

Research Paper

Psychological Safety as a Cultural Construct: Employees' Meaning-Making in Egyptian Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

Psychological safety research is grounded predominantly in Western, individualist frameworks, leaving cross-cultural applicability underexamined. This qualitative study explores how Egyptian workers understand and construct meaning around psychological safety and the cultural frameworks through which it is conceptualised. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 49 participants (20 males, 29 females; age range 18 to 67) from diverse occupational sectors in Egypt, conducted in Arabic and translated into English. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed three themes: (1) psychological safety as a relational understanding anchored in familial belonging and collective care; (2) dignity and honour (karama) as foundational cultural constructions of safety, particularly the threat posed by belittlement and public humiliation; and (3) the genuine recognition and validation of one's voice and contribution as a distinct condition of feeling safe. These findings reveal a dignity-centred, relational construction of psychological safety that challenges the universality of dominant frameworks and contributes to the cross-cultural organisational psychology literature.

Keywords: *Psychological Safety, Egypt, Workplace, Occupational Psychology, Culture*

Psychological safety has become one of the most studied constructs in organisational behaviour, consistently linked to team learning, performance, creativity, and employee well-being (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Since Edmondson's (1999) foundational formulation, the construct has generated a substantial empirical literature spanning health care, technology, education, and beyond. Yet psychological safety research has been conducted almost exclusively in Western, industrialised organisational contexts, leaving a critical question largely unexamined: how do workers in non-Western cultural settings understand and construct safety at work? This is not merely an empirical gap; it is a conceptual one. The meanings people attach to interpersonal safety, dignity, voice, and belonging are not culturally neutral. They are shaped by the values, relational norms, and social structures of the contexts in which people live and work.

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Attending to these cultural dimensions is essential if organisational psychology is to develop constructs genuinely inclusive of human experience in its full diversity. As organisational life increasingly crosses cultural boundaries, the cost of inattention to local cultural realities grows harder to justify, whether measured in theoretical imprecision, in measurement error, or in well-intentioned interventions that fail to account for local conditions. The existing literature has made important strides in understanding psychological safety in Western contexts. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a serious engagement with how workers in culturally distinct settings construct the very meaning of safety itself. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how Egyptian workers understand and construct meaning around psychological safety in the workplace, attending to the cultural values and relational logics through which safety is conceptualised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Safety: Foundations, Developments, and Conceptual Limits

The concept of psychological safety has its roots in Kahn's (1990) work on the psychological conditions of personal engagement, which defined safety as the ability to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (O'Donovan and McAuliffe, 2020). Edmondson (1999) reconceptualised it as a team-level phenomenon, describing it as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Her seven-item scale became the dominant operational definition of the construct and has been used in hundreds of subsequent studies. Meta-analytic reviews have confirmed robust associations between psychological safety and knowledge sharing, innovation, voice behaviour, employee well-being, and organisational citizenship (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Scholars have examined antecedents including leadership style, trust, and organisational climate (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2011). More recently, Edmondson and Bransby (2023) extended the construct beyond team learning, arguing that psychological safety is increasingly relevant to broader organisational adaptation and societal resilience.

Despite this rich scholarship, important conceptual limitations have been identified. The construct as operationalised focuses heavily on individual voice: the willingness to ask questions, admit mistakes, and challenge authority. Scholars have observed that this framing implicitly privileges individualist, low power-distance cultural assumptions (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2011). Edmondson's original scale items ask whether team members feel it is safe to take risks and whether they can raise problems and tough issues. These items assume that interpersonal risk-taking is a recognisable and valued category of behaviour, and that individual agency in surfacing problems is both possible and appropriate. In contexts where relational harmony, deference to hierarchy, or collective face-saving are paramount values, these assumptions may not hold. The construct may thus be capturing a culturally particular experience of safety rather than a universal one, a possibility with significant implications for cross-cultural validity and theoretical coherence.

