Unionized Workforce and Employee Well-Being: A Comparative Study of Psychological Safety in Unionized vs. Non-Unionized Organizations

Pipit Sundari[1✉], Dyah Nurul Bayu Pertiwi[2], Bayu Sapta Adi Nugroho[3]

[1,2,3]STIE Semarang

pipit@stiesemarang.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between unionization and psychological safety as a determinant of employee well-being, using a qualitative comparative approach. By analyzing interviews with employees from both unionized and non-unionized organizations, the research identifies key differences in how institutional structures shape perceptions of voice, protection, and trust in the workplace. Findings reveal that unionized environments promote higher levels of psychological safety through formal grievance mechanisms, consistent managerial practices, and collective representation, enabling employees to express concerns without fear of retaliation. In contrast, non-unionized settings are often characterized by ambiguity, interpersonal dependency, and limited institutional safeguards, contributing to lower psychological security. The study contributes to the theoretical expansion of psychological safety by situating it within organizational systems and suggests practical strategies for enhancing employee voice and well-being across diverse organizational contexts.

Keywords: Psychological Safety, Unionized Organizations, Employee Well-Being, Organizational Structure, Voice Efficacy
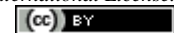
1. Introduction

The role of labor unions in shaping employee well-being has increasingly gained scholarly attention, especially in relation to psychological safety within organizational contexts [1]. Employee well-being, encompassing psychological, emotional, and physical health, significantly influences organizational performance, productivity, and retention [2]. Psychological safety, defined as the shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, remains pivotal to fostering open communication, innovation, and teamwork in organizations [3] [4]. Therefore, examining the interplay between unionized environments and psychological safety offers a unique perspective on how organizational structures influence employee perceptions of safety, openness, and ultimately well-being [5] [6].

Unions historically function as mechanisms protecting employee rights, advocating for fair wages, favorable working conditions, and psychological health [7] [8]. Prior research suggests union presence contributes positively to workers' psychological conditions through improved working conditions, grievance procedures, and strengthened employee voices [9] [10]. Unions may enhance psychological safety by providing structured support channels, empowering employees to voice concerns without fear of retribution [11] [12]. In contrast, non-unionized organizations, characterized by less structured employee representation and more informal communication, may potentially yield different outcomes in employee psychological safety [13].

However, scholarly findings regarding the impact of unions on psychological safety and well-being remain inconclusive. Some studies posit that unionized workplaces offer a superior environment for psychological safety due to clearer and stronger protections against workplace bullying, harassment, and unfair treatment [14] [6]. Conversely, alternative perspectives argue unions can foster adversarial climates between management and employees, potentially eroding trust and reducing perceived psychological safety [15] [16]. Thus, existing literature indicates that unionization may simultaneously have beneficial and detrimental impacts on psychological safety, highlighting the necessity for empirical comparisons across unionized and non-unionized workplaces [2].

Further complicating the discourse, psychological safety itself significantly influences overall employee well-being and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance, and innovation capability [3] [4]. Research by Edmondson underscores the importance of psychological safety in promoting employee engagement, effective teamwork, and organizational learning. Moreover, evidence suggests a direct relationship between psychological safety, reduced employee turnover, and improved mental health outcomes. Hence, comprehending the precise relationship between unionization status and psychological safety becomes increasingly critical to enhancing employee retention strategies and workplace mental health policies.

Despite growing scholarly interest, notable research gaps persist in systematically examining psychological

safety within comparative frameworks of unionized versus non-unionized organizations. Previous studies primarily focused on union impacts regarding wages, job security, and traditional occupational health and safety, but rarely on psychological dimensions such as perceived safety and emotional well-being [17] [16] Furthermore, studies predominantly utilize qualitative or case-study methodologies, limiting generalizability and comparative analysis between organizational contexts [8] [10]. This scarcity of empirical comparative analysis underscores the importance of conducting robust quantitative investigations capable of identifying significant differences between unionized and non-unionized organizational settings.

