RISE TO THE CHALLENGE
OF LEADERSHIP®

GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™

College of Doctoral Studies

Supervisor Influence on Employee Psychological Safety in U.S. Federal Government Organizations: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

By: Vernon S. Brown
Grand Canyon University
March 24, 2023

Committee Members:
Dr. Carita Harrell, Dissertation Chair
Dr. Holli Eskelinen, Methodologist
Dr. Scena Webb, Content Expert
Dr. Nicholas Markette, AQR Reviewer

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is defined as a characteristic of organizational culture conducive to employees' belief that they can contribute to group enterprises without negative consequences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Psychological safety is the established practices and shared beliefs within the organization that encourage open and trustful relationships to facilitate candid discussions without fear of rejection or reprisal (Boylan & Turner, 2017).

Psychological safety is the extent to which employees feel comfort in taking interpersonal risks that are positive and free of embarrassment, shame, or ridicule (Wanless, 2016b).
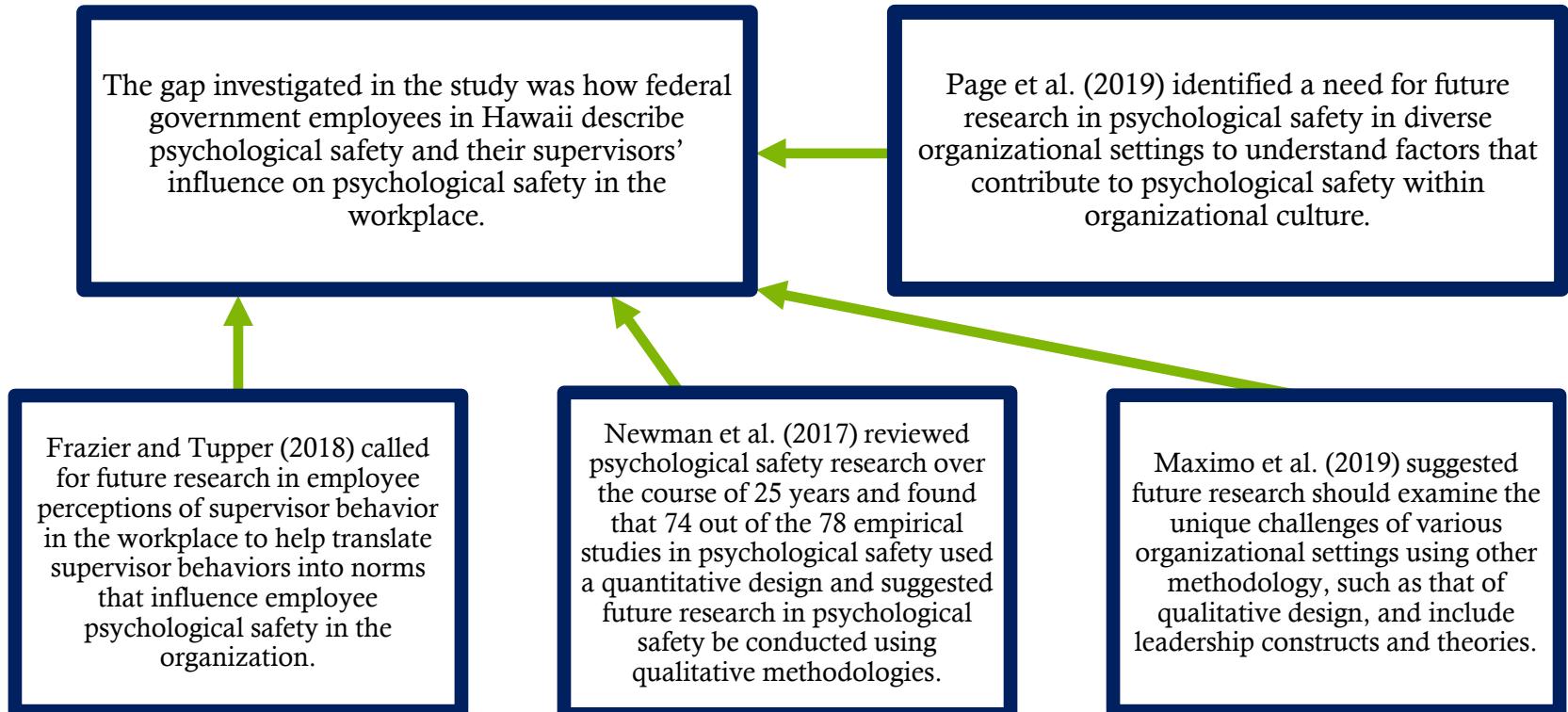
Camila

"Psychological safety is important to me because I want to feel safe when I come to work. I want to be heard and listened to and I want to know that I can say something if I am concerned or worried about a process or even another coworker."