Culture and the Construction of Psychological Safety

Culture shapes not only the behaviours that psychological safety is thought to produce but the very meanings through which safety in interpersonal and organisational contexts is understood (Deardorff, 2009). Hofstede's (2001) framework identifies individualism-collectivism and power distance as among the most consequential cultural dimensions for organisational behaviour. In individualist, low power-distance contexts typical of North America and Northern Europe, the freedom to speak one's mind, challenge authority, and take interpersonal risks is culturally valorised and organisationally expected. The dominant

psychological safety construct maps closely onto these values, raising the question of whether the construct, as currently theorised, is adequately capturing a universal human experience (Marques, 2026; Newton and Knight, 2022). Triandis (1995) noted that in allocentric cultures, group harmony, relational obligation, and collective identity take precedence over individual expression, fundamentally shaping how people experience their social environments.

Empirical cross-cultural work has begun to illuminate these differences. In East Asian contexts, face (mianzi) mediates the safety-voice relationship: employees may experience voice behaviour as inherently face-threatening, for themselves or for their superiors, shaping that relationship in ways that diverge from Western findings (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2011). Research in South Asian organisational contexts has similarly attended to the role of hierarchical relational norms, with deference to authority and concerns about face appearing to mediate the relationship between psychological safety and voice behaviour. In Sub-Saharan African organisational contexts, the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises communal interdependence and collective identity, shapes how belonging, voice, and mutual accountability are experienced in ways that resist mapping onto Western frameworks (Mangaliso, 2001). These studies converge on a shared insight: psychological safety is not a context-free cognitive appraisal but is embedded in culturally specific relational and moral frameworks that shape both its meaning and its behavioural expression.

The theoretical implications run deeper than cross-cultural variation in behaviour. Drawing on social constructionist and cultural psychological traditions, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that the self is constituted differently across cultural contexts. In interdependent frameworks, the self is defined through connection, obligation, and belonging rather than through individual autonomy. Shweder (1991) similarly argued that the self, emotion, and moral reasoning are shaped by cultural contexts, such that the same situation may be experienced in qualitatively different ways by people embedded in different cultural worlds. If the self is constituted relationally, then constructs organised around the individual's freedom to take interpersonal risks may be conceptually misaligned with cultural contexts in which being a self is inseparable from relational embeddedness. Psychological safety, in such contexts, may be less about the individual's subjective sense of risk and more about the quality of the relational field: whether one is genuinely cared for, treated with dignity, and recognised as a person of worth.

Egyptian Organisational Culture and the Gap in the Literature

Egypt occupies a particularly significant position for this inquiry. As the most populous country in the Arab world, with a rapidly diversifying economy and a workforce operating across public, private, and international organisational contexts, Egypt represents an important and underexplored setting for organisational psychology research (Cohen-Mor, 2026; Najm, 2015). Egyptian culture is characterised by a strong collectivist orientation in which the family serves as the primary social unit and principal model for broader social relations (Barakat, 1993; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013). Interpersonal relationships at work are governed by norms of loyalty, reciprocal obligation, and hierarchical respect, with significant consequences for how authority, conflict, communication, and professional identity are navigated in organisational settings.

Religion plays a meaningful role in shaping organisational culture and values (Al-Kandari and Gaither, 2011). Islam emphasises mutual respect, communal responsibility, justice (adl, عدل), and the intrinsic dignity of the human person (Ali, 2010). The concept of shura (شورى),

or consultative decision-making, reflects an expectation that those in authority will genuinely seek and respect the input of those they lead (Frangieh, 2018). These religious values interweave with collectivist relational norms and family-centred social structures to produce a distinctive organisational culture that is not adequately captured by frameworks developed elsewhere.

A further defining feature of Egyptian and broader Arab organisational life is *wasta* (واسطة): the use of personal connections, relational networks, and intermediaries to navigate institutional and professional contexts (Branine and Analoui, 2006; Sidani and Thornberry, 2013). *Wasta* reflects the degree to which professional life in Egypt is embedded in relational structures that extend well beyond formal organisational boundaries (Cohen-Mor, 2026). In this context, who one knows, and crucially how one is regarded by those one knows, carries substantial weight. The quality of one's relational standing is not incidental to professional life; it is constitutive of it (Mneimneh, 2008; Najm, 2015). This has direct implications for psychological safety: in a cultural context where relational standing shapes access, opportunity, and protection, threats to one's dignity or exclusion from caring relational networks carry consequences that extend far beyond the interpersonal moment.

