Psychological Safety Revisited: An Intersectional Approach to Workplace Inclusion

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Abstract

Abstract – EN

Title: Psychological Safety Revisited: An Intersectional Approach to Workplace Inclusion

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This thesis explores how organizations can foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities and how such strategies respond to the challenges of increasingly diverse workplaces. Even though psychological safety is widely recognized as a key condition for inclusion and performance, most organizational approaches assume a universal experience of safety and overlook identity complexity. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) professionals, supported by consultants, employees, and secondary data, this study examines how inclusion is structured and experienced within medium-to-large organizations across Europe.

Findings reveal that psychological safety is not a uniform outcome, but a system-contingent experience shaped by leadership behaviour, relational trust, organizational alignment, and structural accountability. Symbolic efforts rarely address the needs of employees with intersecting marginalized identities, who often experience a conditional sense of safety.

In response, this thesis proposes an embedded intersectional approach to inclusion: a shift from isolated DEI initiatives to structurally integrated practices that embed identity awareness across organizational systems. These include inclusive leadership development, identity-responsive feedback systems, transparent promotion criteria, and sustained relational infrastructures. Crucially, these efforts must be supported by senior leadership; executive alignment and board-level accountability are essential to secure resources and strategic consistency.

The thesis contributes to psychological safety theory by redefining safety as identity-sensitive and structurally mediated. It advances intersectionality in organizational studies by showing how systemic design, not just representation, is key to inclusion. Finally, it offers practical guidance for embedding inclusion through coherent and accountable strategies, positioning inclusion as an organizational imperative.

Key words: psychological safety, intersectionality, workplace inclusion, DEI, organizational strategy, leadership, identity complexity, structural inclusion.

Resumo – PT

Título: Segurança Psicológica Revisitada: Uma Abordagem Interseccional para a Inclusão no Local de Trabalho

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Esta dissertação explora como as organizações podem promover a segurança psicológica para pessoas com identidades marginalizadas interseccionadas e como essas estratégias respondem aos desafios de ambientes de trabalho cada vez mais diversos. Embora a segurança psicológica seja amplamente reconhecida como uma condição essencial para a inclusão e o desempenho, muitas abordagens organizacionais assumem uma experiência universal de segurança e ignoram a complexidade identitária. Com base em entrevistas qualitativas com profissionais de Diversidade, Equidade e Inclusão (DEI), complementadas por consultores, colaboradores e dados secundários, este estudo analisa como a inclusão é estruturada e vivida em organizações europeias de médio a grande porte.

Os resultados mostram que a segurança psicológica não é um resultado uniforme, mas sim uma experiência contingente ao sistema, moldada por liderança, confiança relacional, alinhamento organizacional e responsabilidade estrutural. Esforços simbólicos raramente atendem às necessidades de pessoas com identidades marginalizadas interseccionadas, que frequentemente relatam uma sensação de segurança condicional.

Em resposta, propõe-se uma abordagem interseccional integrada à inclusão: uma transição de iniciativas isoladas para práticas estruturais que incorporam a consciência identitária em sistemas organizacionais. Isso inclui desenvolvimento de liderança inclusiva, sistemas de feedback sensíveis à identidade, critérios de promoção transparentes e infraestruturas relacionais sustentadas. O apoio da liderança executiva é essencial para garantir recursos e consistência estratégica.

Esta dissertação contribui para a teoria da segurança psicológica ao redefini-la como sensível à identidade e mediada estruturalmente, oferecendo também recomendações práticas para uma inclusão sustentável.

Palavras-chave: segurança psicológica, interseccionalidade, inclusão no trabalho, DEI, estratégia organizacional, liderança, identidade, inclusão estrutural.

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Finally, to those working tirelessly to make organizations safer and more inclusive: this work is for you.

AI Disclaimer

This document has been reviewed using AI (artificial intelligence) tools for linguistic refinement and clarity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores psychological safety within organizations through the lens of intersectionality. Psychological safety was first defined by Kahn (1990) as a "sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career." It has been widely recognised as a critical element in fostering environments where individuals can share ideas, take risks, and challenge the status quo without fear of repercussions (Edmondson, 1999). Research has shown that psychological safety enhances collaboration, learning, and innovation, contributing significantly to team performance and organizational success (Edmondson, 1999; Baer & Frese, 2003). It enables behaviours such as admitting mistakes, seeking help, and experimenting with new approaches, which are essential for continuous improvement and adaptability in dynamic work environments (Edmondson, 1999). Leadership and team norms also play a pivotal role in cultivating psychological safety, with inclusive leadership and open communication practices fostering environments where diverse perspectives are valued and encouraged (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

However, what remains underexplored is how psychological safety is shaped by the complexities of intersecting social identities within organizational teams. Emerging research suggests that a lack of psychological safety is disproportionately experienced by professionals from underrepresented communities, yet the connection between psychological safety and diversity & inclusion remains underexplored in academic literature (Bhasin, 2022). Furthermore, while diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives have gained traction in workplace research and practice, most studies focus on singular identity categories, overlooking the ways in which overlapping identities create unique barriers to psychological safety (Holvino, 2010; Atewologun, 2018). While organizational strategies that aim to foster psychological safety may help address existing disparities, further research is needed to understand how such strategies affect the experiences of individuals with intersecting marginalised identities.

To overcome the above-mentioned gap in the literature, this study will tackle the problem by deploying an intersectionality theory approach. Intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), has been defined by Kaufmann and Derry (2024) as "the study of how multiple forms of social inequality interact to produce individuals' unique experiences of marginalization, as well as the study of the systemic practices that perpetuate these

inequities." For instance, Black women experience distinct forms of bias due to the compounded effects of both racial and gender-based discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). In organizational settings, Holvino (2010) has argued that D&I initiatives must address the complexities of intersectional experiences to ensure meaningful inclusion and fairness. Organizational studies incorporating intersectionality have revealed how overlapping identities shape workplace dynamics, exposing systemic biases that traditional D&I efforts often fail to address (Atewologun, 2018). Such perspective can be valuable, among others, to abide by theories of justice (Beauchamp and Bowie's, 1997), focusing on organizations' ethical responsibility to ensure both fair processes (procedural justice) and equitable outcomes (distributive justice). From this standpoint, addressing psychological safety from an intersectional perspective becomes even more urgent, as it directly influences whether individuals with overlapping marginalised identities experience fairness and inclusion in workplace dynamics.

Indeed, Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) further underscores why it is crucial for organizations to consider overlapping identities, as these identities shape individuals' access to safety, voice, and inclusion in ways that single-category analyses fail to capture. Organizations that effectively foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting identities benefit from enhanced employee engagement, increased innovation, and improved overall well-being—factors that are essential for long-term organizational success.

This research aims to bridge these gaps by examining how intersecting social identities influence psychological safety within teams and identifying organizational strategies to support individuals facing multiple layers of marginalization.

The guiding research question of this study is: **What organizational strategies effectively foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting identities, and how do these strategies address challenges in diverse teams?**

Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the theoretical debate on intersectionality within organizational studies (Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010) by detailing how intersecting identities uniquely affect individuals' perceptions of safety and inclusion in team environments. Likewise, this research will expand psychological safety literature (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 1999) by uncovering how individuals with multiple marginalised identities experience psychological safety, thereby offering a more comprehensive and identity-conscious understanding of team dynamics and inclusion.

This study also offers practical and managerial implications for organizations seeking to promote psychological safety through an intersectional approach. Through in-depth interviews with professionals from diverse fields—including HR, DEI specialists, DEI consultants, and employees—this research captures nuanced, firsthand perspectives on how intersecting identities shape workplace experiences. The exploratory qualitative methodology provides rich, context-specific insights into both the challenges and strategies organizations use to create psychologically safe and inclusive environments.

The contribution of this research is twofold: first, to address a gap in psychological safety literature by examining how intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences of safety and inclusion; and second, to provide actionable insights for leaders and organizations on fostering psychological safety through a structurally embedded, intersectional approach.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

2.1 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety addresses the interpersonal conditions that allow individuals to fully engage and contribute within organizational teams. This concept was introduced by Kahn (1990) and defined as the "sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career". Kahn's original work focused on personal engagement, exploring how employees' willingness to take on tasks is influenced by their perception of emotional risks. Edmondson (1999) further conceptualised this and described psychological safety as a prerequisite for high performance in teams and organizational learning. She emphasizes that psychological safety enables behaviours like admitting mistakes, seeking help, sharing ideas, and experimenting with new approaches without fear of retribution or embarrassment. In this way, these behaviours engender collaboration, learning, and innovation, thereby enhancing performance outcomes (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety is deeply influenced by the organizational climate and leadership behaviours. Key factors such as trust, respect, and open communication are essential in creating environments where individuals feel valued and able to express themselves without fear of judgment or retribution. Research by Edmondson (1999) and Carmeli et al. (2010) underscores the role of inclusive leadership in fostering this climate—where leaders actively seek input and encourage diverse perspectives. Such environments empower employees to engage more freely, contributing to collaborative learning, innovation, and ultimately improved performance outcomes (Frazier et al., 2017).

Unlike other forms of organizational safety, psychological safety addresses interpersonal dynamics and the collective behaviours within teams. It allows individuals to feel secure enough to express their ideas without fear of judgment. In the absence of psychological safety, teams may experience fear, defensiveness, and disengagement, preventing open collaboration and the sharing of innovative ideas (Frazier et al., 2017).

Psychological Safety and Inclusion

Psychological safety is deeply intertwined with inclusion, as both are necessary for creating environments in which people of all backgrounds can contribute meaningfully. Inclusion is defined as the degree to which an employee perceives themselves as an esteemed member of

the workgroup, achieved through treatment that fulfils their needs for both belonging and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Shore et al. highlight psychological safety as one of the practices and processes that foster inclusion. Where people are safe from a psychological point of view, they can express themselves without fear of negative consequences, which is crucial for realizing inclusion.

Furthermore, inclusion minimizes perceived status differences, creating a "level playing field" where all team members feel comfortable sharing their unique perspectives (Shore et al., 2011; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). However, the link between psychological safety and inclusion remains underexplored in academic literature, with Shore et al. (2011) being one of the few studies to explicitly connect the two. This gap suggests a need for further research to understand how psychological safety can be leveraged to promote meaningful inclusion in diverse teams.