Joe

"Psychological safety in an organization is key to innovation and higher morale. When employees feel safe, they also feel comfortable bringing up new or opposing ideas to the table, allowing for more creativity and comradery."

GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™
College of Doctoral Studies

Background & the Gap

The gap investigated in the study was how federal government employees in Hawaii describe psychological safety and their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in the workplace.

Page et al. (2019) identified a need for future research in psychological safety in diverse organizational settings to understand factors that contribute to psychological safety within organizational culture.

Frazier and Tupper (2018) called for future research in employee perceptions of supervisor behavior in the workplace to help translate supervisor behaviors into norms that influence employee psychological safety in the organization.

Newman et al. (2017) reviewed psychological safety research over the course of 25 years and found that 74 out of the 78 empirical studies in psychological safety used a quantitative design and suggested future research in psychological safety be conducted using qualitative methodologies.

Maximo et al. (2019) suggested future research should examine the unique challenges of various organizational settings using other methodology, such as that of qualitative design, and include leadership constructs and theories.

Problem Statement

It is not known how federal government employees describe psychological safety and their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in the workplace.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how federal government employees of Hawaii describe psychological safety and their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational Leadership Theory:

Transformational leaders compel their followers through motivation (Burns, 1978). Through transformational leadership, leaders strive to enhance the spirit of commitment and teamwork (Al-edenat, 2018), suggesting that transformational leaders look beyond self, and through influence and motivation, transform the norms within an organization (Winarto, 2018).

Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) Theory:

PSC is a framework for explaining the relationships between job expectations, supervisor influence, resources, worker well-being, and workers' psychological health. The application of PSC is reflected in organization policy, practice, and leader commitment, that is conducive to a stress-free and uninhibited work environment (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Furthermore, Dollard and Bakker (2010) assert that PSC is important in an organization as the precursor to better working conditions and to indirectly boosting employees' engagement, job performance and productivity.

Research Methodology and Design

Qualitative:

- The goal was to explore how a phenomenon affected a group of people; therefore, a qualitative research method was deemed appropriate for the study to explore supervisor's influence on employee psychological safety in the context of U.S. federal government organizations.

- Qualitative research is used to gain an in-depth understanding of phenomena in their natural settings through open-ended data that are grounded in the specific perspectives and contexts of people in those settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Descriptive:

- A qualitative descriptive research design is used to explore a phenomenon in its natural state with the purpose of obtaining information relevant to the description of the given phenomenon (Siedlecki, 2020).

- A qualitative descriptive design focuses on participants' descriptions of real-world conditions, rather than on the abstract, theoretical foci of other qualitative designs (Sandelowski, 2010).

GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™
College of Doctoral Studies

Phenomenon

How employees describe their supervisors' influence on their perceptions of Psychological Safety.

Research Questions

- **RQ1**: How do federal government employees describe psychological safety in their workplace?

- **RQ2**: How do federal government employees describe their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in their workplace?

Population of Interest and Sample

- Target population was employees in federal government organizations in Hawaii.

- The unit of analysis was individual federal government employees in Hawaii.

- Sample size: The study targeted an estimated 12,053 employees in federal government organizations from the Federal Employees of the U.S. Government LinkedIn Group to achieve a total of 46 federal government employees who completed the researcher-developed open-ended questionnaire; and 14 federal government employee respondents with the highest years of working experience who completed the researcher-developed one-on-one interview.

Sample Profile

- 58 volunteers who were employed in a federal government organization in Hawaii for two or more years and were 18+ years of age.

- **46 government employees fully completed the online questionnaire.**

  - 12 employees did not proceed past signing the informed consent and therefore they provided no data for use in the study and were discarded.