Central to Egyptian and Arab cultural life is the concept of *karama* (كرامة), encompassing dignity, honour, and personal worth (Cohen-Mor, 2026). *Karama* is not merely a private psychological experience; it is a socially constituted status that must be actively affirmed and that can be publicly damaged (Suleiman, 2016). Its violation through public humiliation, dismissal, or condescension carries consequences that extend beyond interpersonal discomfort, affecting one's standing within the community and one's willingness to participate in collective life (Frangieh, 2018; Hammond, 2007). In organisational settings, the preservation of *karama* may thus function as a foundational condition for psychological engagement and safety. Yet despite the centrality of these cultural dynamics, studies specifically examining how Egyptian workers construct meaning around psychological safety are, to the knowledge of the present authors, absent from the literature. The broader Arab world is similarly underrepresented. This gap is consequential not only for theory but for practice: as multinational organisations operate increasingly within Egyptian and Arab contexts, frameworks that do not account for local cultural realities risk both ineffectiveness and harm.

Purpose of the Study

The construct of psychological safety was built largely from studies conducted in organisational contexts where individual voice, interpersonal risk-taking, and autonomy are culturally valorised. Egyptian workers, situated within a cultural landscape shaped by collectivism, relational obligation, dignity, familial belonging, and religious values of justice and mutual respect, offer a perspective from which the cultural assumptions embedded in dominant frameworks can be examined afresh. Understanding how psychological safety is constructed in this context is not simply a matter of filling a geographic gap in the literature. It is an opportunity to interrogate those assumptions and to contribute to a more adequate, cross-culturally grounded account of what it means to feel safe in organisational life. The research question guiding this inquiry is: how do Egyptian employees understand and construct psychological safety in their organisational lives?

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative design informed by a constructivist epistemological position was adopted, consistent with the aim of understanding how participants actively construct meaning around psychological safety (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Constructivism holds that knowledge and meaning are produced through the interaction between researcher and participant, shaped by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which both are embedded. This stance is particularly well suited to a study concerned with cultural meaning-making, since it foregrounds the importance of attending to the specific contexts in which understandings are formed rather than treating knowledge as context-independent. Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) was employed as the analytic method. Reflexive TA generates themes through an iterative, theoretically engaged process rather than imposing predetermined codes, foregrounding the researcher's active role in knowledge construction. The analysis operated at both semantic and latent levels, attending to participants' explicit accounts and to the underlying cultural assumptions that structured them. A qualitative approach was selected in preference to quantitative methods because the aim was not to measure a predefined construct but to understand how safety is locally constituted.

Participants

Forty-nine participants were recruited from diverse occupational sectors across Egypt. Purposive sampling ensured variation in gender, age, sector, and organisational seniority, enabling the research team to examine whether understandings of psychological safety varied across these dimensions or reflected shared cultural logics that cut across them. Inclusion criteria required current employment or employment within the previous six months. Table 1 presents sample characteristics. All participants are referred to using pseudonyms throughout the findings.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N = 49)

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	20 (40.8%)
	Female	29 (59.2%)
Age range	18-29	14 (28.6%)
	30-44	19 (38.8%)
	45-67	16 (32.7%)
Sector	Education	10 (20.4%)
	Healthcare	9 (18.4%)
	Government/Public	10 (20.4%)
	Private/Business	11 (22.4%)
	Service industry	9 (18.4%)
Interview language	Arabic	49 (100%)

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Materials and Procedure

All interviews were conducted in person by the first author at locations chosen by participants, including workplaces, cafes, and university spaces, to maximise comfort and minimise any power differential associated with researcher-chosen settings. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed iteratively through consultation across the full authorship team and piloted with two non-

