positive correlation existed between perceived organizational support and the psychological safety of resident healthcare practitioners. Their feeling of psychological safety in the workplace had a positive impact on their overall program evaluation and resources domain. Hence, it is justifiable to propose that giving adequate support to employees is likely to promote psychological safety.

In another study, Xu et al., (2021) explored the mediating role of psychological safety on the nexus between perceived organizational support and work engagement among Chinese nurses during Covid-19. Convenience sampling was adopted for selecting 689 nurses from the Hebei and Guangxi provinces of China. The researchers found a direct link for the mediation model. That is, perceived organizational support positively influenced psychological safety which in turn positively correlated with work engagement. Although focused on work engagement, this study provides empirical support for the proposed link between perceived organizational support and psychological safety. According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), a supportive organization can provide the right atmosphere for a social relationship (between the employees and the organization) that goes beyond the standard financial obligation the organization owns

the employees. When the organization through its supervisors and managers offers adequate support to subordinates, it creates a sense of safety in the work environment. Based on the available literature reviewed, it is hypothesized that:

H<sub>2</sub>: perceived organizational support will positively and significantly predict psychological safety among staff in secondary schools.

A conceptual framework is developed to show the relationship among the variables under consideration. It is a tentative framework (based on the researcher's expectations) that proposes that participation in decision-making and perceived organizational support will predict psychological safety. The conceptual framework is depicted in the figure below:

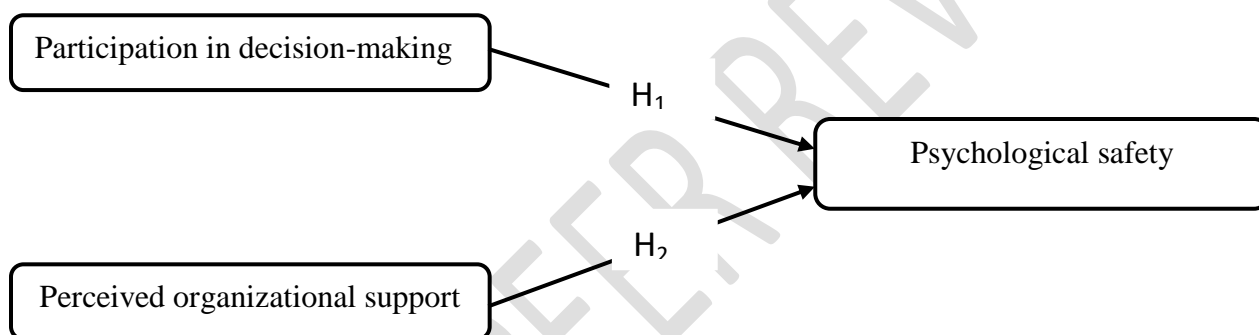


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Sample and Procedure

Participants of the study comprise 150 secondary school staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Secondary School, Awka and Guardian Angel College, Amawbia, and were randomly selected using a simple random sampling technique by dip pick. They had a mean age of 30.2 years and a standard deviation of 8.3. The gender distribution was composed of 78 females (51.8%) and 72 males (48.2%). The questionnaires were administered to the teaching and non-teaching staff across the sampled secondary schools. The questionnaires were administered to the teachers in their staff room while the questionnaires were administered to the non-teaching staff in their duty post e.g., security posts. They were asked to follow the standardized instructions contained in each section of the questionnaire form. The researchers were present to address any questions

raised by any of the staff. Two research assistants helped in the administration of the questionnaires and data collection. Some participants took about 15 minutes to complete the entire set of questionnaires while the rest requested to submit their response the next day. Meanwhile, all of them completed the questionnaires in the same order. Informed consent to participate in the research was obtained from all the staff who completed the questionnaires. Participation was strictly voluntary and the staff were assured that the responses would be confidential and anonymous since there was no form of identification required on the questionnaires

### **3.2. Instruments**

Three instruments were used for data collection namely: the psychological safety scale (PS) developed by Edmondson (1999), the perceived organizational support scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986), and the participation in decision-making scale developed by Denton and Zeytinolu (1993). The scales are discussed below:

#### **3.2.1 Psychological Safety**

The psychological safety scale adopted in this study was developed by Edmondson (1999) to measure the willingness of an employee to express an opinion, admit mistakes, or unsafe behaviors, without fear of being embarrassed, rejected, or punished. It has a total of 7 items. The response format consists of a 5-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The present study found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71. **A Cronbach's alpha greater than or equal to 0.7 is largely satisfactory.** Sample items on the scale include: "If I make a mistake in this organization, it is held against me", and "It is safe to take a risk in my organization".