- **14 government employees completed the 1:1 interviews.**

  - 19 government employees volunteered to participate in the 1:1 interviews.

  - 15 of 19 government employees were invited based on purposely selecting participants using highest number of years employed in a government organization. One of the 15 invited did not respond after multiple attempts to arrange and conduct an interview.

Sources of Data
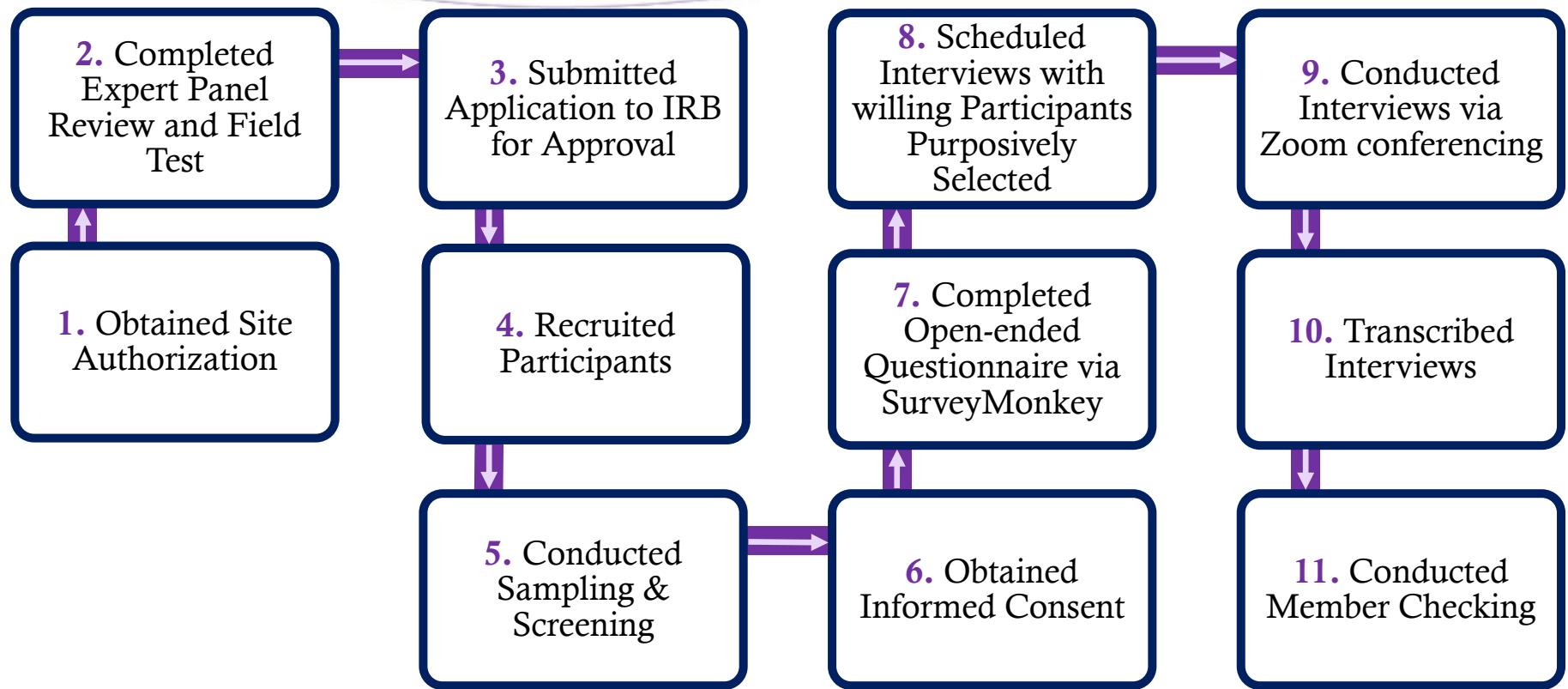
Open-Ended Questionnaire