sample participants before being revised accordingly. Three core questions anchored each interview: (1) Can you tell me about a time at work when you felt completely comfortable, like you could be yourself and say what you genuinely thought? What was that like? (2) Have you ever been in a work situation where you held back, stayed quiet, or felt like you could not fully show up? What was going on for you in that situation? (3) If you were describing an ideal work environment to someone who had never experienced one, what would you say it feels like to be in it? These core questions were supplemented by flexible probing tailored to each participant's responses, allowing the interview to follow threads introduced by participants rather than by the research schedule.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic to maximise fluency and authenticity of expression. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the first author, then independently verified for accuracy and cultural fidelity by the second author, both of whom are fluent in Arabic and English. Instances where direct translation risked losing cultural nuance were discussed between the two authors and rendered in English with explanatory notes retained in the analytic record.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading and annotation; generation of initial codes across the full dataset; construction of candidate themes by organising codes into meaningful groupings; review and refinement of themes in relation to coded extracts and the full dataset; definition and naming of themes; and production of the final analysis. The analytic process was genuinely recursive rather than linear. The team returned repeatedly to earlier phases as interpretation deepened, and candidate themes were substantially revised through sustained cross-team discussion before being finalised. An initial set of eight candidate themes was generated in the first analytic pass and, through iterative review, consolidated into the three overarching themes presented here. Disagreements about theme boundaries and naming were resolved through return to the data and sustained discussion rather than through consensus-seeking, preserving the productive analytic tension that reflexive TA requires. Member checking was conducted with eight participants drawn from different sectors and age groups, who confirmed the resonance of emerging themes with their own understandings and contributed clarifications that refined the final analytic account.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the International Executive School, Strasbourg, prior to data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with IRB standards and the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants received a detailed information sheet, were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and without consequence, and provided informed written consent. All participants are identified only by pseudonyms, and no identifying information has been reported.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was treated as an active and generative dimension of the analytic process rather than a methodological obligation to be discharged (Naipaul and Kouyaté, 2026; Naipaul and Kyriakou, 2026). The authorship team comprises nine scholars whose disciplinary and cultural locations span organisational behaviour and culture, occupational and environmental health, psychotherapy and social work, cultural studies, and cross-cultural organisational psychology, with backgrounds rooted in the Arab world, North and West Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. The two authors of Arab background occupied a position

of cultural and linguistic insiderness that brought significant analytic advantages: deep familiarity with Egyptian relational and communicative norms, attunement to register and implication in participants' accounts, and sensitivity to what was conveyed indirectly as well as what was stated explicitly. The first author, who conducted all interviews, was able to draw on this proximity to create the conditions under which participants spoke candidly. At the same time, this insiderness required sustained reflexive vigilance, since the risk of naturalising the very assumptions the study sought to examine was explicitly acknowledged throughout.

The remaining authors served a complementary function. They pressed on interpretations that risked being taken for granted, surfaced assumptions embedded in early analytic choices, and introduced comparative perspectives from collectivist, postcolonial, and clinical traditions that enriched the team's reading of the data. Reflexive discussions were held at regular intervals, structured around specific interpretive decisions rather than general reflection. All authors maintained reflective journals, and disagreements were documented and worked through via sustained return to the data rather than through the pursuit of premature consensus (Naipaul and Kouyaté, 2026; Naipaul and Kyriakou, 2026). The productive tension between insider depth and outsider scrutiny was not resolved but held, and it is from within that tension that the analysis developed.

Findings

Three themes were generated from the data, each capturing a distinct dimension of how Egyptian workers understand and construct psychological safety. While analytically separable, the themes reflected interrelated aspects of a broader relational and dignity-centred framework of safety. Table 2 provides a summary of the themes and their cultural anchors.

Table 2: Summary of Themes

Theme	Description	Core Cultural Concept
1. Safety as Relational Home: The Workplace as Family	Psychological safety understood in relational terms, anchored in the warmth, loyalty, and mutual protection associated with family life. Safety felt as a quality of the relational field rather than an individual appraisal of risk.	El-3eila (العيلة): family as the primary model of belonging and mutual obligation
2. To Be Safe Is to Be Dignified: Karama as a Condition of Safety	Dignity as a non-negotiable condition of safety. Karama violations, particularly public belittlement, experienced as irreversible ruptures that permanently foreclose openness and contribution, regardless of other relational conditions.	Karama (كرامة): dignity, honour, and the right to be treated as a person of worth
3. Safety in Being Seen: The Recognition of Voice and Contribution	Safety requiring genuine acknowledgement of professional contribution. Performative consultation, in which input is solicited but not acted upon, experienced as a distinct form of professional erasure.	Ihtiram (احترام): respect as active, visible acknowledgement

Note. Cultural concepts are presented in transliterated Arabic with original script. Translations are approximations; full conceptual meanings are elaborated in the findings below.