Psychological safety, therefore, especially in diverse teams, requires inclusive leadership. Leaders who encourage the expression of unique perspectives and engender a sense of belonging create an environment where employees feel valued and respected. As previously stated, inclusive leadership has been found to relate positively to psychological safety, which in turn enhances employee involvement in creative work (Carmeli et al., 2010). This becomes very important in diverse teams, where full contribution of individuals is premised on their experience of inclusion—both a sense of belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011).

However, exclusion occurs not only in the form of social rejection but also when unique perspectives are treated as irrelevant. Workplace rejection, whether by colleagues or supervisors, predicts poor psychological health and work attitudes, although this effect is stronger among men than women (Hitlan, Clifton, & DeSoto, 2006). Women in top management teams often face exclusion due to their lower power, despite their positive impact on firm performance. This lack of belongingness and recognition of their unique contributions leads to higher turnover rates among female executives compared to their male counterparts (Krishnan, 2009).

Furthermore, some employees may feel pressured to conform to dominant organizational norms, sacrificing their unique identities. For instance, women attorneys may adopt masculine behaviours to fit the mold of a "successful attorney" (Ely, 1995), and African American executives may alter their appearance to align with organizational expectations (Anderson, 1999). While these strategies may temporarily fulfil belongingness needs, they often

undermine uniqueness, leading to emotional exhaustion and higher turnover intentions (Hewlin, 2009). These findings highlight the importance of valuing both belongingness and uniqueness in organizations to foster psychological safety and fully leverage the benefits of diversity.

However, achieving psychological safety remains challenging, particularly in certain organizational settings. In hierarchical or highly competitive environments, psychological safety is often compromised as individuals prioritize personal interests over open communication, leading to a lack of trust and collaboration (Kahn, 1990). High-pressure settings that emphasize performance outcomes can exacerbate this issue, where interpersonal relationships are undervalued in favour of achieving targets. This creates a climate of risk avoidance, where individuals are reluctant to speak up about challenges, especially when fear of failure is high (Edmondson, 1999).

For marginalised employees, these pressures can be even more pronounced. The fear of making mistakes or voicing concerns can become compounded by the concern that any misstep may reinforce negative stereotypes or biases, further isolating them from the group. This fear of confirming stereotypes can prevent marginalised employees from sharing ideas or seeking help, further compromising psychological safety in the workplace.

2.2 Diversity, Inclusion, and Intersectionality

Over the decades, D&I efforts have gained prominence in organizations, with early frameworks emphasizing demographic representation as a driver of innovation and financial success. However, such “business case” rationales have been criticised for commodifying diversity while failing to address ethical enrooting to D&I and organizational wellbeing (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Intersectionality theory offers an alternative approach, focusing on the interplay of overlapping identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation—and the systemic barriers they create (Crenshaw, 1989).

The evolution of D&I policies demonstrates progress but also ongoing challenges. Scholars such as Shore et al. (2011) and Ferdman and Deane (2014) advocate for inclusive practices that go beyond token representation, emphasizing the importance of creating equitable, fair and safe work environments/cultures. Holvino (2010) and Kaufmann and Derry (2024) make the same argument from an intersectional perspective: how organizational practices often do not take into consideration the compounded challenges faced by individuals with intersecting identities. Policies for addressing these obvious inequalities arise, such as demographic quotas

or minimum representation targets, but as Ely and Thomas (2020) are making the point that such policies are insufficient without shifts in organizational power structures or decision-making dynamics.

Critiques of D&I efforts also expose their limitations in addressing systemic inequality. Amis et al. (2021) argue that due to the primacy accorded to surface-level changes in most current practices, the root causes of inequality – institutionalised power dynamics and cultural biases – remain unaddressed. Intersectionality fills this gap by repositioning D&I as a matter of structure rather than a superficial goal, providing a lens to uncover how marginalised identities are disproportionately excluded from meaningful participation in organizations.

Notwithstanding the improvements in the domain of D&I research, the literature has not yet adequately discussed how real inclusion can be achieved in an organizational team and especially for individuals navigating intersecting social identities. Intersectionality highlights the need to move beyond surface-level representation toward addressing systemic barriers and power imbalances. It is necessary to understand how these dynamics impact the effective and equitable ability of individuals to contribute to team settings. By bridging insights from D&I research with broader organizational dynamics, this study seeks to enrich the conversation around creating inclusive workplaces.

2.3 Bridging Intersectionality and Psychological Safety

While psychological safety focuses on the interpersonal dynamics that enable individuals to contribute openly within teams, intersectionality adds a crucial dimension by highlighting how overlapping social identities—such as race, gender, and disability—shape workplace experiences. Individuals with intersecting marginalised identities often face compounded challenges that affect their ability to feel safe and included in organizational settings (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, Black women frequently encounter both racial and gender biases that uniquely impact their sense of psychological safety. These biases can lead to reluctance in speaking up, sharing ideas, or challenging the status quo due to fears of stereotyping or retaliation. Recognizing these compounded challenges, organizations must move beyond one-size-fits-all diversity initiatives and implement tailored strategies that actively foster psychological safety for all employees.

Since professionals from underrepresented communities are more likely to experience a lack of psychological safety, fostering psychologically safe workplaces is crucial for promoting

belonging and inclusion. Psychological safety is not only about whether individuals feel comfortable speaking up, but also about whether they have the ability and agency to participate fully in the workplace. Dr. Komal Bhasin, a Senior DEI Consultant and Mental Health Expert-in-Residence at BCI (bhasin consulting inc.) with extensive experience in creating and delivering programming in a range of leadership and DEI areas, including psychological safety, emphasizes the importance of agency in psychological safety—highlighting that it is not just about the absence of fear but also about whether individuals from marginalised backgrounds are truly able to contribute, take risks, and engage without facing exclusion or inequities (Bhasin, 2022).

An intersectional approach to psychological safety, as Dr. Komal Bhasin explains, acknowledges that speaking up is not experienced in the same way by all employees. While some individuals may feel relatively safe to voice their opinions, others may face negative consequences when they do so, particularly if their identities are historically marginalised. For instance, when an employee from an underrepresented group expresses concerns or challenges the status quo, they may be more likely to experience retaliation, microaggressions, or exclusion compared to a colleague from a more privileged background. This discrepancy underscores the need for organizations to move beyond a general understanding of psychological safety and ensure that inclusion efforts specifically account for the ways in which different identities shape workplace experiences (Bhasin, 2022).

Research underscores the critical role of psychological safety in ensuring that diverse employees can fully engage in the workplace. Singh, Winkel, and Selvarajan (2023) found that psychological safety mediates the relationship between diversity climate and employee performance, with this effect being particularly pronounced for racial minorities. Their findings suggest that a psychologically safe work environment is not just beneficial but essential for enabling employees from underrepresented backgrounds to thrive.

Although Picketts et al. (2023) focus on psychological safety within healthcare education, particularly for learners and simulated participants, their insights extend beyond this context. They emphasize the ethical imperative of psychological safety in diversity and inclusion efforts, advocating for structured strategies such as transparency, prebriefing, and opt-out mechanisms to mitigate harm. These principles can be effectively applied to workplace diversity initiatives, ensuring that inclusion efforts do not inadvertently reinforce exclusion or discomfort.

By applying an intersectional lens to psychological safety, this research seeks to uncover how multiple, layered identities shape individuals' experiences of inclusion and identify concrete organizational strategies that foster environments where all employees feel safe, valued, and empowered to contribute (Holvino, 2010; Russo et al., 2017).

2.4 Key Variables in Organizational Strategies to foster psychological safety

2.4.1 Team Dynamics

Team dynamics play a pivotal role in fostering psychological safety, as the 7-item scale developed by Edmondson (1999) emphasizes the importance of shared team experiences in creating an environment conducive to open communication and learning. The scale measures how team members perceive their ability to express ideas, make mistakes, and contribute without fear of negative consequences. These elements of team dynamics are foundational for psychological safety, as they enable individuals to engage in behaviours that are essential for team learning and innovation (Edmondson, 1999). Research consistently highlights that when teams establish trust, openness, and mutual respect, it creates an environment where members feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks, thereby enhancing their willingness to share diverse perspectives and challenge the status quo (Edmondson, 1999). Thus, understanding and cultivating positive team dynamics is central to fostering psychological safety, which in turn supports greater collaboration and collective performance (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Frazier et al., 2017).

In addition to trust and openness, research has also highlighted other critical team characteristics that influence psychological safety. For example, at the individual level, perceptions of similarity in systems understanding and a continuous quality improvement climate positively influence project performance and organizational commitment through higher levels of psychological safety (Bendoly, 2014; Rathert, Ishqaidef, & May, 2009). At the team level, shared team rewards (Chen & Tjosvold, 2012), formal team structures (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010), and engagement in boundary work (Faraj & Yan, 2009) have been found to foster team psychological safety.

Interestingly, some studies suggest that faultlines—subgroups based on non-overlapping demographic characteristics—can lead to greater psychological safety in teams. Lau and Murnighan (2005) argued that strong faultlines may result in positive social effects within subgroups, which could enhance the overall team's psychological safety. Furthermore,

research by O'Neill (2009) has shown that collective responsibility for outcomes, such as project failure, can encourage team members to admit mistakes, which, in turn, reinforces psychological safety within the team.

Edmondson's (1999) 7-item scale for psychological safety, developed using rigorous scale construction protocols and validated across diverse samples, serves as a foundation for measuring these dynamics. All studies using this scale report very good internal consistency, reinforcing its reliability across varied contexts. The statements in Edmondson's scale offer valuable insights into the different aspects of team dynamics that promote or hinder psychological safety:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (Reverse-coded)
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is easy to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

2.4.2 Individual and Team Differences and Intersectionality

Researchers have also identified that individual and team differences, such as adherence to co-worker norms, self-consciousness, status differences, and cognitive styles, are associated with psychological safety (May et al., 2004; Bienefeld & Grote, 2014; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Post, 2012). From an intersectional perspective, these factors must be considered not only as individual attributes but also as elements shaped by social identities such as race, gender, and class.

For instance, status differences within teams have been shown to impact psychological safety, with individuals perceiving higher status feeling more comfortable speaking up and contributing (Bienefeld & Grote, 2014; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). However, this dynamic can be complicated when considering intersectionality. Women and individuals from marginalised racial or ethnic backgrounds may experience lower perceived status within a

team, despite outward appearances of equality. These status dynamics can influence their sense of safety in sharing ideas or voicing concerns, creating a barrier to full participation and engagement within the team. In this sense, psychological safety is not just about structural team characteristics, but also about how these dynamics intersect with the multiple identities individuals carry.