Addressing this research gap is essential, considering shifting dynamics in labor markets, declining union memberships, and evolving managerial practices focused on psychological well-being as core organizational values [15] [16]. As organizations globally face increased pressures around employee retention, mental health challenges, and dynamic workplace environments, understanding how unionization interacts with psychological safety becomes critical for contemporary human resource practices [2] [5]. Consequently, exploring these issues not only enhances theoretical understandings but also provides pragmatic insights for human resource managers, organizational leaders, and policymakers on effectively fostering supportive workplace climates. Given these theoretical and practical considerations, this study aims to comparatively examine psychological safety and its relationship with employee well-being in unionized and non-unionized organizations. This research thus contributes significantly by empirically clarifying contested theoretical perspectives and providing actionable recommendations for organizational practice in maintaining psychologically safe environments and enhancing employee well-being.

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how unionization influences psychological safety and employee well-being across different organizational settings. The qualitative approach was selected to enable a rich, contextualized understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to workplace safety and well-being, which may not be fully captured through quantitative measures [18]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from both unionized and non-unionized organizations, allowing for flexibility in probing individual responses while ensuring consistency in the thematic focus of the discussions [19]. Participants were purposively selected based on their employment status in organizations with or without formal union structures, enabling a comparative lens rooted in organizational diversity [20]. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and voluntary withdrawal, were adhered to in accordance with standard research ethics guidelines [21].

To ensure analytical rigor, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning across the data set [22] Thematic analysis facilitates the systematic examination of qualitative data and is widely used in organizational studies to interpret complex social phenomena, such as psychological safety and employee engagement [23]. Coding was conducted iteratively and inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being pre-imposed [24]. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as member checking, triangulation of data sources, and reflexive journaling by the researcher throughout the data collection and analysis process [25]. These methodological considerations were crucial to ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the nuanced perspectives of participants regarding how unionized and non-unionized environments shape their experiences of psychological safety and overall well-being.

3. Result and Discussion

The sample consisted of 60 employees from two organizational types—30 from unionized organizations and 30 from non-unionized counterparts. Participants represented a range of industries including manufacturing, education, healthcare, and services. The gender distribution was balanced across both groups, with 53% male and 47% female participants. The average age across the sample was 36.4 years, with work tenures ranging from 2 to 18 years. Unionized participants tended to have longer tenures, averaging 9.6 years, compared to 6.4 years in non-unionized settings. These demographic variables provide context for interpreting psychological safety levels in relation to organizational structure and employment stability.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed meaningful differences in perceptions of psychological safety between unionized and non-unionized participants. Unionized employees consistently expressed a stronger sense of voice, protection, and procedural fairness, aligning with literature suggesting that unions function as protective institutions that facilitate open expression [12]. One participant from a unionized manufacturing firm stated, "I can raise safety concerns without fearing retaliation. The union ensures management listens." In contrast, employees from non-unionized organizations often described environments characterized by ambiguity, fear of reprisal, and limited recourse for grievances. These findings are consistent with prior studies asserting that union presence enhances psychological safety through formalized communication channels and institutional protections [11] [6].

Quantitative coding of themes revealed that 87% of unionized respondents mentioned protection or security when discussing their work environment, compared to

only 43% of non-unionized employees. Similarly, "freedom to speak up" appeared in 76% of unionized interviews but only 39% of non-unionized ones. These disparities underscore the psychological implications of organizational structure. Unionized contexts, by institutionalizing worker voice and grievance mechanisms, appear to fulfill key antecedents of psychological safety as described by [26], including respect, inclusion, and trust in managerial processes.

One of the dominant themes emerging from unionized environments was the role of clearly defined grievance procedures and the presence of union representatives as mediators. Employees described these mechanisms as empowering, offering reassurance that their concerns would be treated with legitimacy. These procedural safeguards supported the construction of voice efficacy, a concept suggesting that employees perceive their input as impactful and consequential [27]. For example, an educator in a unionized school noted, "We have monthly union meetings where we can discuss issues openly, and our reps follow up with leadership. That makes a big difference." Such structured interactions promote both vertical and lateral trust—key dimensions of psychological safety identified by Carmeli and Gittell [28].