Safety as Relational Home: The Workplace as Family

Across the dataset, the most consistent and emotionally charged understanding of psychological safety centred on the workplace as a relational home: a place where one is cared for, protected, and genuinely known. Participants did not describe safety in abstract or cognitive terms. They described it through the texture of their relationships, and the most powerful relational frame they reached for, repeatedly and instinctively, was family. To feel safe at work was, for many, to feel that the workplace functioned like *el-3eila* (العيلة), not merely as an affective unit but as a moral one, carrying obligations to show up for one another, to cover for each other, and to protect one another's standing. This architecture included an implicit understanding that mistakes would be managed within the relationship rather than exposed to outside judgment, that vulnerability would be met with support rather than exploitation, and that loyalty would be extended and expected in both directions.

When it feels like a family, I can mess up and not panic about it. Because in a family, you don't throw someone out the moment they make a mistake. You help them. That's when I feel like I can actually be myself. (Fatima, 34, healthcare)

The absence of this relational quality was experienced as a clear and legible signal that visibility was unsafe. Participants who described cold or transactional workplaces reported an almost physical pulling-back: they stopped volunteering ideas, stopped asking questions, and reduced engagement to the minimum required. Several described monitoring small relational cues, such as a manager's tone in greeting, whether colleagues ate lunch together, or whether problems were raised directly or circulated behind closed doors, as ongoing indicators of whether full participation was worth the risk.

At my last job, we were genuinely like brothers and sisters. If something went wrong, we sorted it together. I could say anything. Where I work now, everyone keeps to themselves. I do the same. You learn pretty quickly that that's the deal. (Khaled, 42, private sector)

Participants did not describe the family-like workplace as one without conflict or difficulty. Rather, it was described as a place where conflict and difficulty could be navigated safely because the underlying relational bond was trusted to hold. The family metaphor was not about idealised harmony but about the security of a committed relational container: a place where mistakes were absorbed rather than amplified, and where difficulty was met with solidarity rather than judgment. Psychological safety, in this construction, is less a cognitive judgment about interpersonal risk than a felt sense of relational embeddedness, of being held within a web of relationships that renders full participation and disclosure both worthwhile and protected. In this sense, the *el-3eila* framework does not merely parallel the dominant Western construct but reframes the very terms on which safety is possible.

To Be Safe Is to Be Dignified: Karama as a Condition of Safety

Across all sectors and demographic groups, no dimension of psychological safety was more emotionally intense or universally articulated than dignity. Participants returned again and again to the idea that safety was inseparable from being treated as a person of worth. The concept of *karama* (كرامة), encompassing dignity, honour, and a person's fundamental right to be treated as someone of worth, emerged as the cornerstone of how safety was understood at the individual level. What distinguished this theme from general descriptions of being treated well was the weight and irreversibility attached to its violation. Participants described *karama* violations not as unpleasant experiences from which recovery was

straightforward but as ruptures that permanently altered the relational landscape of the workplace. The asymmetry was stark and consistent: respect built safety slowly and incrementally, while a single act of belittlement could dismantle it entirely and lastingly.

Karama is not negotiable. You can be hard on me, you can push me, that's fine. But if you disrespect me in front of people, I am done. Not in a dramatic way. I just stop. I stop sharing, I stop contributing. Internally, I've already left. (Omar, 51, government sector)

The concept of ihana (إهانة), being belittled or shamed, surfaced repeatedly as the specific mechanism through which karama was most frequently violated. This included being corrected condescendingly in meetings, having one's competence questioned before colleagues, being interrupted or spoken over, or being addressed in a tone that communicated contempt or dismissal. Participants were clear that it was not the correction itself that threatened safety but the manner of delivery: one that communicated that the person was lesser, that one's standing as a person of worth was not being honoured.