#### **3.2.2 Perceived Organizational Support**

Perceived organizational support was measured using the 8-item version of the perceived organizational support scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). It was developed to assess employees' perception concerning the extent to which the organization values the contributions of employees and cares about their well-being. It has a response format consisting of a 5-point Likert type ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. Eisenberger et al. (1986) reported an alpha coefficient of .79. The present study found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, **which**



was largely satisfactory. Sample questions include: “The organization values my contribution to its well-being.”, and “the organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me”.

### 3.2.3 Perceived Participation in Decision-Making

This was measured with an 8-item scale developed by Denton and Zeytinolu (1993). The scale measures employees’ perception of their engagement in the decision-making process in their workplace. It has a 5-point Likert scale type ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The present study found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82. The Cronbach's alpha was > .70. Hence, it met the statistical requirement. Sample questions include: “I have been a member of important decision-making committees in the school”, and “I feel my voice is heard in management level committee meetings”.

### 3.3. Design and Statistics

The quantitative cross-sectional survey and predictive design were adopted in this study. Multiple regression analysis was used for testing the predictive role of participation in decision-making and organizational support on employee psychological safety using the IBM-Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 23.

## 4. RESULTS

**Table 1:**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Correlations Coefficient of the Study Variables**

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1	Psychological Safety	35.2	8.7	(.71)		
2	Participation in Decision-Making	33.4	8.6	0.01	(.82)	
3	Perceived Organizational Support	38.2	10.1	0.40*	0.71	(.81)

*Note:*  $N = 150$ ; \*Correlation is significant at  $p < .05$ ;  $M$  = mean;  $SD$  = standard deviation; Cronbach's alphas for the variables are in parenthesis.

Table 1 above shows that participants in this study have a total mean score of 38.5, and a standard deviation of 10.1 for perceived organization support, psychological safety showed a total mean score of 35.2, and a standard deviation of 8.7, while participation in decision-making had a total mean score of 33.4, and a standard deviation of 8.6. The correlation matrix table indicated that perceived organizational support has a significant positive relationship with psychological safety ( $r = 0.40, p < .05$ ), while participation in decision-making showed no significant relationship with psychological safety ( $r = 0.01, p > .05$ ). Table 1 also indicated that decision-making showed no significant relationship with perceived organization support ( $r = 0.71, p > .05$ ).

**Table 2:**  
**Results of the Regression Analysis**

	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	$R^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Participation in Decision-Making	-.014	-.015	8.73	.000	.020	-.143	.887
Perceived Organizational Support	.069	.081	8.71	.007	.722	.85	.040*

Note:  $n = 150$ ; \* $p < .05$ ;  $\beta$  = standardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error of sample size.

Table 2 shows that participation in decision-making did not significantly predict psychological safety among employees in secondary school ( $\beta = -.014, F = .020, p > .05$ ). The first hypothesis which states that participation in decision-making will significantly predict psychological safety among secondary school staff was rejected. This is an indication that participation in decision-making had no significant contribution to psychological safety.

Table 2 also indicated that perceived organizational support positively and significantly predicts psychological safety among secondary school staff in Awka ( $\beta = .081, F = .722, p < .05$ ). Thus, the second hypothesis which states that perceived organizational support will significantly predict psychological safety among secondary school staff was accepted. This finding implies that an increase in perceived organizational support facilitates an increase in psychological safety among secondary school employees. Hence, perceived organizational support contributed significantly to psychological safety.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study examined the predictive roles of participation in decision-making and perceived organizational support on the psychological safety of secondary school employees in Anambra State, Nigeria. The descriptive statistics revealed a moderate level of participation in decision-making, perceived organizational support, and psychological safety for the secondary school employees who participated in the study. Based on the results of the data analysis, one of the hypotheses was rejected, while the other was accepted. More specifically, the first hypothesis which stated that participation in decision-making will positively and significantly predict psychological safety among staff in secondary schools was rejected. This implies that engaging employees in the decision-making process has no significant impact on their psychological safety. Hence, an increase in participation in decision-making does not lead to an increase in psychological safety and vice versa. The result is not consistent with the argument put forward by the researchers on the predictive effect of participation in decision-making and the criterion variable. Also, this finding is contrary to some of the previous empirical studies that were earlier reviewed in the study (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Bouwmans et al., 2017; Omobude & Igbudu, 2012; Silla et al., 2020). For example, Appelbaum et al. (2000) found that an atmosphere of trust between the employees and management is developed when employees are allowed to participate in the decision-making process.

