

Psychologically-(Un)Safe Climates in the Age of Digital and Social Tensions

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Theme and Objectives

We propose a special issue dedicated to consolidating studies from various disciplines that examine the unique facets of the challenge involved in nurturing a psychologically safe climate (PSC) amidst contemporary digital and social tensions. While technological advances are revolutionizing the workplace, automating routine tasks, facilitating data-driven decision-making, and introducing unprecedented efficiency and productivity, the shifting dynamics introduced by remote work (Bailey et al., 2022; Rhymer, 2023), algorithmic management (Cameron & Rahman, 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020), and the implications for how we work with and relate to one another (Cameron, 2022; Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2022) raise important questions about how we maintain the social-relational fabric of organizations and society as a whole. This comes at a time where social tensions, stemming from issues like systemic inequalities (Amis et al., 2018; Bapuji et al., 2020; Luo & Zhang, 2022) and ideological rifts (Bergemann, 2017; Caprar et al., 2022; Swigart et al., 2020), are more palpable than ever in organizations, exacerbating the strain and challenging the very core of interpersonal relationships and cohesion in organizations.

The extreme digital and social tensions of today pose distinct challenges to the creation of a (PSC), which is an environment where individuals feel respected, and comfortable being themselves, without fear of negative repercussions for expressing thoughts, questions, concerns, or mistakes (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). PSC promotes open dialogue, encourages learning from mistakes, fosters collaboration, and facilitates innovation (Frazier et al., 2017). It is rooted in mutual trust and respect among group members and is often cultivated by leadership behaviors that demonstrate transparency, feedback, vulnerability, or inclusivity (Coutifaris & Grant, 2020; Edmondson & Harvey, 2017). In certain respects, new technologies can advance PSC by being a non-judgmental and unbiased source of information, providing a safe environment for individuals to ask questions, make mistakes, or suggest ideas without the fear of criticism (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Yet, artificial-intelligence interventions in technology-mediated communication can distort important social signals, by altering properties of how individuals communicate or changing their appearance in ways that radically alter others' impressions, potentially leading to mistrust (Woolley et al., 2023). They may further digital hostility, internet pile-ons and shaming (Cover et al., 2022). In addition, the inequality that is created when technology enriches the jobs of some while replacing others can quickly erode cooperation and

trust and thus the capacity of human systems to build a PSC and collectively learn and solve problems. This is a growing concern, as, despite the growth in technological capabilities, there are still significant societal problems that can only be addressed through human cooperation. These issues include complex problems such as inequality, political polarization, and climate change, as well as personal threats like sexual harassment, violence, and burnout. Organizations need to sustain the commitment and trust of employees and customers in order to survive, which is also an essential function that algorithms cannot perform. Therefore, collective learning and problem-solving are still critical to organizational and societal functioning, but these capabilities cannot develop if we do not create the conditions for the social-relational functioning necessary to build a PSC.

Thus, it is imperative to address the existing gaps in our understanding of what fosters or impedes a PSC. For leaders to identify and address problems, those impacted need to feel that they can speak up to create awareness without negative repercussions. However, in addition to the barriers technology can create, the constantly changing sociodemographics of many organizations may make this challenging. Widespread migration driven by economic, social, political, or environmental factors increases the level of diversity in many organizations on multiple dimensions. The aging workforce also contributes additional difficulty, as employees spanning multiple generations struggle to find common ground and mutual respect. All of these factors exert additional stress on the social fabric of our communities, contributing to our collective problems and causing greater difficulty in addressing them. Therefore, it is essential to increase our understanding of how to sustain a PSC in the face of rapidly expanding technological capabilities, the growing diversity of the population on multiple dimensions, and the attendant stress on social-relational systems.

We find ourselves at a crucial point where the acceleration of these forces is outpacing our ability to adapt. As we attempt to fully capitalize on new capabilities technology offers, doing so while maintaining the integrity of our social and relational structures is a growing challenge. This is particularly so as those technological advances alter the signals and social dynamics that normally contribute to the development of social relationships and PSC. Thus, we are at a critical juncture where weaving together the insights of scholars from all areas of organization science is important in order to identify the potential threats and opportunities and identify a productive path forward.

Special Issue Scope and Sample Topics

We propose a special issue to draw together research from the full range of fields focused on different aspects of the problem of building a PSC in the face of today's digital and social challenges to foster the ability of our human systems to collectively learn and solve problems. The papers we anticipate including in this special issue may adopt various theoretical perspectives and focus on different levels of analysis, including individuals, groups, and organizations. We encourage studies that adopt interdisciplinary or multilevel approaches to address complex digital and social challenges in organizations. While we hope to draw together a broad range of perspectives, the unifying focus will be the problem of how to cultivate a PSC to enable collective learning and problem-solving given an increasingly global, technology-mediated environment with growing diversity, competition, polarization, and inequality.