My manager called out something I'd done wrong in front of the whole team. It wasn't even that big a deal, but the way she said it, like I was stupid for not knowing, I wanted to disappear. I never put myself forward again after that. Not once. (Nadia, 27, education sector)

The public dimension of karama violations deserves particular attention. Several participants noted that the same criticism delivered privately would have been manageable, even constructive. It was the publicness of the humiliation that made it injurious in a way that could not be recovered from. This reflects the socially constituted nature of karama: dignity in Egyptian cultural life is not merely a private psychological state but a form of social standing maintained or damaged in the eyes of others. To be publicly humiliated is to have one's standing visibly diminished in the social space of the workplace, with implications that extend beyond the immediate encounter. This theme is analytically distinct from the first, though the two are connected: where the first theme concerned the quality of collective relational bonds, this theme concerned how the individual was treated as a person of worth within those bonds. A workplace could be warm and collegial in general and still produce profound psychological unsafety through the careless or contemptuous treatment of individuals. Participants were clear that both conditions had to hold: belonging without dignity, or dignity without belonging, was experienced as incomplete and ultimately insufficient to sustain genuine openness and contribution over time.

Safety in Being Seen: The Recognition of Voice and Contribution

A consistent pattern across the dataset concerned the experience of having professional contributions genuinely received, or not received, by those around them. Feeling safe at work required something beyond being cared for as a person and treated with dignity: it required knowing that what one brought to the work actually mattered. Being recognised as a contributor, as someone whose specific knowledge, perspective, and effort made a difference, was named as a distinct and non-negotiable condition of safety.

Participants drew a sharp and recurring distinction between workplaces that genuinely engaged with their input and those that performed consultation without intention to act. The latter was not experienced as merely frustrating; it was described as a kind of professional erasure. When ideas were consistently offered but never visibly used, when questions were

welcomed but never followed up, when contributions were acknowledged in the moment but left no trace in decisions or directions, participants described a quiet but definitive withdrawal. This withdrawal was experienced not as resistance or strategic disengagement but as a rational response to a clear signal: that one's professional self did not fully register as real or consequential in this particular organisational world.

My manager would always ask what I thought in meetings. But you could tell within thirty seconds whether they were actually listening or just going through the motions. Once I figured out it was usually the second one, I stopped offering anything real. Why would I? (Yasmine, 31, private sector)

Recognition operated at two distinct registers for participants. The first was task-level: whether specific ideas, suggestions, and professional knowledge were taken seriously and visibly incorporated into decisions. The second was identity-level: whether participants were known at work as someone who had something distinctive to offer, as a professional presence rather than an interchangeable occupant of a role. Both registered as conditions of safety, and the two could come apart. One could receive credit for a specific idea while still feeling fundamentally invisible as a professional person.

I need to feel like I bring something that no one else does, and that people can see that. When that's there, I'll give everything. When it's not, when you feel like a body in a seat, you start doing the minimum. Not out of spite. Just because what's the point of doing more? (Ahmed, 45, service industry)

In a social context shaped by wasta and relational networks, participants' acute sensitivity to the authenticity of recognition reflects not simply a preference for being heard but a culturally embedded attunement to the difference between relational appearances and substantive regard. Being genuinely seen was not simply pleasant; it was evidence that one's presence in the organisation had real rather than merely nominal value. This theme was related to karama but operated at a different level of specificity. Karama concerned what was owed to the person as a human being; this theme concerned what was owed to the professional, to the person as a contributor of knowledge and effort. Participants experienced these as meaningfully separable: one could be treated with personal dignity while feeling professionally invisible, and the latter was experienced as its own distinct form of unsafety. The full construction of psychological safety, in participants' accounts, required all three conditions to hold simultaneously: to be held within caring relational bonds, to be treated with dignity as a person, and to be genuinely seen and valued as a contributor.

DISCUSSION

The findings make clear that psychological safety, as Egyptian workers understand and construct it, cannot be adequately captured by frameworks developed in Western, individualist organisational contexts. Safety in the Egyptian workplace is not primarily a cognitive appraisal of interpersonal risk; it is a relational and moral achievement whose foundations are cultural in the deepest sense, grounded in understandings of belonging, dignity, and recognition that the dominant literature has lacked the conceptual resources to adequately theorise. The three themes generated in this analysis each illuminate a distinct dimension of this architecture, and each carries theoretical implications that extend beyond the Egyptian case. Taken together, they invite a fundamental reconsideration of what psychological safety is and what it requires.