One plausible explanation could be offered for the unexpected result. The predictive effect of participation in decision-making could have been impeded by other characteristics salient to the secondary schools' work environment. A likely characteristic of the work environment that could have caused the observed result is perceived organizational justice (with emphasis on procedural and distributive justice) in the workplace. According to Konovsky (2000), perceived procedural and distributive justice is centered on how allocation decisions are made in the organization. Employees usually compare their experience in the workplace (how they are being treated) with that of their colleagues. Low procedural and distributive justice is likely to occur when there is favoritism, and the unwillingness to listen to all the employees who have something to contribute or share (Lyu, 2016). This indicated that employees are likely to feel psychologically safe when they believe that participation in decision-making making is the same for all employees outside managerial positions. Hence, to promote efficient participatory management, there is a need for equity. These could have been the cause of the observed difference between the result of this study and the previous empirical literature. It is suggested that future studies should utilize

perceived organizational justice (procedural and distributive justice) and participation in decision-making as simultaneous predictor variables of psychological safety. Understanding the effects of the combined predictors would help in enhancing the literature and inform managerial practice in educational institutions.

The second hypothesis which stated that perceived organizational support will significantly predict psychological safety among secondary school staff was accepted. This implies that the psychological safety of employees is increased when the organization is highly supportive. Therefore, an increase in perceived organizational support will lead to an increase in psychological safety. This result is consistent with the empirical literature. It is in line with the investigation conducted by Appelbaum et al. (2018) on the psychological safety and organizational support among residents in a clinical learning environment. Using standardized measures and empirical processes, the researcher found a positive nexus between perceived organizational support and psychological safety among resident healthcare workers surveyed for the study. The result is also in line with Xu et al., (2021). They examined the indirect effect of psychological safety on the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement among Chinese nurses during Covid-19. The outcome of the study showed that perceived organizational support positively influenced psychological safety which in turn positively correlated with work engagement. Although focused on work engagement, this study provides empirical support for the result of the second hypothesis. The result is also consistent with the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Based on the premise of the social exchange theory, a supportive organization provides the right atmosphere for a relationship that goes beyond obligations and contracts. In a situation where the organization through its managers and supervisors gives adequate support to subordinates, it creates a sense of safety in the workplace.

In conclusion, this study successfully examined participation in decision-making and perceived organizational support as predictors of psychological safety in a sample of secondary school employees. The study showed that participation in decision-making did not predict psychological safety, while perceived organizational support was found to be a significant and positive predictor of psychological safety.

### **5.1 Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have some salient implications for managerial practice. As suggested in the extant literature and the current study, perceived organizational support is an important factor for psychological safety in the workplace such that the higher the perception of support, the higher the psychological safety felt. Thus, the organization has to promote a supportive culture in the workplace. This can be achieved by recognizing and adequately rewarding employees for their contributions and efforts, and providing support for their well-being. This is essential because when the management fails to support its employees on important issues like workplace health and safety, this might cause the workers to develop stress, leading to poor psychological well-being.

## **5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies**

The first limitation istied to the cross-sectional nature of the research. The study was built on cross-sectional data. Although the hypotheses tested suggest causal relationships, a cross-sectional study provides a weak basis for making causal inferences between two variables. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is suggested that future research should consider the experimental or longitudinal approach and consider other subjects and settings of the study. A longitudinal approach may help in improving the researchers' ability to make causal statements. Although this study may pose a limitation in terms of generalizability, however, it furthers our understanding by determining and testing the factors that predict psychological safety in the workplace. Future studies should use larger samples to increase external validity to make generalization possible. As earlier suggested, researchers can explore the interaction of **perceived organizational justice (procedural and distributive justice)** and participative decision-making as predictors of psychological safety in public and private sector organizations.

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