Cognitive style differences, such as a preference for sequential, logical thinking versus more intuitive, holistic approaches, also affect team interaction and psychological safety (Post, 2012). However, these cognitive differences may intersect with social identity factors. For example, women or people from marginalised communities who deviate from the expected cognitive style may be judged more harshly, influencing their willingness to contribute to team discussions and the overall sense of psychological safety. The intersection of cognitive styles with social identity markers such as gender, race, and cultural expectations can shape how individuals are perceived and, ultimately, how safe they feel in expressing themselves.

2.4.3 Quality of Leadership

Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering psychological safety by creating an environment where employees feel comfortable expressing ideas, taking risks, and challenging the status quo. A range of leadership behaviours has been identified as critical to promoting psychological safety, such as inclusiveness, support, trustworthiness, and openness. Research highlights several leadership styles that contribute to these behaviours: servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), inclusive leadership (Bourke & Espedido, 2019), and authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008). These styles emphasize trust, openness, and employee development, which shape organizational cultures where individuals feel supported and valued.

To assess whether a leader effectively cultivates psychological safety, their actions can be analysed based on the following indicators, which align with the key tenets of supportive leadership behaviours found in the literature:

- **Encouraging Open Dialogue** – Transformational leaders foster open communication and critical thinking, creating a culture where employees feel safe to speak up (Bass, 1985). This behaviour is linked to leader inclusiveness and openness, both of which contribute to psychological safety at the individual level (Detert & Burris, 2007; May et al., 2004).

- **Modelling Vulnerability** – Authentic leaders demonstrate self-awareness and transparency, normalizing constructive discussions about challenges and mistakes (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This openness and behavioural integrity (Palanski & Vogelgesang, 2011) serve as a model for subordinates, reinforcing a safe environment for risk-taking and candid communication.

- **Recognizing and Valuing Contributions** – Inclusive leaders ensure that diverse perspectives are actively sought and meaningfully integrated into decision-making (Bourke & Espedido, 2019). This behaviour directly fosters psychological safety by reinforcing that all voices are valued and have a place in organizational decision-making (Bienefeld & Grote, 2014).

- **Fostering Inclusivity in Decision-Making** – Leadership behaviours that prioritize equity and representation help build trust and psychological safety (Bourke & Espedido, 2019). By ensuring that all employees feel included in the decision-making process, leaders help establish a psychologically safe environment conducive to collaboration and innovation.

- **Providing Individualised Support** – Transformational leaders offer personalised mentorship and guidance, reinforcing employees' confidence in sharing ideas and concerns (Bass, 1985). Research has shown that support from leaders is linked to higher employee engagement, job performance, and team learning outcomes through the mediation of psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nemanich & Vera, 2009).

These leadership behaviours, grounded in various leadership styles, align with the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social exchange processes (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), which suggest that when leaders model supportive behaviours, employees are more likely to emulate these actions, creating a reciprocal cycle that strengthens psychological safety across teams.

2.4.4 Supportive Organizational Practices

Supportive organizational practices play a crucial role in fostering psychological safety, which in turn enhances employee work outcomes, such as organizational commitment, job performance, and engagement. These practices can be formal or informal and are essential in creating a work environment where employees feel safe to express themselves, take risks, and contribute to organizational learning.

At the individual level, research has consistently shown that organizational practices that demonstrate support for employees contribute positively to psychological safety. For example, perceptions of organizational support—whether through recognition programs, career development opportunities, or employee wellness initiatives—have been linked to enhanced feelings of safety at work (Carmeli & Zisu, 2009). This sense of support encourages employees to engage fully in their roles, knowing that their contributions are valued and that they will not be penalised for taking calculated risks.

Mentorship programs are another critical practice that fosters psychological safety. Access to mentoring, particularly in the form of guidance from senior colleagues or leaders, offers employees an outlet to receive feedback and support, further promoting psychological safety (Chen et al., 2014). Mentoring not only provides career development but also cultivates a trusting relationship where employees feel comfortable voicing concerns or asking questions without fear of judgment or retaliation.

Diversity practices, particularly those that emphasize inclusivity and belonging, are equally significant in fostering psychological safety. Singh et al. (2013) demonstrated that workplace diversity practices, when effectively implemented, foster psychological safety by promoting a sense of employee identification with the organization. These practices help create an environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel respected and valued, which leads to increased comfort in expressing themselves and engaging in open dialogue without fearing discrimination or exclusion.

Research by Carmeli and Zisu (2009) further supports this, showing that supportive organizational practices, such as training programs and inclusive leadership behaviours, can foster psychological safety through social learning processes. When employees perceive their organization as supportive, they are more likely to engage in collaborative behaviour and share knowledge, knowing that their input is valued.

2.4.5 Relational Quality and Networks

High-quality relationships in the workplace play a crucial role in fostering psychological safety by creating an environment of trust, mutual respect, and open communication. According to Kahn (1990), when interpersonal relationships are characterised by support and trust, they allow individuals the freedom to take risks and possibly fail without fearing negative consequences. This idea aligns with research by Carmeli et al. (2009), which identifies five essential components that define high-quality relationships and their role in

promoting psychological safety. These components can be categorised into capacities and experiences, as outlined below:

- **Capacities of High-Quality Relationships**
    - **Emotional carrying capacity**: the ability to express and manage both positive and negative emotions within work relationships.
    - **Tensility**: the flexibility and resilience of relationships in the face of challenges or stress.
    - **Connectivity**: the extent to which individuals feel linked and engaged with their colleagues.
- **Experiences of High-Quality Relationships**
    - **Positive regard**: the perception that colleagues value and respect each other.
    - **Mutuality**: the shared sense of responsibility and interdependence in workplace interactions.

These components create an environment where employees feel safe to take interpersonal risks, contributing to both psychological safety and organizational learning (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Beyond individual relationships, the networks in which these relationships exist also play a significant role in fostering psychological safety. Studies have shown that social support networks at different levels of an organization are crucial in promoting psychological safety. At the individual level, positive co-worker relationships and frequent interpersonal interactions can enhance individual learning and engagement through psychological safety (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2009; May et al., 2004). On the team level, the quality of relationships and the social resources within these networks can positively impact team learning, performance, and innovation (Gu, Wang, & Wang, 2013; Schulte, Cohen, & Klein, 2012). Furthermore, prior interactions and familiarity between team members are important factors driving psychological safety (Roberto, 2002), as are the trust and collaborative thinking nurtured within these networks (Huang & Jiang, 2012). At the organizational level, strong social networks among members have been linked to improved

organizational learning from failure, contributing to a culture that encourages psychological safety and innovation (Carmeli, 2007).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) to examine how psychological safety is shaped by organizational strategies and experienced by individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. A qualitative design is well suited for exploring complex social phenomena where contextual understanding, meaning-making, and lived experience are central (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This approach enables a deep, nuanced examination of identity-based workplace experiences and organizational practices that are not easily captured through quantitative methods (Mason, 2002). It aligns with the research question's focus on uncovering how inclusion efforts are interpreted, felt, and navigated by individuals with overlapping marginalised identities.

The study centres psychological safety as both a structural and relational phenomenon and uses intersectionality as a guiding lens to understand how social identities (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and disability) interact to shape individuals' experiences in diverse organizational settings. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for studies using intersectional and critical perspectives, where researchers seek to challenge dominant narratives and surface silenced voices (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

While the interviews were structured around five pre-identified thematic areas drawn from the literature, the overall research approach was primarily inductive, allowing insights to emerge from the data rather than being strictly shaped by existing frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Patterns, meanings, and themes were developed from participant narratives, with deductive elements used only to support thematic alignment. This flexible, iterative process reflects best practices in exploratory qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

3.2 Sample Selection

A purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to recruit participants with diverse professional roles and varied gender and ethnic backgrounds. Although demographic characteristics were not formally recorded in the dataset, diversity in gender and ethnic background was considered during participant selection to ensure a range of perspectives.

Participants were selected based on their involvement in DEI efforts, their ability to speak to organizational strategies, or their firsthand experience of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace.

The study focused on three participant types[1]:

- DEI professionals (primary sources) working in mid-to-large European companies. These participants are central to the analysis.
- DEI consultants who work externally with organizations, offering triangulation and sector-wide insights.
- Employees from the same organizations, offering lived experience and contrast with managerial perspectives.

Out of a total of 15 interviews, the majority (two-thirds) were conducted with DEI professionals. The remainder were split between consultants and employees. All interviews were conducted online via video call platforms, consensually recorded with audio and subsequently transcribed.

Table 1: Overview of Interviews

Code of Interview	**Date, Time**	**Duration (minutes: seconds)**	**Role as Key Informants**
Interviewee1	19th March 2025, 12:30 pm	53:21	DEI Specialist
Interviewee2	20th March 2025, 11 am	18:18	DEI Specialist
Interviewee3	20th March 2025, 3 pm	49:47	DEI Specialist
Interviewee4	21st March 2025, 12 pm	33:54	DEI Specialist
Interviewee5	21st March 2025, 2:45 pm	39:07	DEI Specialist
Interviewee6	21st March 2025, 4 pm	22:34	DEI Specialist

[1] Although participants were drawn from a range of European countries, the sample was not designed to enable meaningful cross-national comparison. As such, regional influences on DEI are noted but not analysed in depth.

Interviewee7	28th March 2025, 10 am	24:25	DEI Specialist
Interviewee8	31st March 2025, 9 am	38:52	DEI Consultant
Interviewee9	31st March 2025, 6:30 pm	53:25	DEI Consultant
Interviewee10	2nd April 2025, 10 am	38:46	DEI Specialist
Interviewee11	3rd April 2025, 10 am	66:20	DEI Specialist
Interviewee12	3rd April 2025, 11:30 am	25:35	Employee
Interviewee13	11th April 2025, 9 am	27:00	Employee
Interviewee14	11th April 2025, 1 pm	24:05	DEI Specialist
Interviewee15	16th April 2025, 9 am	45:37	DEI Consultant

3.3 Data Collection

The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participant-specific experiences while maintaining thematic consistency.

- Interview guides were tailored for each group (DEI professionals, consultants, employees) but aligned to the study's five key variables (Team Dynamics, Individual Differences and Intersectionality, Leadership, Organizational Practices, and Relational Networks) to ensure consistency and comparability. The interview protocols for each participant group are included in Appendix 1.
- Questions explored areas such as inclusive leadership behaviours, identity-related challenges, perceived safety to speak up, team inclusion, and systemic vs. symbolic DEI practices.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data: Transcripts were reviewed multiple times and annotated.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding was both deductive (from literature and interview protocol) and inductive (emerging from data).
3. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into candidate themes aligned with the five analytical dimensions.
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were refined and checked for coherence and distinction.
5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined with illustrative quotes.
6. Producing the report: Final themes were connected to research questions and theoretical frameworks.