The centrality of relational belonging in participants' accounts demands more than a passing acknowledgment of Egypt's collectivist cultural orientation (Barakat, 1993; Triandis, 1995). In the existing psychological safety literature, relationships are typically positioned as antecedents or contextual moderators of safety, as conditions that allow safety to develop rather than as its constitutive content (Frazier et al., 2017). For participants in this study, however, the relational quality of the workplace was not a backdrop to safety; it was its very substance. Safety was located in the felt sense of belonging to a caring, morally invested collective, not in an individual's assessment of whether speaking up carried acceptable risk. If safety is relationally constituted rather than individually appraised, then the unit of analysis for psychological safety research in collectivist cultural contexts may need to shift from the individual's cognitive appraisal to the quality of the relational field in which that individual is embedded. This connects to Nembhard and Edmondson's (2011) finding that relational dynamics within teams shape the safety-voice relationship in ways that go beyond individual perception, and suggests that the field has not yet fully theorised the relational architecture of safety.

The prominence of *karama* as a foundational and non-negotiable condition of safety is the most theoretically consequential contribution of this study. Dignity has been acknowledged in the psychological safety literature, particularly in discussions of the fear of embarrassment or humiliation that can inhibit voice behaviour (Edmondson, 1999), but it has not been developed as an explicit and central theoretical category in its own right. The present findings suggest it should be. Two aspects of the *karama* findings are particularly significant for theory. First, the asymmetry between dignity-building and dignity-destruction is notable: while respect built safety slowly and incrementally over time, a single public act of belittlement could foreclose it permanently. This suggests that psychological safety is not simply a continuous variable that increases with positive relational inputs but a threshold construct in the dignity dimension, one that can be durably and sometimes irreversibly damaged by specific relational events. Second, the public nature of *karama* violations was consistently identified as amplifying their impact. The social visibility of humiliation, the fact that it was witnessed by others whose regard matters to one's professional and social standing, made it qualitatively more damaging than the same communication delivered privately. This points to a cultural logic in which the group is not merely the context for safety but the audience before which one's worth is affirmed or denied.

The findings concerning recognition engage a dimension present in the existing literature, particularly in work on voice behaviour and the conditions under which employees feel able to speak up (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2011), but they take on culturally specific texture in the Egyptian context. Participants' acute sensitivity to the distinction between performative and genuine consultation reflects a culturally embedded attunement to the authenticity of relational exchange. In a social context shaped by *wasta*, the question of whether one's contributions are valued on their merits or whether one's presence is merely nominal is practically significant and sometimes consequential. The finding that professional invisibility, being present in the organisation but not genuinely seen as a contributor, constitutes its own distinct form of psychological unsafety suggests that the construct needs to be theorised with greater attention to the multiple layers of recognition that workplace participation requires: recognition of one's humanity, one's dignity, and one's professional worth.

Together, the three themes allow a preliminary conceptual model of psychological safety in the Egyptian organisational context to be articulated. This model comprises three

interlocking foundations: relational embeddedness (el-3eila), dignity affirmation (karama), and genuine recognition (ihtiram), corresponding respectively to the collective, personal, and professional registers of safety. Each is necessary and none is sufficient alone: relational warmth without dignity produces belonging that cannot be trusted; dignity without belonging produces respect insufficiently robust to sustain openness; recognition without either produces visibility that feels precarious rather than safe. The full experience of psychological safety requires all three foundations to hold simultaneously. This model differs from the dominant Western framework not merely in adding cultural nuance to an existing construct but in proposing a qualitatively different architecture of safety, one built from relational and moral foundations rather than from the individual's cognitive appraisal of interpersonal risk. Whether dignity, belonging, and recognition constitute a more universal architecture of safety that the Western literature has systematically under-theorised is a question that future cross-cultural research is well positioned to explore.

Implications

The findings carry practical implications for organisations operating in Egyptian and comparable cultural contexts. Managerial approaches that prioritise formal professionalism over relational warmth may inadvertently undermine psychological safety by disrupting the familial relational conditions through which it is culturally constituted. Practices taken for granted in Western settings, such as maintaining professional distance, conducting performance conversations in standardised formats, or prioritising task efficiency over relational investment, may have unintended costs in Egyptian organisational life. Leadership development programmes operating in these contexts would benefit from explicit attention to relational investment, dignity-preserving communication, and the authentic solicitation and uptake of employee voice, not as peripheral concerns but as foundational conditions of organisational safety and performance.