Semi-Structured One-on-one Interviews
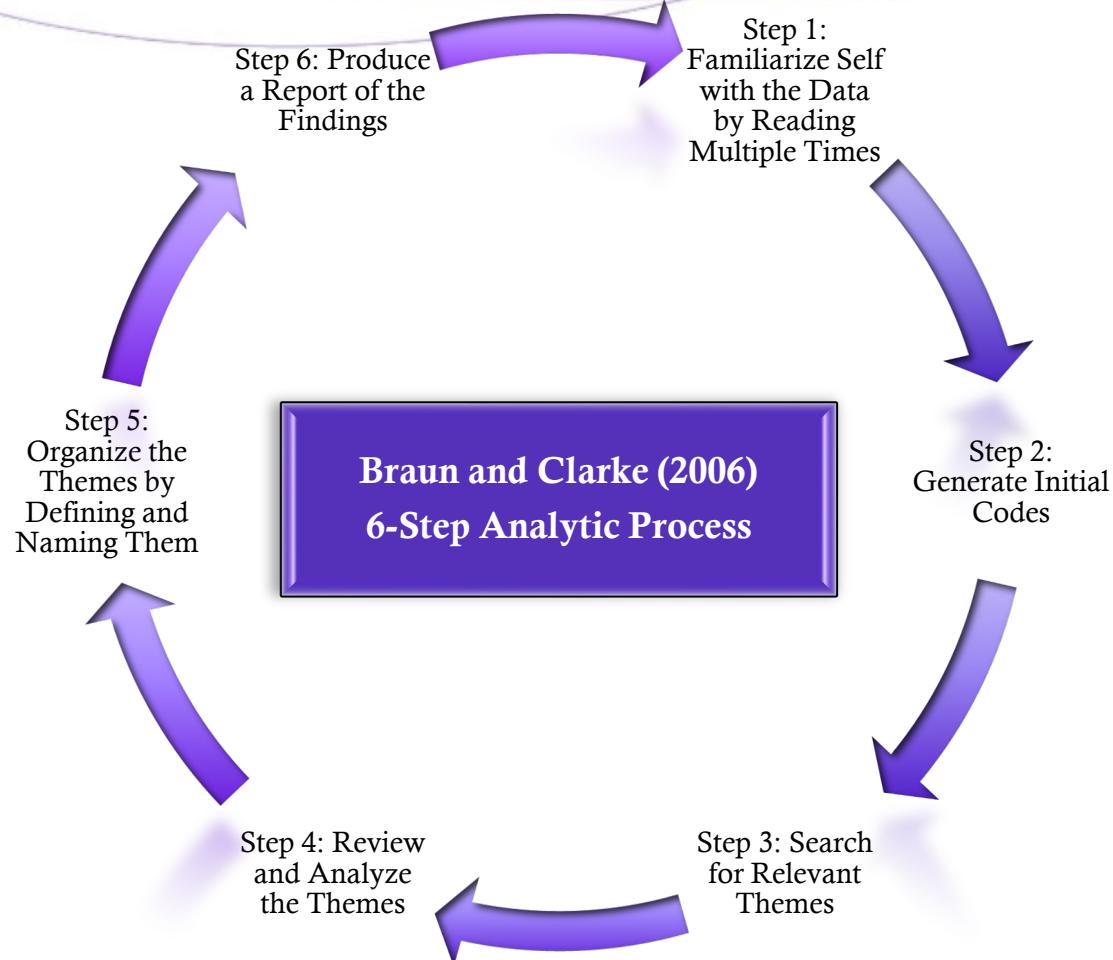
12 Questions
(Researcher Developed)