An intersectional coding lens was applied to highlight how participants' experiences were shaped by overlapping social identities and positionalities. Manual coding was supported by a structured coding template derived from the key variables.

Triangulation was used by comparing responses across the three participant groups to confirm, contrast, or deepen findings. Primary emphasis was placed on DEI professionals' insights, with consultant and employee perspectives used to identify gaps or reinforce conclusions.

While the initial coding template was structured around the five analytical dimensions identified in the theoretical framework, the final organization of themes in the findings chapter follows the structure of the interview protocol. This shift was made to preserve the narrative coherence of participants' accounts and to more authentically represent how insights emerged in practice.

3.5 Validity and Rigor

Several measures were taken to ensure rigor and credibility:

- **Triangulation across roles (professionals, consultants, employees)**: For instance, the theme of *conditional psychological safety* was consistently mentioned by DEI professionals and echoed by consultants, who noted that employees often only speak

up when the perceived risk is minimal. This was supported by employee accounts that described needing to assert themselves in order to feel included or feeling safer only when supported by identity-aligned leadership or accessible HR structures.

- **Manual coding supported by a structured coding matrix**: Thematic codes such as *"conditional psychological safety," "executive alignment," "masking to conform," "emotional intelligence in leadership,"* and *"symbolic versus structural DEI practices"* were developed across interviews using a matrix organized by the five analytical dimensions. This matrix helped track which themes appeared across roles and identity contexts, ensuring consistency and depth in the analysis.
- **Reflexive journaling to track evolving interpretations and minimize researcher bias**: Throughout the analysis, I maintained a reflexive journal to capture questions, emerging tensions (e.g., between formal policy and lived experience), and my own developing perspective as someone with academic and practical exposure to workplace inclusion. For example, after one interview where a participant criticized performative leadership behaviours, I reflected on how my prior involvement in university-based DEI initiatives and workplace culture projects might be shaping my expectations about "what good leadership should look like," and how that could influence my coding choices.

The study offers limited generalizability to comparable contexts, specifically mid-to-large European organizations engaged in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. At the same time, it aims for theoretical transferability by providing in-depth, well-contextualized insights into how psychological safety is shaped by intersecting identities in the workplace. The structure and transparency of the methodology allow for future replication in similar organizational contexts, especially those navigating the challenges of diversity and inclusion.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to standard research ethics:

- Participants provided informed consent before the interview.
- Interviews were anonymised, and sensitive data was handled confidentially.
- Data was securely stored, and participation was voluntary.

All participants signed a Participant Consent Form, which explained:

- The purpose of the study
- That participation was entirely voluntary
- That they could withdraw at any time without consequence
- That their identities would remain anonymous
- That interview data would be used solely for academic research purposes

3.7 Methodological Contribution

This research contributes methodologically to the study of inclusion and psychological safety by combining thematic analysis with an intersectional lens. The triangulated, multi-perspective approach enables a rich understanding of how organizational strategies are interpreted and experienced differently across identity lines and roles. This methodological design was essential to surfacing the patterns of fragmentation, alignment, and relational infrastructure that informed the conceptualization of an embedded intersectional approach to inclusion, developed in the discussion chapter. It lays the foundation for theory-building on intersectional psychological safety in organizational settings.

Chapter 4: Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the main findings derived from qualitative interviews conducted with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) professionals, consultants, and employees across various medium to large European organizations. DEI professionals formed the core data source, while consultants and employees provided points of contrast, confirmation, and triangulation.

While the theoretical framework in Chapter 2 outlined five analytical dimensions, the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) followed a different structure to allow for more organic and participant-led discussions. As a result, this chapter presents the findings according to the flow of the interviews, reflecting how participants naturally expressed their experiences and priorities.

The interviews focused primarily on the intersectional experiences of individuals across three core identity dimensions: gender, race/ethnicity, and disability. These dimensions were explicitly included in the interview protocols and guided the thematic coding. However, participants also organically raised topics related to sexual orientation, neurodivergence, and mental health. When relevant, these experiences are included in the findings to reflect the complexity of identities discussed.

In this chapter, findings are presented through the lens of participants' descriptions, supported by multiple illustrative quotes. No interpretation or theoretical analysis is offered at this stage; the goal is to provide a transparent, grounded account of what was shared in the interviews.

4.1 Defining Inclusivity: How Organizations Conceptualize Inclusion

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were invited to reflect on how their organizations formally defined inclusivity, and how these definitions were communicated internally. Most organizations emphasized values such as fairness, authenticity, and belonging in their stated definitions.

Several participants highlighted inclusion as a deliberate act, distinguishing it from diversity, which they saw as a given. As one DEI professional explained, “diversity is a fact [...] but inclusivity is an act” (Interviewee2). Another echoed a popular metaphor: “diversity is being invited to the party, and inclusion is being asked to dance—but that’s a bit overused now—,

so I always say that diversity is about who the individuals in the organization are, and inclusion is making each of those individuals contribute and converge" (Interviewee1).

Other participants emphasized the emotional dimension of inclusion. For Interviewee3, inclusion was best captured by a "sense of belonging," while Interviewee5 explained it as creating conditions where employees "can bring their full, holistic version of themselves to work." Similarly, Interviewee6 emphasized promoting participation and "creating an environment of belonging where everyone can feel they are their authentic self at work."

Several professionals referenced structural fairness alongside emotional safety. As Interviewee10 put it, "inclusivity for us is ensuring that every person has equal opportunity to grow and to advance in the organization [...] and also about feeling safe to be their authentic selves." Others tied inclusion directly to organizational mission, with Interviewee4 describing it as a "conscious and intentional effort" that aligns both internal culture and external service.

4.2 Opening Insights: What Enables Psychological Safety?

Following their reflections on how their organizations define inclusivity, DEI professionals were asked about the key factors they believed were essential for creating a psychologically safe workplace for employees from diverse genders, ethnicities, and disability backgrounds. This question was intentionally framed without direct mention of the five analytical dimensions explored later in the interviews, in order to avoid biasing participant responses.

Despite the open framing, participants organically touched on several of the core areas identified in the theoretical framework. Leadership behaviours were consistently highlighted as central to fostering psychological safety, with one DEI professional emphasizing that leaders must "walk the talk," because otherwise "you can have all the policies in place, and it still won't work" (Interviewee1). Visible representation across organizational levels was similarly described as a psychological anchor, as another participant noted that "when you see people who look like you at the top, it sends a message that you belong here too" (Interviewee4).

In addition, participants emphasized the importance of accessible and well-designed feedback mechanisms in fostering psychological safety. One DEI professional described their organization's dual system: "We have two different ones: one is general feedback that you provide to your manager about your satisfaction or the level of inclusion you feel at work […]

and then we have a formal process where, whenever you feel you've been discriminated against, you can initiate a formal hearing" (Interviewee6). These tools were seen as necessary channels for surfacing concerns and reinforcing employee trust in organizational responsiveness. An employee confirmed the importance of such systems, stating, "I feel safe; I'm not sure if something will happen, but at least I feel safe knowing that if something happens, I can speak with someone, and someone will be on my side" (Interviewee12).

The adaptability of organizational practices to accommodate diverse needs was also mentioned, as a DEI professional explained that "flexibility isn't just about working hours; it's about adapting the environment so everyone can be comfortable and productive" (Interviewee4). Another participant emphasized that "flexible working only creates safety when it is not just permitted but actively modelled by leaders across all levels" (Interviewee2).

These initial reflections offered a broad overview of the elements participants associated with psychological safety. Each of these aspects is explored in greater depth in the sections that follow.

4.3 Organizational Approaches to Inclusion and Psychological Safety

Building on how inclusivity was defined and the foundational conditions identified as enabling psychological safety, participants were asked to describe how their organizations recognized and responded to the experiences of employees with intersecting marginalized identities, especially at the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and disability.

Several participants emphasized that although inclusivity was often defined formally in mission statements or internal policies, its practical meaning varied depending on leadership commitment and organizational culture. One DEI professional noted that "inclusivity is often framed around celebrating differences, but the real test is whether employees feel they can be their full selves at work" (Interviewee5). Another interviewee added that "having a diversity statement doesn't guarantee that inclusion is lived day-to-day" (Interviewee9).

When asked about addressing intersectionality, most participants acknowledged that while their organizations had initiatives aimed at specific identity groups (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ employees, or people with disabilities), few had systematic strategies that accounted for overlapping identities. A consultant remarked that "psychological safety is not the same for a

white woman as for a Black woman" (Interviewee9), underscoring how experiences differ across intersecting identity lines. Another DEI professional explained that "we have LGBTQ+ groups, and women's networks, but it's rare to have programs that actually look at the intersections between these identities" (Interviewee8).

While a few organizations had recently begun conversations around intersectionality, participants generally described it as an emerging topic rather than an embedded element of organizational practice. These observations suggest that, at the organizational level, inclusivity is often treated as a broad ideal rather than operationalized with attention to identity complexity.

4.4 Supportive Organizational Practices

Participants described a range of formal organizational practices aimed at promoting psychological safety and inclusion. These included structured onboarding processes, mental health resources, DEI training, feedback mechanisms, and career development initiatives focused on supporting employees from marginalized backgrounds.

Several participants emphasized that clear reporting channels and support services were important structural foundations, yet insufficient on their own. "Reporting channels don't always generate safety—they're reactive," one DEI professional explained, pointing to the need for more proactive approaches (Interviewee7). Others highlighted that inclusion efforts must move beyond policy to become part of everyday organizational culture.

DEI training and reflection sessions were widely used across organizations. One employee praised mandatory psychological safety workshops, stating, "they helped us stop and reflect [...] they should be mandatory—it helps people respect each other more" (Interviewee13). However, others questioned the long-term effectiveness of trainings when not reinforced by broader behavioural and cultural change.