The durability of dignity violations carries particular practical urgency. A single act of public belittlement may irreparably damage an employee's willingness to contribute, even where all other relational conditions remain positive. Organisations would do well to attend carefully to the public dynamics of correction, feedback, and disagreement, recognising that the audience present during a difficult exchange is not incidental but central to its impact. The capacity to deliver feedback in dignity-preserving ways might productively be understood as a core managerial competency in Egyptian organisational contexts rather than an optional cultural consideration.

For researchers, these findings highlight the importance of developing culturally grounded measures of psychological safety for use in non-Western contexts. Existing validated instruments, developed and tested primarily in Western samples, may not adequately capture the relational and dignity-centred dimensions of safety identified here. A measure of psychological safety valid in Egyptian organisational contexts would need to include items assessing the relational warmth and familial quality of the workplace, the degree to which individual dignity is consistently protected, and the extent to which employees experience their contributions as genuinely rather than performatively recognised. Scale development work informed by qualitative, culturally embedded research of the kind conducted in this study represents an important methodological next step, as does the broader project of developing theoretical frameworks capable of holding cultural variation without reducing it to noise around a Western mean.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn exclusively from Egypt and findings should not be assumed to generalise to the full diversity of Arab cultural contexts, which vary considerably in their social, political, religious, and organisational characteristics. Purposive rather than random sampling limits representativeness and precludes claims about prevalence. All interviews were conducted by a single interviewer, which, while ensuring consistency, introduces the possibility of interviewer effects that cannot be fully controlled for. The study is interpretive in nature and the themes represent one rigorous and reflexively produced reading of the data rather than a definitive or exhaustive account. The cross-sectional design means that the longitudinal dynamics of psychological safety construction, including how safety develops or deteriorates over time within organisational relationships, could not be examined. Finally, while the research team's cultural diversity was treated as an analytic strength, it is also possible that the interpretive distance of outsider authors introduced subtle misreadings of culturally embedded meaning, a limitation inherent to cross-cultural collaborative qualitative research and managed through sustained reflexive discussion rather than eliminated.

Future research might develop and validate culturally appropriate measures of psychological safety in Egyptian and Arab contexts, enabling systematic examination of the dignity, belonging, and recognition dimensions identified here and testing whether these dimensions predict organisational outcomes over and above existing Western measures. Comparative qualitative designs examining how psychological safety is constructed across different Arab national contexts would illuminate both shared cultural logics and important intra-regional variation. Longitudinal research examining how karama violations unfold over time, and whether and how recovery from dignity threats occurs within ongoing organisational relationships, would address dynamic dimensions that the present design cannot capture. Attention to gender differences in how psychological safety is constructed and experienced in Egyptian organisational contexts would also be valuable, given the distinct dynamics that shape women's organisational participation in Egypt and the Arab world more broadly. Finally, intervention research examining whether dignity-centred, relationally attentive leadership approaches produce measurable benefits for psychological safety and organisational outcomes in Egyptian contexts would carry significant practical as well as scholarly value.

CONCLUSION

What psychological safety means is not separable from where and how it is constructed. For Egyptian workers, safety at work is constituted through the moral quality of relational bonds, the consistent affirmation of personal dignity, and the genuine recognition of professional contribution: three interlocking conditions rooted in cultural values that the dominant organisational psychology literature has not been designed to capture. The family-like relational container of *el-3eila*, the socially constituted dignity of *karama*, and the substantive professional regard of *ihitiram* together form an architecture of safety that is both deeply specific to the Egyptian context and potentially instructive for the field more broadly. This study has offered an empirically grounded and culturally attentive account of that construction, contributing to an emerging body of cross-cultural scholarship that takes seriously both the diversity of human experience and the limits of context-free theorising. The findings challenge not only the cultural universality of the dominant psychological safety construct but the adequacy of any framework that treats the individual's cognitive appraisal of interpersonal risk as the primary site at which safety is made and unmade. Advancing the field's capacity to support the well-being and performance of workers across

cultural contexts requires a willingness to ask not only whether psychological safety is present but what, in each particular cultural world, safety is understood to mean and what conditions, relational, moral, and professional, are required to make it possible.

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Conflict of Interest

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