18 Questions
(Researcher Developed)
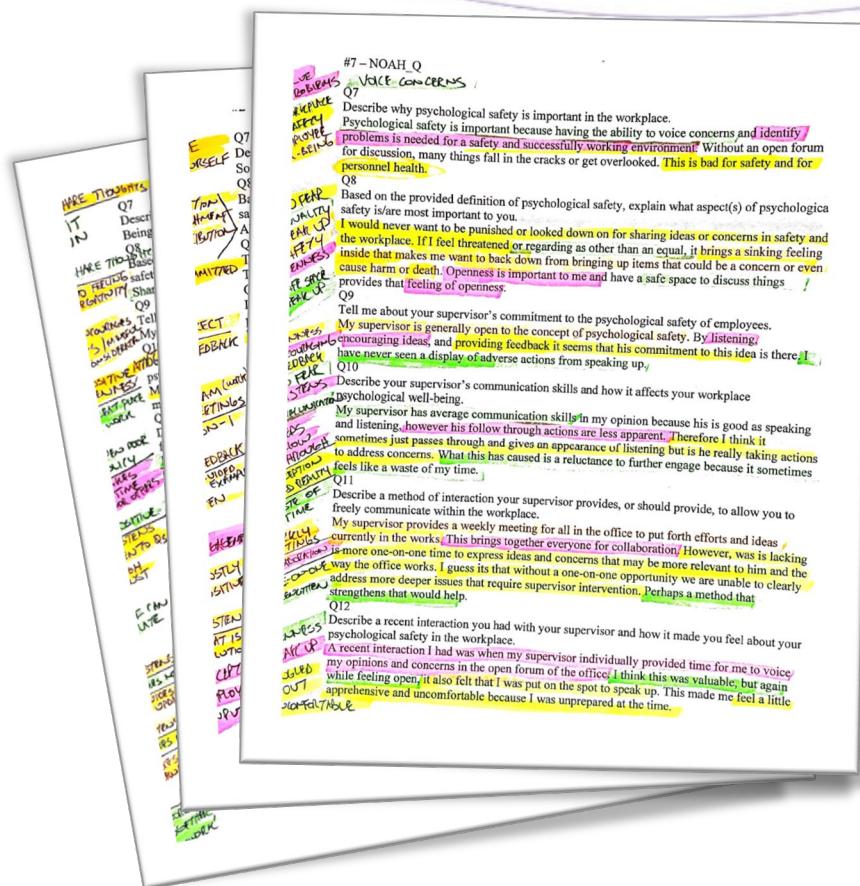
Data Collection Procedures

2. Completed Expert Panel Review and Field Test → **3.** Submitted Application to IRB for Approval

8. Scheduled Interviews with willing Participants Purposively Selected → **9.** Conducted Interviews via Zoom conferencing

1. Obtained Site Authorization

4. Recruited Participants

7. Completed Open-ended Questionnaire via SurveyMonkey

10. Transcribed Interviews

5. Conducted Sampling & Screening → **6.** Obtained Informed Consent

11. Conducted Member Checking

Data Analysis Procedures

Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-Step Analytic Process

Step 1: Familiarize Self with the Data by Reading Multiple Times

Step 2: Generate Initial Codes

Step 3: Search for Relevant Themes

Step 4: Review and Analyze the Themes

Step 5: Organize the Themes by Defining and Naming Them

Step 6: Produce a Report of the Findings

GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY™
College of Doctoral Studies

Coding

Results

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: How do federal government employees describe psychological safety in their workplace?	RQ1 - T1: *As:* <u>Impactful to Motivation and Quality of Work</u> RQ1 - T2: *A:* <u>Supportive Network that is Family Like</u> RQ1 - T3: *An:* <u>All-inclusive Environment</u>
RQ2: How do federal government employees describe their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in their workplace?	RQ2 - T4: *A:* <u>Commitment that Affects Employee Needs</u> RQ2 - T5: *An:* <u>Agent of Change to Organizational Barriers</u> RQ2 - T6: *An:* <u>Enabler to Personnel Engagement</u>

Six themes discovered from the coding and thematic analysis to address the RQs

GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™
College of Doctoral Studies

Results

RQ1: How do federal government employees describe psychological safety in their workplace?

RQ1 - T1: *As:* <u>Impactful to Motivation and Quality of Work</u>
Federal government employees describe psychological safety in the workplace as an environment of mutual respect to share ideas to enhance personal and professional performance.

RQ1 - T2: *A:* <u>Supportive Network that is Family Like</u>
Federal government employees describe psychological safety in the workplace as an environment of innovation and respect where people are valued and treated like family.

RQ1 - T3: *An:* <u>All-inclusive Environment</u>
Federal government employees describe psychological safety in the workplace as an environment of inclusion and respect with policies and practices that support safety and open communication.

Results
RQ1: Example Responses

How do federal government employees describe psychological safety in their workplace?

- **Oliver (I)**: "So yeah, productivity motivation work ethic all increases, especially when my personal psychological well-being is on the positive note, and then on the negative it does decrease your productivity."

- **Sophia (Q)**: "My coworkers are like family and we are comfortable speaking with each other openly about usually anything."