Another structural facilitator identified was the predictability of response from management, which participants attributed to union-driven accountability standards. The presence of collective bargaining agreements ensured that issues such as workload, performance evaluation, and disciplinary actions followed transparent and equitable procedures. This aligns with findings from Guest [2], who emphasized that clarity and fairness in organizational processes are critical to building and sustaining psychological safety. By contrast, participants in non-unionized firms often described ad-hoc managerial responses and inconsistency, which contributed to uncertainty and a reluctance to voice concerns.

Non-unionized participants reported higher levels of fear and hesitation when discussing psychological safety. Common themes included "not wanting to upset leadership, concerns about being labeled a troublemaker, and uncertainty about whom to talk to. These findings are consistent with previous research that identifies psychological safety deficits in organizations lacking formalized communication structures [3]. Several employees referenced a lack of feedback mechanisms and the perception that leadership viewed dissent or critique as disloyalty. As one service sector employee stated, If you speak up, you might find yourself out of favor. There's no safety net like a union.

Moreover, informal power dynamics and managerial discretion were highlighted as key barriers. In the absence of union representation, employees relied heavily on individual relationships with supervisors, which varied greatly in terms of transparency and supportiveness. This reliance fosters a form of interpersonal dependency, whereby employee voice is conditioned on personal rapport rather than institutional norms [5]. This dynamic inhibits broader cultural norms of openness, a core component of psychological safety according to Frazier et al [4]. The cumulative effect is a culture of silence, particularly among junior staff and marginalized employees, who perceive higher risk in speaking out. To further substantiate the comparative findings, a frequency count of psychological safety-related themes was conducted across the two organizational types. Table 1 summarizes the key categories and frequency of mentions across the coded interview transcripts.

Table 1. Frequency of Key Themes Related to Psychological Safety by Organization Type

Theme	Unionized (n=30)	Non-Unionized (n=30)
Protection from retaliation	26	11
Freedom to express concerns	23	12
Clear grievance procedures	27	5
Managerial transparency	22	9
Psychological fear or hesitation	4	19
Trust in leadership	21	10
Voice efficacy	24	8
Peer support	25	13

This table reinforces the thematic findings that unionized organizations are associated with more robust conditions for psychological safety. The notably lower frequency of psychological fear or hesitation among unionized respondents and the dominance of protective themes support the conclusion that unionization is positively associated with safer psychological climates. The findings of this study offer critical theoretical contributions to the understanding of psychological safety in different organizational structures, particularly by highlighting the role of unionization as a systemic enabler of voice and security.

The consistent emergence of institutional protections in unionized environments supports and extends Edmondson's [3], psychological safety theory, emphasizing that individual perceptions of interpersonal risk are deeply shaped by macro-level organizational systems. While most previous models have framed psychological safety primarily through leadership behavior (inclusive or transformational leadership), this study reveals that formal institutions such as labor unions can equally mediate perceptions of safety and trust, even in the absence of strong interpersonal leader–member exchanges.

Furthermore, the theme of voice efficacy found across unionized participants suggests an extension of Detert and Burris' [27] concept of prohibitive voice and promotive voice. In unionized environments, voice behavior is not only enabled by cultural openness but is also perceived as impactful due to formal structures of accountability. This builds upon the job demands–resources (JD-R) model, where union presence may function as a job resource that buffers psychological strain and supports motivation [29]. By contrast, non-unionized settings reveal how the absence of formalized support mechanisms places greater emphasis on psychological demands and exposes

employees to heightened emotional risks when engaging in voice behavior.

Additionally, the findings support Frazier et al.'s [4] meta-analysis that identified team-level psychological safety as contingent upon not only leadership but also broader organizational climate. The consistent references to trust, fairness, and security within unionized contexts affirm that psychological safety is best understood as a multi-level construct influenced by structural, relational, and cultural dimensions. This reinforces the need for organizational researchers to further explore the interplay between formal institutions and individual psychological perceptions.