Career development support was another area participants identified as both crucial and uneven. Some organizations implemented structured and inclusive promotion criteria to mitigate bias and improve fairness in advancement: one DEI professional explained that "we have the processes for the promotion criteria in which we want to be as structured and objective as we can […] there's a real process that is described and detailed" (Interviewee4). Another participant emphasized that succession planning was "definitely based around

inclusion," adding that "it has an inclusive panel, which looks at […] the candidates, the criteria, and the selection processes" (Interviewee7). However, participants also noted that while inclusive frameworks may exist, in practice, informal networks often shaped access to growth opportunities. "Mentoring and sponsorship are talked about, but in practice, access still depends a lot on who you know," one DEI professional observed (Interviewee6).

Concerns about the performative nature of some DEI efforts were common. Participants critiqued one-off training sessions and symbolic practices such as diverse panels as unlikely to produce meaningful change on their own. As one DEI consultant explained, "if you only do [a training] one time, you're not going to see any real change happen from it" (Interviewee15).

Overall, participants agreed that supportive practices can be effective only when consistently implemented, modelled by leadership, and strategically embedded across organizational systems.

While not a focus of the study, a few participants noted that national legal frameworks and cultural norms influenced how DEI practices were implemented and perceived. In countries with restrictive data collection laws or less social openness around identity, inclusion efforts were often shaped by these external factors. Because the sample was not structured to support regional comparison, these reflections are not explored in detail here. However, they highlight the importance of considering external context when designing or evaluating organizational strategies for inclusion.

4.5 Leadership, Team Dynamics, and Individual Differences

Organizations employed several strategies aimed at equipping leaders to foster psychological safety, including inclusive leadership workshops, DEI-infused manager onboarding programs, and integrated training touchpoints that "takes them through kind of the full employee lifecycle", detailing their "role as a manager and as a leader within the organization" (Interviewee5). A DEI professional described a program they implemented, explaining that "it's a series of different workshops and modules that all managers have to go through [...] it gives our leaders just a foundational learning" (Interviewee5). Another interviewee emphasized that inclusivity topics are embedded into various leadership enablement moments, stating: "It's part of our senior leadership program, our new manager training, our

promotion and merit review processes [...] the key to success is that it's embedded throughout" (Interviewee10).

While some organizations focused on developing leaders specifically, others implemented mandatory company-wide trainings on inclusion-related topics such as "microaggressions, unconscious bias, the power of inclusion" (Interviewee6). "We have mandatory training for everyone in the company through e-learnings, and we change the content every few years," explained one DEI professional; "people have to redo those trainings every two years" (Interviewee6). A few organizations also offered voluntary learning resources through self-service platforms covering topics such as disability inclusion and managing diverse teams (Interviewee6, Interviewee10, Interviewee11).

One consultant echoed the importance of equipping managers with the right tools and mindset, describing how their programs taught leaders to "set clear ways of working," "lead by example," and "allow employees the freedom to be themselves and to fail at times," particularly for individuals from minority groups who may feel pressure to conform (Interviewee15).

Participants also described more structured approaches to leadership development. One DEI professional referenced the use of alpha/omega role-play tools as a way to cultivate leadership behaviours that balance authority and empathy, thereby supporting psychological safety in teams (Interviewee1). Despite these efforts, interviewees frequently noted that inclusive leadership behaviours were inconsistently applied across teams and departments. As one DEI professional summarized, "if leadership doesn't walk the talk, you can have all the policies in place, and it still won't work" (Interviewee1). Another participant highlighted a disconnect between technical competence and interpersonal sensitivity: "he's technically good, but emotionally… not so much" (Interviewee13).

Beyond leadership behaviour, team dynamics were also identified as a key factor shaping psychological safety—yet participants emphasized that leadership often sets the tone for these dynamics. Several organizations used pulse surveys and diagnostic tools to assess the inclusiveness of team environments. As one DEI professional explained, "We do employee engagement surveys and pulse surveys, and we specifically ask, like, does your manager support you? Do you feel safe to bring things up? […] If the results in a particular team don't look very good, then we follow up with coaching and interventions" (Interviewee2). Team-

level initiatives like check-ins and guided feedback formats were described as useful for building trust: “we set regular time aside to check in, share reflections, and make sure no one’s voice is being left out,” said Interviewee1.

In some cases, inclusive behaviours were embedded into processes through small but intentional cues. One professional described how their team promoted cognitive diversity by integrating reminders into everyday workflows: “We talk about things like sending agendas in advance for introverts, rotating meeting times across time zones, or just reminding managers during performance reviews that people communicate and learn differently. We try to feed that into processes as just-in-time nudges” (Interviewee5).

However, participants also expressed scepticism toward symbolic or inconsistently implemented team practices. Initiatives such as cross-team presentations or informal team events were sometimes viewed as superficial when not embedded in a deeper culture of respect. As one employee reflected, “someone always shows up, but it doesn’t really change how people relate” (Interviewee3). In contrast, teams that fostered openness and mutual support were seen as more conducive to psychological safety. “My team is great: we talk, share feelings, and I feel secure to speak freely” (Interviewee13).

A few participants also reflected on moments when they felt pressure to downplay aspects of their identity in order to fit in. One DEI professional explained, “passing is when you make yourself a little uncomfortable, so others don’t feel uncomfortable” (Interviewee3). An employee shared, “if I wasn’t as outspoken, I would feel excluded all the time. Just because we’re a minority, it feels like we don’t matter” (Interviewee12).

4.6 Relational Networks and Peer Support

Organizations adopted several strategies aimed at strengthening relational networks and fostering peer support as a foundation for psychological safety. These included the creation and support of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), peer mentorship programs, and storytelling initiatives. Such initiatives were often designed to provide employees—especially those from underrepresented or marginalized groups—with spaces for authentic connection and collective voice.

ERGs were frequently cited as valuable platforms for both community-building and organizational feedback. One DEI professional explained that “our ERGs serve as an

important feedback mechanism, allowing people who don't feel comfortable raising concerns individually to channel them through community leads who can speak on their behalf" (Interviewee10). Another participant emphasized their emotional impact, noting, "just having this space where people can talk to others who understand their experiences... can definitely help to foster psychological safety" (Interviewee15).

Some participants also referred to peer mentorship programs and storytelling initiatives as complementary strategies to support psychological safety, particularly for employees from marginalized backgrounds. One DEI professional noted that mentoring was particularly well received by employees, explaining that "one of the key feedback points was how much they valued mentoring — it gave them a strong sense of psychological safety" (Interviewee1). A DEI consultant observed that "mentorship opportunities […] encourage people from marginalized positions to have a voice and to be quite seen and visible within organizations. […] Things that give minority voices a platform also can help to improve psychological safety overall" (Interviewee15). Another DEI professional added that, "mentoring and sponsorship are talked about, but in practice, access still depends a lot on who you know," underscoring the need to move beyond symbolic initiatives toward more structured and inclusive mentoring systems (Interviewee6).

Storytelling—often embedded within ERG events or inclusion campaigns—was also mentioned as a valuable practice for fostering empathy and building cross-cultural understanding. One DEI leader explained that some employee resource groups intentionally focused on sensitive but often overlooked themes like grief, illness, and menopause, offering safe spaces for people to share personal experiences and feel heard (Interviewee5). Another emphasized that "sometimes it is around being informed, and that understanding is really key," particularly when colleagues or managers lack lived experience with issues such as racism, disability, or women's health (Interviewee7). These narratives helped bridge empathy gaps and contributed to more inclusive, psychologically safe environments.

Participants also pointed to organizational culture and structure as influential in shaping relational quality. Flat hierarchies and open communication channels were associated with greater comfort in expressing concerns and ideas. "Everyone is on the same level here—we don't have vertical hierarchy," one employee shared (Interviewee12). Another participant noted the importance of feeling heard in decision-making spaces: "In leadership meetings, I feel heard; I have a voice, and no one cuts me off" (Interviewee13).

However, concerns were raised about the sustainability and fairness of employee-driven inclusion efforts. Several interviewees warned that relying too heavily on volunteer-led structures, such as ERGs and informal mentoring, risked overburdening marginalized employees. “We rely too much on volunteers; the structure needs to support these efforts, not just applaud them” (Interviewee3), one DEI professional cautioned.

Participants also reflected on the top-down nature of some inclusion initiatives, which could feel imposed rather than empowering. As one DEI professional put it, “if everything comes from HR, it can feel oppressive. People need to feel like they can create and be supported” (Interviewee11). These reflections suggest that relational trust and peer support thrive not only through formal structures, but also when organizations enable bottom-up participation and recognize the emotional labour involved. At the same time, relational proximity to trusted HR personnel was also appreciated; one employee noted, “The proximity of the HR, it helps” (Interviewee13), pointing to the value of accessible and supportive internal actors in fostering everyday safety.

4.7 Final Reflections from Participants

At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were invited to share any final reflections or suggestions on how organizations could strengthen psychological safety and inclusion, particularly for employees with intersecting marginalized identities.

Many participants emphasized the need for greater accountability mechanisms to ensure that DEI efforts moved beyond symbolic actions and were embedded into organizational structures and leadership behaviours. As previously quoted, Interviewee10 claimed “there needs to be metrics, accountability. DEI should be treated like any other business objective” (Interviewee10). The importance of linking DEI outcomes to leadership evaluations and organizational KPIs was stressed as a way to sustain long-term cultural change.

Participants also underscored the importance of strategic integration over isolated efforts. “The most important thing is just making sure that DEI values are implemented throughout the structures of the organization,” explained one DEI consultant. “If it’s more strategic or more one-off — I think that’s the bigger distinction” (Interviewee15). Several participants voiced frustration with short-term awareness initiatives that lacked follow-through or failed to address systemic challenges. Others also reiterated the issue of emotional labour, emphasizing that the burden of inclusion work often fell on underrepresented employees without adequate

recognition or compensation. As one DEI professional noted, “the people doing the most for culture are the most stretched—and they don’t get paid for it” (Interviewee3).

Others offered advice to fellow DEI professionals. One consultant stressed the importance of securing leadership buy-in early on: “If you’re always having to convince the senior leaders the value of your role and of your job, it’s going to be difficult to get anything done. But if they’re already on board, you can actually focus on implementation” (Interviewee15). Another interviewee encouraged peers to find community support: “It’s a very long and overwhelming job […] but the community will always share stories and help you find a way to navigate this” (Interviewee9). A third highlighted the value of contextual awareness: “Don’t just stay inside: take time to observe what role your company plays in its community and surroundings and think about what it can contribute or improve” (Interviewee8).

Finally, participants reiterated the importance of embracing identity complexity. As one consultant reflected, “Organizations need to stop thinking of people as boxes to be checked. Intersectionality means people's experiences are complex, and strategies need to reflect that” (Interviewee9).