- **Evelyn (Q)**: "My office is very open and we respect each other as equals and teammates. Weekly office meetings, training and problem solving together have helps us build and learn to work together and respect each other."

- **Liam (I)**: "My door is always open you got something for me come talk to me, you know you can talk to me, you can talk to your boss, we just want you to know like if you see something you got something to say come talk to us like open door policy right."

Results

RQ2: How do federal government employees describe their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in their workplace?

RQ2 - T4: *A:* Commitment that Affects Employee Needs
Federal government employees describe their supervisors influence on psychological safety in the workplace as impactful to the basic human need of feeling safe and the willingness to openly express oneself.

RQ2 - T5: *An:* Agent of Change to Organizational Barriers
Federal government employees describe their supervisors influence on psychological safety in the workplace as a measure of investment in employee value and worth that impacts employee engagement and collaboration.

RQ2 - T6: *An:* Enabler to Personnel Engagement
Federal government employees describe their supervisors influence on psychological safety in the workplace as an enabler of personal engagement, communication, and safety through transparency.
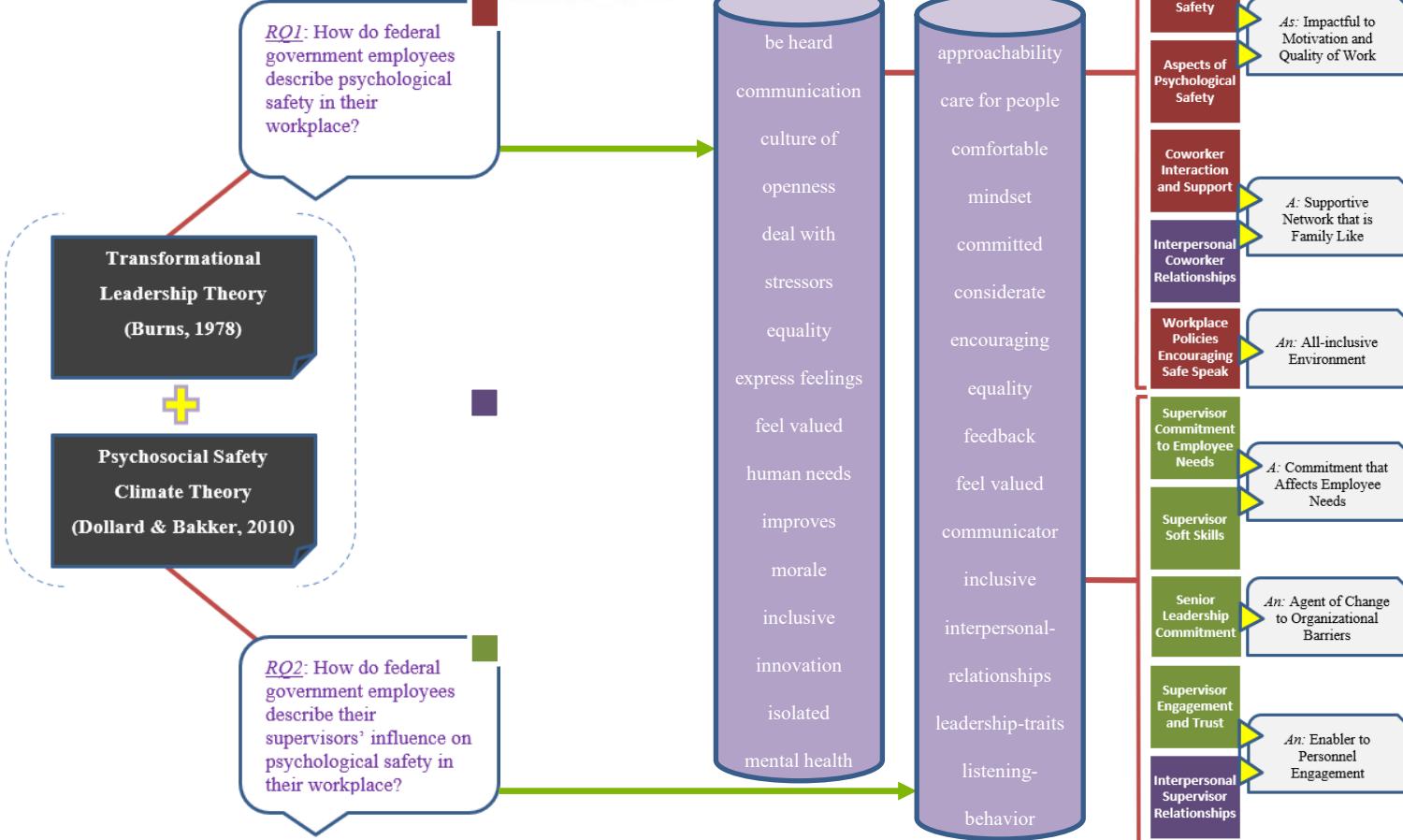
Results
RQ2: Example Responses