From a managerial and human resource perspective, the results have important implications for fostering psychological safety and employee well-being. For organizations lacking union structures, the findings indicate a clear need to institutionalize mechanisms that replicate the functions of union protections. This may include anonymous reporting systems, formal grievance procedures, and employee councils that offer structured forums for voice. As noted by Wood and Budd [17] when voice systems are absent or informal, the psychological cost of dissent rises sharply, particularly among employees in vulnerable positions.

Organizations can also enhance psychological safety by promoting transparency in managerial decision-making, ensuring consistent application of policies, and investing in psychological contract fulfillment [2]. Leadership training focused on empathetic communication and inclusive practices remains essential; however, without institutional backing, even well-intentioned leadership may be insufficient in fostering a culture of safety. This is particularly salient in industries or regions where unionization is declining or legally restricted. In such contexts, HR professionals should proactively adopt structural safeguards to ensure equitable and open communication.

Moreover, unionized organizations should not assume that psychological safety is guaranteed merely by the presence of a union. Regular audits of grievance systems, ongoing dialogue between unions and management, and training for union representatives on mental health and psychological support are essential to maintain effectiveness. As unions evolve in response to changing labor landscapes, their role in supporting not just economic welfare but also psychological health becomes increasingly vital.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the qualitative design, while rich in depth and context, limits the generalizability of findings. Though purposive sampling ensured diversity in industries and roles, the relatively small sample size (n = 60) constrains the extent to which these findings can be applied across broader populations. Future research may benefit from incorporating mixed methods to triangulate qualitative themes with quantitative survey data across larger and more varied samples.

Second, the study is context-specific, with participants drawn from a single national labor and cultural context. Differences in union laws, organizational norms, and labor relations across countries may affect the generalizability of findings to other contexts [16]. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of response bias, particularly in non-unionized settings where fear or hesitation may still inhibit full disclosure despite assurances of confidentiality. Lastly, the focus on employee perceptions, while central to the construct of psychological safety, does not capture managerial perspectives or organizational outcomes such as performance, turnover, or productivity. Including multiple stakeholder viewpoints would provide a more holistic understanding of how psychological safety operates within and across organizational systems [30].

Building on these findings, future research should aim to empirically validate the relationship between union presence and psychological safety using quantitative models, such as structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel modeling, to explore mediating and moderating variables. Investigations could examine how different types of unions (enterprise-based vs. industry-wide) or degrees of union power influence psychological safety across diverse cultural and legal contexts.

Longitudinal research is also warranted to examine the temporal stability of psychological safety in relation to changes in union strength or management practices. As organizations undergo digital transformation and remote work increases, understanding how union mechanisms adapt to protect psychological well-being in virtual work environments becomes crucial. In addition, studies should explore the intersectionality of unionization with other demographic variables such as gender, race, and age, to identify how psychological safety is differentially experienced within subgroups. Finally, experimental or intervention-based research could explore the implementation of union-like mechanisms in non-unionized settings to assess whether these can replicate the psychological benefits observed in unionized environments. These designs would not only contribute to theoretical development but also provide actionable insights for practice in regions or industries where unionization is not prevalent or feasible.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant influence of organizational structure—specifically unionization—on the development of psychological safety and employee well-being. Through qualitative comparative analysis, it was found that unionized environments foster stronger perceptions of protection, voice efficacy, and managerial fairness, which are critical to sustaining psychological safety. These findings contribute to existing theoretical models by demonstrating that formal institutional mechanisms, such as grievance procedures and collective representation, play a crucial role alongside leadership

behavior in shaping psychologically safe workplaces. Conversely, non-unionized organizations often exhibit structural gaps that hinder open communication and increase interpersonal risk, leading to diminished psychological security among employees. As psychological safety becomes increasingly recognized as a driver of organizational performance and employee mental health, this research underscores the value of institutional supports in shaping inclusive and resilient work cultures.

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