4.8 Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the organizational strategies participants identified as fostering psychological safety for employees with intersecting marginalized identities. Participants highlighted that while most organizations had formal DEI structures—such as inclusive leadership training, feedback mechanisms, and equitable promotion processes—their effectiveness depended on cultural alignment, leadership modelling, and consistent implementation.

Leadership development and accountability were widely seen as essential. Many organizations offered manager-specific inclusion trainings and embedded DEI into leadership programs. However, participants emphasized that upper management support was critical: without leadership buy-in, DEI professionals faced resistance or were left without the authority or resources to drive meaningful change.

Team-level practices that promoted open communication and trust were described as essential complements to organizational structures—and frequently shaped by leadership behaviours. Organizations used check-ins and inclusive design practices, like rotating meeting times or

adapting for neurodiverse communication needs, to support collaborative team cultures. These relational dynamics were often supported by small, intentional reminders to managers rather than formal mandates. ERGs, peer mentorship, and storytelling initiatives also helped build psychological safety by creating space for connection and visibility, though participants raised concerns about over-relying on volunteers to sustain these efforts.

Despite growing awareness of identity complexity, most organizations continued to address diversity through siloed initiatives. Intersectionality was rarely embedded into strategy, limiting the ability to address overlapping forms of marginalization. A few participants also noted that national legal frameworks and cultural attitudes shaped how inclusion was approached in practice, although these contextual influences were not explored in depth in this study.

Together, these findings show that advancing psychological safety for individuals with intersecting identities requires more than isolated practices: it depends on strategic coherence across culture, leadership, and structure.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Contributions

5.1 Revisiting the Research Gap

As outlined in the previous chapter, this study set out to explore how organizations foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities—and how these efforts are experienced from the perspective of DEI professionals. Psychological safety, although well-established in organizational studies, is often treated as a universal condition shaped by leadership or communication norms, with little attention to identity-based differences.

In particular, the experiences of individuals with intersecting marginalized identities remain underexplored. Although intersectionality is increasingly acknowledged in theory, it is rarely embedded in organizational practice or psychological safety frameworks. This thesis addresses that critical gap by applying an intersectional lens to examine how safety is influenced by leadership behaviour, relational structures, and system-level design, particularly in organizations striving to move beyond symbolic DEI efforts.

5.2 Interpreting the Findings: Patterns and Thematic Integration

Chapter 4 presented findings from interviews with DEI professionals, consultants, and employees, showing how psychological safety is cultivated or undermined in organizations. As the analysis progressed, a set of interlocking patterns emerged—revealing not isolated variables but mutually reinforcing conditions that shape whether inclusion efforts succeed or remain symbolic.

Rather than psychological safety being treated as a universal experience, the findings demonstrated that safety is always contingent; constructed through relationships, leadership behaviours, structural signals, and cultural alignment. Participants highlighted that no single program or policy was sufficient on its own; instead, safety and inclusion emerged when multiple elements—such as leadership, peer support, training, and fair processes—worked together with clarity and intention.

These patterns converged around four interdependent themes:

Firstly, leadership modelling and strategic commitment emerged as foundational across interviews. Participants described how psychologically safe environments depended not just on declared values but on the visible behaviours of senior leaders and managers. Findings

highlighted that where leadership “walked the talk”, through consistent communication, inclusive practices, and responsiveness, employees reported greater trust and openness.

This finding aligns with data from the EY European DEI Index (2024), which shows that organizations with higher levels of leadership diversity report stronger DEI outcomes. For instance, 87% of DEI Leaders report diversity in leadership, and over half of their managers come from underrepresented groups, indicating that inclusive leadership at the top fosters broader systemic progress.

Secondly, integration of DEI into organizational systems was repeatedly emphasized by DEI professionals who described how performance evaluations, promotion pathways, and onboarding procedures could either reinforce or undermine psychological safety. Participants stressed that inclusion could not be sustained through isolated efforts; it had to be embedded in routine structures and processes.

This aligns with findings from the EY European DEI Index (2023), which show that DEI Leaders are significantly more likely to embed equitable practices into hiring, evaluation, and advancement. For instance, only 23% of employees at DEI-leading organizations report a lack of transparency around promotions, compared to 44% at other firms. Additionally, these organizations are more likely to diversify hiring teams, train hiring managers in inclusion, and implement fairer recruitment tools such as blind CVs and skills-based assessments (EY, 2024).

Thirdly, relational trust and participatory infrastructures—such as mentoring, employee networks, and feedback channels—were described as essential mechanisms for enabling voice and connection. Participants noted that symbolic gestures fell short when these relational structures were unsupported or inconsistently applied.

The EY Index similarly highlights that DEI Leaders actively support relational structures: 54% rate their engagement with employee networks as “good” or “great,” compared to just 25% at other organizations. Importantly, 55% of DEI Leaders say they implement workplace change based on employee feedback, suggesting that relational trust must be paired with visible responsiveness (EY, 2024).

Fourthly, recognition of identity complexity was a critical concern, particularly when DEI initiatives addressed race, gender, or disability in isolation. As highlighted in Chapter 4,

several participants noted that programs felt performative or exclusionary when they failed to acknowledge the lived realities of those with intersecting identities.

These patterns reinforce the insight that psychological safety is not a static or universally accessible condition, but a system-dependent phenomenon. Its realization depends not only on interpersonal relationships, but on the cultural, procedural, and symbolic infrastructure of the organization. Fragmented or symbolic initiatives may signal good intentions but fail to alter lived experience. In contrast, consistent, cross-cutting efforts that align strategy, structure, and culture create the foundation for inclusion that is both authentic and sustainable.

This chapter now turns to the theoretical implications of these findings, offering three key contributions: (1) to psychological safety theory, (2) to intersectionality in organizational research, and (3) to the literature on DEI strategy and implementation. The chapter then introduces and develops the concept of embedded intersectional strategy, which emerges from the synthesis of interview data, secondary sources, and existing literature.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

5.3.1 Contribution to Psychological Safety Theory

Existing literature on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017) often treats it as a universal construct—an outcome shaped primarily by interpersonal dynamics such as trust, team cohesion, and leader inclusivity. While later work has begun to incorporate aspects of identity (e.g., Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), most studies stop short of exploring how intersecting systems of privilege and marginalization mediate safety perceptions.

This study extends psychological safety theory by foregrounding identity as a structural variable. The findings show that psychological safety is contingent and stratified: individuals with overlapping marginalized identities often experience “conditional safety”, where speaking up or showing vulnerability depends on the perceived risk of backlash, exposure, or misunderstanding. These risks are often invisible to leadership and unaccounted for in generic safety surveys or inclusion metrics.

Moreover, the data suggest that psychological safety cannot be sustained through team-level efforts alone. It is shaped by organization-wide conditions such as leadership consistency, executive-level representation, and the structural embedding of inclusive practices. This supports emerging calls (Edmondson, 2018) to expand psychological safety theory to account for organizational design, not just interpersonal climate.

5.3.2 Contribution to Intersectionality in Organizational Research

Intersectionality has gained traction in DEI discourse, but its operationalization within organizations remains limited (Holvino, 2010). Most organizational practices focus on discrete identity categories (e.g., gender, disability, race) rather than the simultaneity of identities. This study contributes to the literature by offering empirical evidence of how the failure to embed intersectionality into strategic design creates fragmented inclusion and perpetuates hidden exclusions.

Participants noted that identity-specific initiatives were often siloed and uncoordinated. These patterns suggest that while intersectionality may be acknowledged rhetorically, it is seldom embedded into the design and implementation of organizational DEI strategies. The study thus reinforces calls by scholars like Holvino (2010) and Crenshaw (1991) for a shift from representational inclusion to systemic inclusion, where overlapping identities inform program design, evaluation, and implementation.

5.3.3 Contribution to DEI Strategy and Implementation

Much of the DEI literature focuses on best practices or normative goals (Köllen, 2021), but less attention is paid to the strategic alignment and systemic integration of DEI principles. This study offers a critical contribution by emphasizing that DEI must function not as a parallel system, but as a core element of organizational infrastructure.

The concept of embedded intersectional strategy emerges here as a practical and theoretical response to this gap. Across interviews, it became clear that fragmented, one-off, or symbolic efforts, such as standalone trainings or awareness campaigns, were insufficient for long-term cultural transformation. Where organizations succeeded in fostering psychological safety, they did so through strategic alignment: inclusive leadership development, consistent ERG support, structural accountability mechanisms, and intentional representation at decision-making levels.

In short, this study contributes to DEI literature by re-centring strategy and structure. It argues that inclusion initiatives succeed through coherence, accountability, and systemic embedding—not just content.

5.4 The Embedded Intersectional Approach to Inclusion

The embedded intersectional approach to inclusion refers to an organization-wide shift that treats inclusion not as a standalone set of programs, but as a structural and strategic

orientation. It reframes inclusion as an operational principle—guiding how systems, practices, and cultural norms are designed and delivered.

The findings of this study illustrate that when intersectionality is addressed only rhetorically or through siloed programs, it fails to shift the conditions that produce exclusion. Participants emphasized that individuals with intersecting marginalized identities often encounter systemic barriers that are not addressed by single-axis initiatives. For example, while organizations may implement programs for women or for disabled employees, few assess how race, disability, gender, and class interact in shaping workplace experience.

Interviewees described key areas where intersectionality could begin to be structurally embedded: inclusive leadership development that incorporates identity literacy; feedback mechanisms designed for psychological safety and diverse communication needs; promotion and performance systems that are transparent and equity-oriented; and relational infrastructures like ERGs and mentoring programs that are formally resourced and sustained over time. Critically, participants emphasized that these efforts require executive-level advocacy and accountability to gain traction.

Embedding intersectionality, then, does not require multiplying initiative, it requires rethinking how inclusion is built into the architecture of the organization. It is about designing systems that anticipate complexity rather than simplifying identity. As such, the embedded intersectional approach provides a roadmap for shifting from symbolic inclusion to sustained structural transformation.

This approach also demands a cultural shift: from celebrating diversity performatively to operationalizing inclusion systemically. To translate the embedded intersectional approach into practice, organizations must align strategy, operations, and culture through the following five key components:

- **Strategic alignment from top leadership**: DEI must be championed by executives and board members, with clear accountability structures in place. This includes tying inclusive outcomes to KPIs, ensuring representation at decision-making levels, and securing budget and visibility for DEI work. This echoes Lesson 4 from the EY Index (2024), which found that DEI Leaders are more likely to involve their boards in DEI strategy and to ensure that diversity leaders report directly to top governance structures. This level of alignment helps secure budget, accountability, and long-term traction for DEI goals.