How do federal government employees describe their supervisors' influence on psychological safety in their workplace?

- **William (Q)**: "My supervisor is committed, easy going and understanding most of the time. Of course, we have disagreements but overall, my supervisor makes me feel comfortable by listening and giving proper attention to me and my fellow coworkers."

- **James (I)**: "I think the major thing that has helped me evolve and understand that it is safe to speak up and to do things is looking at the human interaction from the upper leadership during meetings, whether it be you know one on one meetings or in a group setting just that instead of the institutional regimental meeting structure that I have unfortunately been used to it, it's seeing that leader as a human being."

- **Mateo (I)**: "My immediate supervisor, I'm with him every day. We talk more we talk about things, whether it's work related or non-work related we spend a lot of time discussing you know families that type stuff so it's a it's not you don't feel like you can only talk about work and because of that it makes the work portion much easier to deal with."

- **Emily (Q)**: "Open two-way communications and treating issues carefully and treating me and my fellow workers equally to show support and understanding."

GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™
College of Doctoral Studies

Results

Findings Compared to Previous Studies

- Previous studies suggested that different organizational hierarchies have different levels of psychological safety within an organization.
  - Results from this study suggest that hierarchies have a great influence on the level at which an employee is engaged, which starts with coworkers and their influence on the psychological safety of others.

- In previous studies, 90% of empirical research on psychological safety during the recent span of 25 years utilized quantitative methodology.
  - This study explored an in-depth understanding of psychological safety in a natural setting, which added to the body of knowledge by providing a living account specifically in the governmental organization construct.

Theoretical Implications

Transformational Leadership Theory

- Idealized influence
- Inspirational motivation
- Intellectual stimulation
- Individualized consideration

Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) Theory

- The level of senior management commitment and support for stress prevention
- The priority management gives to psychological health and safety v. productivity goals
- Organizational communication upwards and downwards in relation to psychological health and safety
- The extent of participation and involvement by managers and workers in relation to psychological health and safety

Practical Implications

- Acknowledge the importance of psychological safety
  - Conduct awareness training for all employees on the fundamentals of psychological safety.
  - Be cognizant of the hierarchical differences and strive to overcome the rigid hierarchical barriers.

- Increase senior leadership commitment to psychological safety
  - Senior leaders should proactively engage with employees upfront to provide affirmation of the organizational commitment to psychological safety and equally value all regardless of rank, position, or level within the organization.
  - Provide open venues for the interaction and shared voice of all in the organization through social activities, luncheons, organizational activities.

- Provide feedback mechanisms and conduct routine health checks
  - Develop surveys and focus groups to solicit feedback from employees.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths

- Integrative multi-theoretical approach
- Adds new knowledge to existing literature of psychological safety, especially in Federal Government organizations
- Qualitative research provides a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through lived experiences than would a quantitative study

Weaknesses

- Transferability and applicability
- Self-reported data collection method
- Limited target population

Potential Practical Implications

- **BLUF:** Participants of the study discussed experiencing 1) **isolated workplace environments**, 2) **lack of employee social events**, 3) **inadequate training in psychological safety**, 4) **full inclusion**, and 5) **explicit policies towards psychological safety at their respective organizations**.

  - **Potential Practical Solutions**: To mitigate these experiences, practitioners (*and government organizations and leaders*) should **1)** develop training, surveys and focus groups surrounding psychological safety, **2)** solicit feedback from government employees on ways to cultivate safer spaces, **3)** increase access and inclusion to leaders and decision space, **4)** integrate social activities, and **5)** implement transformational initiatives that engage and inspire employees.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Future research on the topic of employee psychological safety in non-profit (e.g., government) organizations is recommended.