The following set of questions, though not exhaustive, illustrates the breadth of potential topics appropriate for this special issue:

Psychologically Safe Climates and Technological Advances

- How do technological advances in the workplace influence the development and maintenance of psychologically safe climates among employees?
- Can technology-powered HR tools promote psychologically safe climates in the organization, and if so, how?
- What role does technology play in detecting, analyzing, and mitigating threats to psychologically safe climates within organizations?
- How does the use of new technologies in organizational decision-making processes affect the feelings of psychological safety of employees?
- What are the potential psychological safety risks associated with technology integration in the workplace and how can these be effectively managed?

Psychologically Safe Climates and Remote Work

- How does working-from-home affect individuals' feelings of psychological safety in teams and organizations?
- How do leaders foster a psychologically safe climate in remote and hybrid workforces?
- What role does job, team, or organizational design play in the facilitating psychologically safe climates when people rarely interact in-person?
- How does status and social capital influence psychologically safe climates in the context of remote work?
- How can digital technologies and virtual communication tools be used to support psychologically safe climates for remote workers?

Psychologically Safe Climates and Boundaryless Collaborations

- How does the changing nature of teams (e.g., shifting membership) influence psychologically safe climates?
- How can organizations leverage interorganizational collaboration to enhance psychologically safe climates and overcome large-scale, complex problems?
- What are the barriers to maintaining psychologically safe climates during large-scale, interorganizational collaboration?
- How does psychologically safe climates influence the job performance of boundary-spanning employees such as healthcare professionals or management consultants interacting with external stakeholders?

Psychologically Safe Climates and Mental Health

- In what ways do team dynamics and interpersonal relationships influenced by a psychologically safe climate contribute to mental health outcomes?
- How do perceptions of a psychologically safe climate influence stress and burnout rates?
- What role do organizational policies and interventions play in promoting mental health by enhancing psychologically safe climates?
- How do changing societal views on mental health influence the importance and role of psychologically safe climates in the workplace?

- How do individual factors such as personality, past experiences, or demographic variables modulate the impact of a psychologically safe climate on mental health outcomes?

Psychologically Safe Climates and DEIB?

- How do social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too influence feelings of psychological safety for individuals in organizations?
- How do societal perceptions or expectations of accountability and transparency influence psychologically safe climates within organizations?
- What role does psychologically safe climates play in addressing and reducing a culture of silence in the context of social movements?
- How have discussions around equity and inclusion influenced the development of policies and practices supporting psychologically safe climates in the workplace?
- How have demographic changes and the politics related to DEIB affected leadership strategies for promoting psychologically safe climates in the workplace?
- What is the relationship of PSC to uncivil, immoral, or unethical behavior in the workplace?
- How do victims of bad behavior perceive psychological safety before and after the incident?
- How does PSC change the way employees respond to bad behavior — as victims or observers?

Psychologically Safe Climates and Political Polarization?

- To what extent does political polarization compromise the establishment and maintenance of a psychologically safe climate?
- How do political discussions and events affect the perception of psychological safety among employees?
- What strategies can organizations employ to maintain psychological safety in the face of rising political polarization?
- How do employees from minority political beliefs perceive psychological safety compared to those holding majority views?
- What role do organizational leaders play in shaping perceptions of psychological safety during politically charged times?
- Are organizations that cultivate psychological safety climates more resilient to the external pressures of political polarization over time?

Instructions for Authors

We encourage submissions that cover these questions or any others that intersect psychological safety and organizations. In keeping with Organization Science’s focus and audience, papers need to engage with the debates of interest to organizational scholars by building on or contributing to theory. This issue is not appropriate for papers focused only on societal issues or other “macro” topics in which the role of the organization is not apparent. It is also not appropriate for papers focused only on individual-level processes, experiences, or outcomes divorced from organizational factors.

Please note that this call for papers for the special issue does not operate as a tournament, meaning there is no fixed quota on accepted papers. In other words, the review process is not a zero-sum game. Authors submitting a manuscript should thus anticipate being invited to review at least one other submission.

Authors should submit papers to the special issue by December 1, 2024. Submissions will begin to be accepted on June 1, 2025 via <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/orgsci>.

Please contact the guest editors with any questions at psych.safety.organizations@gmail.com.

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Biographies

Henrik Bresman is an associate professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD. His research focuses on learning and change in complex organizations, with particular emphasis on teams, and has been published in journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal* and *Organization Science*. He has served on several editorial review boards, including *Organization Science*, the *Academy of Management Journal*, and the *Academy of Management Review*. Bresman received his PhD in management from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. Her research examines psychological safety and team learning in complex organizations and has been published in journals including *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Organization Science*. She has served on *Organization Science*’s Editorial Review Board since 2004, and won the Extraordinary Service Award (2010). Edmondson received her Ph.D. in organizational behavior, AM in psychology, and AB in engineering and design from Harvard University.