- **Consistent relational infrastructures**: Programs like ERGs, mentoring, and safety check-ins should be recognized as core to inclusion and systematically supported. This includes formal recognition of emotional labour, consistent funding, and integration into performance and retention strategies. The EY report supports this emphasis, showing that organizations which support employee networks and mentorship programs with executive sponsorship and resources see better inclusion outcomes. Such infrastructures were not just symbolic; they were tied to performance and retention strategies (EY, 2024).
- **Identity-conscious and participatory feedback systems**: Feedback channels should be adapted to reflect the safety needs of marginalized groups. This includes anonymous platforms, feedback disaggregated by identity (where legal), and DEI-led facilitation of group reflections. Participation in shaping the feedback process itself should also be encouraged. This aligns with Lesson 7 of the EY Index (2024), which found that top-performing organizations are twice as likely to engage with diverse employee networks and act on their feedback. Listening and responding to feedback, especially from underrepresented voices, is essential to ensuring that inclusion efforts reflect lived realities.
- **Integrated leadership development**: Inclusive leadership training should be embedded across the leadership pipeline—from onboarding to promotion. Programs must focus not only on generic inclusive behaviours, but also on identity literacy, emotional intelligence, and scenario-based learning related to complex intersectional challenges.
- **Bias-mitigating practices throughout the employee lifecycle**: DEI efforts should go beyond hiring practices and address advancement, development, performance reviews, and exit processes. Practices such as structured promotion criteria, inclusive succession planning, and audit mechanisms help reduce bias at every stage.

Secondary data sources confirm this strategic imperative. The DEI Toolkit, for instance, notes that organizations with the most inclusive outcomes do not rely solely on stand-alone DEI departments but embed responsibility across business units. The EY European DEI Index similarly shows that organizations with high intersectional engagement scores demonstrate both structural commitment and representational balance across decision-making tiers.

This embedded approach serves both as a diagnostic lens, revealing when and where inclusion efforts fall short, and a roadmap for change. Organizations that embed intersectionality not only signal value alignment but also create the material and relational conditions that make psychological safety a reality for all, not just for those who already feel safe.

5.5 Practical and Managerial Implications

The findings of this study suggest several actionable implications for managers, DEI practitioners, and organizational leaders:

1. **Develop Inclusive Leadership with Identity Literacy**: Managers should receive training that goes beyond generic inclusive behaviours to include identity-specific awareness. This includes how race, gender, disability, and their intersections affect team dynamics, performance evaluations, and access to opportunities.
2. **Embed DEI Across Functions**: Rather than isolating DEI in HR or standalone teams, organizations should integrate DEI goals into leadership pipelines, feedback systems, and business unit strategies. The EY report demonstrates that DEI Leaders allocate 25% more resources than others, investing strategically across functions rather than concentrating efforts in standalone DEI departments. This integrated approach drives higher transparency, inclusivity, and representation throughout the organization (EY, 2024).
3. **Support Relational Infrastructure**: ERGs, peer mentoring, and storytelling forums should be resourced, recognized, and systematically evaluated as core to the organization's health.
4. **Design Feedback Systems for Safety**: Feedback mechanisms should allow for anonymity, identity-specific insights, and participatory review to reflect the lived experiences of marginalized employees. According to the EY Index, employees in DEI-leading organizations report higher confidence in raising concerns and see greater responsiveness from leadership. Over two-thirds of employees (68%) at these firms "feel empowered to call out non-inclusive behaviour", compared to just 43% in other organizations (EY, 2024).
5. **Secure Executive Alignment**: DEI must be championed at the highest levels. Diverse boards and executive accountability are key to resource allocation and strategic consistency.

6. **Localize Global Standards**: Multinational organizations should resist defaulting to minimal compliance. Instead, they should leverage EU-wide frameworks to push for progressive standards even in restrictive national contexts.

5.6 Broader Impact on the Field

This research contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges universalist assumptions in organizational studies. By reconceptualizing psychological safety as context-dependent and identity-sensitive, it opens avenues for future work to examine safety and inclusion through the lens of power, difference, and systemic design. The embedded intersectional approach to inclusion offers both a vocabulary and a roadmap for moving beyond diversity as representation toward inclusion as transformation. It encourages scholars to deepen engagement with lived experience, while urging practitioners to design with complexity, not simplification, in mind.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited in several ways. First, its qualitative design, while rich in depth, limits generalizability. The sample was confined to mid-to-large European organizations, omitting smaller enterprises and non-European contexts where different norms and legal constraints may apply.

Additionally, the study focused exclusively on organizations that already demonstrate a formal commitment to DEI—those with full-time DEI professionals or dedicated teams. While this was intentional, as these participants were best positioned to discuss strategy and systemic design, it means that the findings are not representative of all medium-to-large companies in Europe. Many organizations have yet to institutionalize DEI work to this extent, and the conditions that enable or hinder psychological safety in less structured environments remain an important area for further inquiry.

Second, while consultants and employees offered supplementary views, the primary dataset focused on DEI professionals, which may skew findings toward strategic narratives rather than grassroots experience.

Third, legal constraints on collecting race and disability data in certain European countries limited identity-specific comparison. This legal limitation itself is a finding, but also a methodological constraint.

Future research should:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess whether embedded intersectional strategies yield sustained inclusion outcomes
- Explore applications of this approach across regions and industries
- Develop intersectional safety scales and mixed methods designs to validate and quantify the patterns found here

Ultimately, this work lays the foundation for a broader rethinking of how organizations define and deliver inclusion—one grounded in identity complexity, strategic coherence, and long-term accountability.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore what organizational strategies effectively foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, and how such strategies are implemented and experienced within medium-to-large organizations across Europe. Drawing on the perspectives of DEI professionals, complemented by consultants and employees, the study examined how inclusion and safety are shaped by leadership, structure, culture, and identity complexity.

Key findings revealed that psychological safety is not a static or universally accessible outcome, but one that depends heavily on context and is shaped by underlying power dynamics. Participants emphasized that fragmented or symbolic DEI efforts often fell short of producing genuine inclusion, particularly for employees situated at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. What emerged was the importance of aligning leadership, relationships, and systems.

By examining these dynamics through an intersectional lens, this study contributes in three key ways. First, it reconceptualizes psychological safety as an identity-contingent outcome—shaped by both formal structures and informal norms—thus extending psychological safety theory beyond its traditional interpersonal framing. Second, it deepens the literature on intersectionality in organizational research by demonstrating how the neglect of identity complexity in DEI practice can inadvertently reproduce exclusion. Third, it contributes to DEI strategy literature by proposing a shift from programmatic inclusion to structural integration. These insights culminate in an embedded intersectional approach to inclusion: a system-wide model that centres identity complexity in leadership, policy, feedback, and culture.

From a managerial perspective, these findings offer actionable recommendations for organizations seeking to foster psychological safety and inclusion in practice. Implementing these strategies may pose challenges, particularly in rigid, under-resourced, or compliance-driven environments, but these can be mitigated by aligning leadership incentives, investing in identity literacy, and ensuring shared accountability across functions. The most critical practical implications include:

- **Develop Inclusive Leadership with Identity Literacy**: Managers should be trained not only in generic inclusive behaviours, but also in how race, gender, disability, and their intersections influence team dynamics and employee wellbeing. These trainings

should be embedded across the entire leadership lifecycle: onboarding, promotion, and evaluation.

- **Embed DEI Across Organizational Functions**: Rather than isolating DEI efforts in HR, organizations must integrate inclusion principles into core systems such as performance reviews, promotions, onboarding, and strategic planning. This ensures that inclusion becomes a shared responsibility supported by structural processes.
- **Support Relational Infrastructure**: Initiatives like employee resource groups, peer mentoring, and storytelling forums should be formally resourced and consistently supported. These platforms foster belonging, provide visibility to underrepresented voices, and serve as informal feedback channels that complement formal structures.
- **Design Feedback Systems for Safety**: Feedback mechanisms should be anonymous, identity-responsive, and participatory. Practices such as pulse surveys and ERG-mediated reporting, already used by several organizations in this study, can help ensure that feedback reflects the lived realities of marginalized employees and leads to meaningful change.
- **Secure Executive Alignment**: Inclusion must be championed by senior leaders and board members. Strategic integration, accountability, and resource allocation depend on leadership commitment at the highest levels. Without visible support from the top, DEI efforts risk remaining symbolic and disconnected from core organizational priorities.

While these strategies are ambitious, they are not unattainable. Organizations can begin with pilot initiatives, employee co-design, and adaptive accountability mechanisms. Success requires not only good intentions but deliberate design and a willingness to challenge the status quo.

This study has limitations that shape how its findings should be interpreted. First, its qualitative design, while rich in detail, limits generalizability. The research focused on mid-to-large organizations in Europe, excluding smaller enterprises and non-European contexts where DEI practices and legal constraints may differ. Second, the emphasis on DEI professionals as primary participants privileges strategic perspectives and may underrepresent frontline lived experience. Moreover, all organizations included in the study had formal DEI functions or full-time DEI professionals, which is not yet the norm across European

companies. As such, the findings may not reflect the conditions of organizations without dedicated DEI structures. Third, legal restrictions in data collection limited the ability to assess and compare race and disability across countries—both a constraint and a finding in itself.

Future research can address these limitations by expanding the scope across geographies, integrating employee-centred methods, and developing quantitative measures of identity-responsive psychological safety. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in assessing whether embedded intersectional approaches result in durable inclusion outcomes over time.

Ultimately, this thesis invites a shift in how organizations understand and operationalize inclusion. Psychological safety cannot be assumed, nor achieved through isolated gestures. It must be structurally embedded, culturally reinforced, and designed with complexity in mind. When organizations embed intersectionality into the fabric of their systems, they don't just foster inclusion; **they model the kind of structural justice that today's workplaces, and societies, urgently require**.

Appendix 1: Interview Protocols

A.1 DEI Professionals

Purpose

This protocol is designed for interviews with in-house DEI professionals working in mid-to-large organizations across Europe. As the primary data source for this study, these interviews aim to explore how organizational strategies, particularly those related to DEI, leadership, and workplace culture, foster psychological safety for employees with intersecting marginalised identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and disability). These conversations provide insight into how organizations design, implement, and evaluate inclusion initiatives, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in embedding psychological safety across diverse teams.