- Future research in trust and transformation precursor efforts is recommended.

- Future research should explore the organizational hierarchy in a government organization and how the effects of psychological safety are felt throughout the different levels of the organization.

- It is recommended that future research expand the recruitment efforts and methods to further enhance the homogeny of the sample.

- In future research, one should explore the training that organizations provide towards psychological safety and the underlying belief of this concept (*psychological safety*) in the workplace.

- Future research should utilize qualitative investigations to explore the influence that government institutionalization has on the psychological safety of individuals and the sense of inclusion in the organizational construct.

"Must Address" Items:
How Addressed?

- Add visual aids/tables in the "Preparation of Raw Data for Analysis and Descriptive Data Section."

  - <u>Effect</u>: **Visuals (tables/figures) prepare the reader.**

- Adding visual aids/tables in the "results" would be very helpful.

  - <u>Effect</u>: **Summarized using a table to depict RQs to major themes.**

- There is a tendency toward long paragraphs. In many places, you can take a breath and break longer paragraphs into two paragraphs.

  - <u>Effect</u>: **Breaks in paragraphs (providing pause/better readability).**

- The implications section is "light."

  - <u>Effect</u>: **Practitioner recommendations and clarity (support/challenge of theories).**

Key References

Al-edenat, M. (2018). Reinforcing innovation through transformational leadership: the mediating role of job satisfaction. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *31*(4), 810-838. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-05-2017-0181

Boylan, S. A., & Turner, K. A. (2017). Developing organizational adaptability for complex environment. *Journal of Leadership Education, April 2017*, 183-198. https://doi.org/10.12806/V16/I2/T2

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burns, J. M. (1978). *Transformational Leadership Theory*. Leadership.

Key References

Dollard, M. F., & Bakker, A. B. (2010). Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to conducive work environments, psychological health problems, and employee engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 83*(3), 579-599. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317909X470690

Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. John Wiley & Sons.

Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 1*(1), 23–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev- orgpsych-031413-091305

Erkutlu, H., & Chafra, J. (2021). Leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding. A moderated mediation model of follower Machiavellianism and trust in the leader. *Journal of Economic and Administrative Sciences, 37*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1108/jeas-05-2020-0060

Key References

Frazier, M. L., & Tupper, C. (2018). Supervisor prosocial motivation, employee thriving, and helping behavior: A trickle-down model of psychological safety. *Group & Organization Management, 43*(4), 561–593. https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601116653911

Maximo, N., Stander, M. W., & Coxen, L. (2019). Authentic leadership and work engagement: The indirect effects of psychological safety and trust in supervisors. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 45*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v45i0.1612

Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review, 27*(3), 521–535. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.01.001

Page, L., Boysen, S., & Arya, T. (2019). Creating a culture that thrives: Fostering respect, trust, and psychological safety in the workplace. *OD Practitioner, 51*(1), 28–35.

Key References

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods combining qualitative and quantitative sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques. *Research in Nursing & Health, 23*(3), 246-255. https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200006)23:33.3.CO;2-8

Sandelowski, M. (2010). What's in a name? Qualitative description revisited. *Research in nursing & health, 33*(1), 77-84. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20362

Siedlecki, S. L. (2020). Understanding descriptive research designs and methods. Clinical Nurse Specialist, 34, 8-12. https://doi.org/10.1097/NUR.0000000000000493

Sim, J., Saunders, B., Waterfield, J., & Kingstone, T. (2018). Can sample size in qualitative research be determined a priori? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 21*(5), 619–634. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1454643

Key References

Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S., & Yong, T. (2018). Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: Systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 18*, 148. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7

Wanless, S. B. (2016). The role of psychological safety in human development. *Research in Human Development, 13*(1), 6-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2016.1141283

Winarto, M. (2018). The effect of transformational leadership on team satisfaction: The mediating effect of psychological safety. In *Proceedings of the 1st Economics and Business International Conference 2017* (EBIC 2017). https://doi.org/10.2991/ebic-17.2018.69

Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publishing.

Questions

Thank you!

GRAND CANYON
U N I V E R S I T Y™
College of Doctoral Studies