Jean-François Harvey is an associate professor in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at HEC Montréal. His research focuses on how individuals, teams, and organizations learn and adapt, especially in uncertain and ambiguous contexts, and it has been published in journals including *Academy of Management Annals* and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. He currently serves on two editorial review boards (*Human Relations* and *HRMR*) has done ad hoc reviewing for *Organization Science*. Harvey received his Ph.D. from HEC Montréal, was a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and completed a two-year postdoc at Harvard Business School.

Anita Williams Woolley is an Associate Dean of Research and professor of organizational behavior and theory at Carnegie Mellon’s Tepper School of Business. Her research focuses on collective intelligence and team collaboration, including how artificial intelligence can be used to enhance collaborative processes, and has been published in a variety of journals including *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (PNAS)*, and *Management Science*. She has served as senior editor for six years at *Organization Science* and is an associate editor at *PNAS* and a founding associated editor of the journal *Collective Intelligence*. Woolley earned her doctorate in organizational behavior from Harvard University.

Lamar Pierce is the Beverly and James Hance Professor of Strategy at Washington University in St. Louis. His research focuses on economic and psychological factors that impact both productivity and misconduct and the organizational solutions to jointly address these effects. He

is Editor-in-Chief at Organization Science, after serving as Department Editor for Organizations at Management Science, associate editor at Strategic Management Journal, and managing guest editor at OBHDP. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

Appendix: Editorial Team and Details on Review Process Management

Special Issue Editorial Team

Lead Editor

Jean-François Harvey, HEC Montréal

Associate Editors

- Henrik Bresman, INSEAD
- Amy C. Edmondson, Harvard Business School
- Anita Williams Woolley, Carnegie Mellon University

Consulting Editor

- Lamar Pierce, Washington University in St Louis (Organization Science EIC)

Decision-Making Process

- Submitted papers are not competing against one another for limited publication slots in the Special Issue (SI). Papers will be evaluated and accepted based on their own merit alone, without any comparisons or rankings of papers relative to each other.
- The lead editor (LE), and other SI editorial team members who will assist as deputy editors, as needed, will make initial decisions on desk rejects and editor review assignments. To preserve reviewer resources, some papers will be desk-rejected for fit or when the LE assesses them as unlikely to meet the standards for publication within two rounds of revision.
- Authors can request a preferred SI-AE to handle their paper, which the LE will honor when possible but will also distribute papers in a manner that balances the workload across editorial team members.
- Theory-enhancing studies will be considered for publication in the special issue, which means that papers do not need to build a *new* theory to be accepted. Instead, they can help clarify or deepen our understanding of an existing theory.
- Special Issue Editorial Team members will not submit their own papers, except for an introduction to the special issue which they will co-author.
- The LE will process and distribute submissions to the editorial team on a rolling basis to expedite special issue completion.
- All authors submitting manuscripts for the Special Issue that pass an initial screening and are sent out for review are expected to serve as reviewers on at least one other paper under consideration for the Special Issue if requested. We will ensure that SI authors understand that the review process is not a zero-sum game, and that we do not want to see competitive behavior among reviewers. We will ensure that we follow all guidelines to avoid conflicts of interest in making review assignments.
- Each member of the Editorial Team will have autonomy in making decisions on the manuscripts they are assigned. All editors will consult with each other openly about any questions on a paper and solicit advice in handling various issues.
- The LE will remain informed about the status and outlook of papers under review as they progress through the process and with input from other AEs and the CE will review decisions that have gone out to ensure consistency in standards and process. The team

will confer periodically to monitor progress on the SI overall and share updates and information to help the team stay on track.

- We will be amenable to granting one-to-two-week extensions to all authors who request one; for those working on revisions, longer extensions may be considered based on their individual circumstances.
- We will do everything we can to meet the 85-day window between the date of submission of a manuscript and the time of decision.
- We are committed to minimizing the chances of “Reject” decisions beyond the first round of review. The majority of manuscripts being invited for revision will have a clear path toward publication going into the second round; almost no authors will proceed to a third review round if more than a “minor revision” is required.
- If a paper goes out for review for the SI, and is rejected, it cannot be resubmitted for consideration for a regular issue of Organization Science. If a paper is desk-rejected for the SI, then authors can submit it subsequently for consideration in the regular review process.
- Unanimity in judgment among reviewers is not required to accept a paper (and does not dictate a decision even when reviewers are unanimous). Final decisions are solely the discretion of the Special Issue Editors. We will make decisions based on our own manuscript evaluation, informed by reviewers' input.