Interview Structure

- Introduction (5 minutes)
    - Explain the interview's purpose and confidentiality.
- Core Interview (45 minutes)
    - Questions based on the 5 key variables.
    - Explore each variable with open-ended questions to allow for rich, detailed responses.
- Closing (5 minutes)
    - Thank the participant for their time and insights.
    - Offer space for additional reflections or observations.

Introduction

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As part of my master's thesis, I'm exploring how organizations foster psychological safety for employees with intersecting marginalised identities—particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, and disability.

You've been invited to participate because of your role as a DEI professional in a mid-to-large organization, and your perspective will form the core foundation of this research. Through this interview, I hope to understand how DEI strategies are being implemented on the ground, how they intersect with leadership and team dynamics, and how they are experienced across different identity groups.

Your responses will be treated confidentially and anonymised for academic use only. If you're comfortable proceeding, we'll begin with a few questions about your organization and move into specific practices and experiences. Sound good?

Core Questions by Theme

- **Introductory questions/Context**
    - How does your organization define inclusivity, and which are the goals you strive for?
    - In your experience, what are the key factors in ensuring a psychologically safe workplace for all employees, particularly for those from diverse genders, ethnicities, and ability/disability backgrounds?
    - How does your organization recognize and respond to the unique challenges faced by employees with multiple marginalised identities (e.g., a disabled woman of colour)? Are there any initiatives designed to address these overlapping experiences?
- **Supportive Organizational Practices**
    - How does your organization promote psychological safety through formal policies or programs?
        - For example, are there zero-tolerance policies, clear reporting channels, inclusion audits, accessibility initiatives, or support structures for employees who experience discrimination?
    - In contexts where collecting data on race or disability is limited, how does your organization still aim to ensure equity and psychological safety for those groups? What alternative strategies or signals do you use?
    - How does your organization support continuous learning on inclusivity?
        - Does the company implement regular DEI training, bias awareness programs, or internal communication campaigns? Are these mandatory or voluntary?
    - How does your organization ensure that employees, especially those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly bearing in mind gender, ethnicity and disability, feel supported in their professional growth?
        - Are there sponsorship programs, career development initiatives, or inclusive promotion criteria?

- In your view, how can organizations move beyond performative DEI (e.g., diverse panels, one-off trainings) to meaningfully embed psychological safety for marginalised groups?

- **Leadership, Team Dynamics and Individual differences**
  - How are leaders trained or expected to play a role in fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, admitting mistakes, and challenging the status quo?
    - Research highlights various leadership strategies, psychological safety training, mentorship programs, bias-busting initiatives, employee resource groups (ERGs), inclusive onboarding, and structured feedback mechanisms. Which of these (or others) are implemented in your organization, and how effective have they been?
  - How does your organization ensure that diverse voices are actively included in decision-making processes and actively support career growth for individuals from underrepresented groups?
    - Are there formal structures to ensure employees from marginalised groups are heard (e.g., facilitators, ERGs, inclusion policies, anonymous feedback channels)?
  - What mechanisms, if any, are in place to ensure that managers are actively fostering psychological safety in diverse teams? Are there feedback loops or accountability structures tied to inclusion outcomes?
  - How does your organization approach cognitive diversity within teams? Are there strategies to ensure individuals with different thinking styles collaborate effectively?
  - When conflicts or mistakes arise within teams, how are they typically handled?
    - Are there processes in place to address power dynamics that may affect employees differently based on gender, ethnicity, or disability status?
- **Relational Quality & Networks**
  - How does your organization foster trust and collaboration among employees across different teams and social identity groups?
    - Are there structured networking opportunities, mentorship programs, or affinity groups to strengthen interdepartmental relationships?

    - What initiatives are in place to ensure employees have equal access to influential workplace networks considering the power dynamics that may disproportionately affect marginalised employees?
        - Are there specific actions taken to mitigate informal biases in mentorship, promotions, or leadership visibility?
    - How does your organization create psychologically safe environments for employees with non-visible or stigmatised identities, such as neurodivergent individuals or those with mental health conditions?
- **Global/European Context (if applicable)**
    - How does your organization balance global DEI strategies with regional adaptations, especially in relation to psychological safety and intersectionality?
- **Final thoughts**
    - If you could improve one aspect of your organization's inclusivity efforts, what would it be and why?
    - Is there anything else you believe is important to discuss regarding psychological safety and inclusion that we haven't covered, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, or disability?

Closing

Thank you so much for your time and insights — I truly appreciate your contribution to this research. This has been a very valuable conversation.

If you have any follow-up questions or additional reflections, please don't hesitate to reach out via email. I'll also be happy to share the final thesis with you once it's completed.

A.2 DEI Consultants

Purpose

This protocol is designed for interviews with DEI consultants whose insights serve to validate, contrast, or deepen findings gathered from internal HR/DEI professionals. These interviews aim to capture an external, cross-organizational perspective on how companies foster psychological safety and address intersectionality, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, and disability. The consultant's input is used as a supplementary lens rather than a primary data source.

Interview Structure

- Introduction (5 minutes)
    - Confirm consent and confidentiality.
    - Explain the purpose and scope of the interview.
    - Emphasize the consultant's role as an external observer.
- Core Interview (35 minutes)
    - Organised by five guiding themes.
- Closing (5 minutes)
    - Thank the consultant for their time.
    - Offer space for additional reflections or observations.

Introduction

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As part of my master's thesis, I'm exploring how organizations foster psychological safety for individuals with intersecting identities, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Most of my research is based on interviews with in-house DEI professionals in mid-to-large organizations across Europe. Your perspective as a DEI consultant will help me validate, contrast, or deepen those internal insights by drawing on your experience across multiple organizations.

The goal of this conversation is not to evaluate your consulting practice, but to better understand the broader patterns you've observed around DEI strategy, inclusion challenges, and organizational readiness to support psychological safety, especially for employees with overlapping marginalised identities.

All your answers will be treated confidentially and anonymised for academic use only. Does that sound good to you?

Core Questions by Theme

1. **Organizational Practices Observed**
    - **a.** Based on your consulting experience, what kinds of DEI strategies have you seen organizations implement to foster psychological safety?
    - **b.** Which strategies have been most effective, and which have fallen short?
    - **c.** Are there notable differences across industries or organization sizes?
2. **Intersectionality in Action (or Inaction)**
    - **a.** How do the companies you work with address intersectionality in their DEI practices?
    - **b.** Are there common blind spots or challenges when it comes to supporting employees with multiple marginalised identities?
    - **c.** Have you seen any promising practices for embedding intersectionality into organizational culture or processes?
3. **Challenges Across Organizations**
    - **a.** What are the most common barriers organizations face in fostering psychological safety for marginalised employees?
    - **b.** Do you notice recurring difficulties in addressing race, disability, or gender inclusion in a meaningful and sustained way?
    - **c.** What are the cultural, legal, or structural limits that companies struggle to navigate?
4. **Consultant Strategies and Interventions**
    - **a.** How do you assess or evaluate an organization's psychological safety climate?
    - **b.** What types of interventions (e.g., workshops, audits, leadership coaching) do you recommend most often, and why?
    - **c.** Have you ever had to shift an organization's focus from performative to transformative inclusion? What worked?
5. **Vision and Reflections**
    - **a.** What does a psychologically safe and truly inclusive organization look like to you?
    - **b.** If you could offer one piece of advice to DEI professionals working in-house, what would it be?

Closing

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful reflections. Your external perspective is incredibly helpful in complementing the insights gathered from internal DEI professionals.

If anything else comes to mind after this conversation, feel free to contact me via email. I’d be happy to share the final thesis with you when it's ready.

A.3 Employees

Purpose

This interview protocol is designed for employees with intersecting marginalised identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability) to share their lived experiences in the workplace. The aim is to explore how psychologically safe they feel, how inclusive and supportive their organizations are, and how DEI strategies affect their day-to-day experiences. These interviews serve to triangulate and enrich findings gathered from DEI professionals and consultants by providing the perspective of those directly impacted by inclusion efforts.

Interview Structure

- Introduction (5 minutes)
    - Explain the purpose of the study and confidentiality.
    - Emphasize that the interview is voluntary, and the participant can skip any question or stop at any time.
- Core Interview (25 minutes)
    - Organised by five guiding themes. Using open-ended questions to invite personal storytelling and reflections.
- Closing (5 minutes)
    - Thank the participant.
    - Ask if they would like to share anything else.

Introduction

Thank you so much for being here and for agreeing to participate in this interview. As part of my master's thesis, I'm studying how organizations support psychological safety for employees with intersecting identities — for example, across gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Most of my interviews are with internal DEI professionals working in mid-to-large organizations, and your perspective as an employee will help me understand how those DEI efforts are actually experienced on the ground.

This conversation is completely confidential and voluntary — you're free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. My goal is to better understand your experiences, challenges, and reflections on inclusion and safety at work. Does that sound okay to you?

Core Questions by Theme

1. **General Experience and Identity Context**
    a. Can you describe what it's like to work at your current organization, especially in terms of how you feel day to day in your team or department?
    b. What aspects of your identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.) do you think have shaped your experience at work?
    c. Do you feel these aspects are seen and understood in your workplace?
2. **Psychological Safety**
    a. Do you feel safe to express your ideas, concerns, or feedback at work without fear of negative consequences?
    b. Have there been moments when you held back from speaking up? What made you hesitate?
    c. Do you feel your identity influences how psychologically safe you feel in your team or workplace?
3. **Organizational Inclusion and Support**
    a. How inclusive would you say your organization is?
    b. Are there any specific practices, policies, or people that have made you feel included or excluded?
    c. Are you aware of any DEI initiatives at your company? Have they had an impact on you personally?
4. **Intersecting Identity Challenges**
    a. In what ways, if any, do you feel that having more than one marginalised identity (e.g., being both a woman and a person of colour, or disabled and LGBTQ+) has shaped your workplace experience differently from others?
    b. Have you ever experienced or witnessed microaggressions, bias, or exclusion related to your identity?
    c. Are there spaces or conversations where you feel especially welcomed—or excluded?
5. **What Helps and What's Missing**
    a. What has helped you feel psychologically safe at work?
    b. What do you think organizations should do more of to support employees like you?

c. If you could change one thing to improve inclusion and safety in your workplace, what would it be?

Closing

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me — I really appreciate your openness and trust. Your voice is important in helping me understand how DEI strategies are experienced on the ground.

If you'd like to add anything else or have any questions later on, you're welcome to reach out. I'll also be glad to share my thesis with you once it's complete.

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