Factors Contributing to Workplace Belonging in Human Service Sectors

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Abstract

This study employed data from an online survey of 302 U.S.-based human service workers to examine predictors of workplace belonging. Personal, psychological, and perceptual variables were analyzed using hierarchical linear regression. Results revealed a statistically significant model explaining 56 to 58% of variance in workplace belonging. Four significant predictors emerged: feeling valued by management (strongest predictor), workload fairness, psychological safety, and workplace support. Findings suggest that organizational factors, particularly managerial recognition, psychological safety, and equitable treatment, are crucial for fostering employee belonging in human service settings. Results provide actionable insights for human resource management practices aimed at improving employee engagement and retention in helping professions.

Introduction

In the dynamic sphere of human service industries, understanding workplace belonging is paramount for enhancing employee satisfaction, productivity, and organizational effectiveness (Thissen *et al*., 2023). This study dives into the web of factors that can positively predict workplace belonging, with a keen focus on personal, psychological, and perceptual determinants such as feeling valued, and supported. Given the increasing sociopolitical forces and regulatory complexities shaping public service sectors and related fields (Levett-Jones *et al*., 2009), exploring these variables for human service workers

provides timely insights about building workplace environments where everyone can thrive.

Literature Review

Examining the theoretical relationships between personal factors such as gender, age, and workplace belonging reveals complex dynamics that shape employee experiences. For instance, individuals often perceive belonging through their connection to professional environments and groups, which is significantly influenced by identity markers like gender (Allen *et al*., 2021; Johnson *et al*., 2023). Studies have shown that identity often interacts with

organizational culture (i.e., corporate values, ways of working), potentially impacting an individual's sense of mattering (Pathak *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, exploring psychological factors such as safety and burnout enhances our understanding of workplace belonging in human service industries. Psychological safety, referring to an environment where individuals feel safe to express ideas and concerns without fear of judgment or negative consequences, is essential for fostering a sense of belonging (Schnell *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, workplace burnout, a state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, adversely affects employees' perceptions of belonging (Waller, 2021). Indeed, ensuring psychological safety while addressing burnout is integral for promoting workplace belonging, thereby enhancing both individual well-being, staff retention, and organizational effectiveness (Schaechter *et al.*, 2023).

Perceptual factors such as leadership beliefs and fairness also play a critical role in predicting workplace belonging within human service industries. Leadership beliefs, particularly the extent to which leaders value people and provide necessary support, significantly influence the organizational culture and, in turn, may shape employees' sense of belonging (Pathak *et al.*, 2020; Strayhorn, in-press). Fairness in the workplace, encompassing equitable treatment and just practices, can cultivate an environment where employees feel valued and respected, thereby enhancing their commitment to the organization (Waller, 2021). This may be particularly relevant in human service industries where diverse perspectives and equitable practices are essential for effective service delivery.

To recap, prior literature highlights several critical factors that positively influence workplace belonging. Personal characteristics impact how employees perceive each other, which can influence interactions at work, collegiality, and group cohesion (Allen *et al.*, 2021). Psychological factors such as safety and burnout also emerge as significant, affecting perceptions of inclusion (Schnell *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, perceptual elements, such as leadership beliefs and fairness, play pivotal roles; person-centered approaches and equitable practices contribute to strengthening employees' feelings of being valued. While useful, prior research has focused extensively on belonging as a concept (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019) or workplace belonging in corporate settings (Strayhorn, in-press). Studies are needed that examine the influence of such factors on workplace belonging in human service fields. This is the gap addressed by the present study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between three sets of independent variables hypothesized to be related to workplace belonging for employees working in human service fields. A single research question guided the analysis: To what extent, if any, do personal, psychological, and perceptual variables predict workplace belonging among human service professionals?

Materials and Methods

This research brief presents results from an on-going online survey project that employs an ex-post facto design. Ex-post facto survey designs are non-experimental approaches to examine relationships between variables after the events have already occurred, without manipulating any independent variables.

Participants include 302 respondents, ranging in age from 18 to over 60 years. There are slightly more women (53%) than men and the sample is diverse in terms of race/ethnicity: 66% white, 10% Black, 9% Hispanic/Latinx, 8% Asian, among others. Table 1 presents a summary.

After receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB), a controlled-access online survey was used to collect data in the spring of 2024. The author used known scales and items from the published literature to create the survey (Levett-Jones *et al.*, 2009). A U.S.-based research firm administered the poll to working adults. In short, the sampling strategy consists of using random location sampling, stratified by geographical region, industry, and job type/level to ensure representation across categories. Minimum sample size was determined by power analysis using G*Power software, estimating that at least 90 subjects are necessary to achieve 80% power at traditional alpha levels (0.05). Study participants

were not compensated. For more information about the research approach, see Strayhorn (in-press).

Data analysis proceeded in several stages. All variables were prepared for statistical analysis using appropriate data (re)coding and cleaning techniques such as tests for missingness. In most instances, imputation was not required since fewer than 2% of cases were missing (Allison, 2002). Next, frequency counts and percentages were computed to explore categorical data, while descriptive statistics were used to assess continuous variables. Hierarchical linear regression (HLR) was used to analyze the relationship between independent variables and workplace belonging via three-stage modeling. Prior to HLR analysis, key assumptions of regression (e.g., normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity) were tested using diagnostic plots and variance inflation factors, and all were found to be adequately met.

Table 1: Frequencies and Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	%	M	SD
Age			
18-29	15		
30-44	33		
45-60	43		
> 60	9		
Gender			
Men	47		
Women	53		
Race			
White	66		
Black/African American	10		
Hispanic/Latinx	9		
Asian	8		
Multiracial	3		
All others	4		
Burnout		3.26	1.38
Safe at work		4.18	0.99
Job security worries		2.77	1.47
Boss values my input		3.81	1.12
Workload is fair		3.54	1.26
Boss gives me what's needed		3.89	1.12
Workplace belonging		3.84	1.15

Results

A hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine whether personal, psychological, and perceptual factors predicted workplace belonging among employees in human service fields, using three sequential models. In Model 1, personal variables were entered, accounting for a significant proportion of the variance in workplace belonging, $F_{(2,276)} = 3.53$, $p < 0.05$, $R = 0.16$, $R^2 = 0.03$. In Model 2, psychological variables were added, resulting in a significant increase in explained variance, $F_{(2,273)}=24.09$, $p < 0.01$, $R =0.55$, $R^2 = 0.31$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.28$. In Model 3, perceptual variables were included, which also significantly improved the model, $F_{(8,270)}=46.04$, $p < 0.01$, $R =0.76$, $R^2 = 0.58$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.27$. The final model accounted for approximately 56% of the variance in workplace belonging, adj.$R^2 = 0.564$. Several predictors were statistically significant: safety (B = 0.23), input valued (B=0.34), workload fairness (B=0.21), work needs met (B=0.18). Table 2 presents a summary.

Table 2: Hierarchical linear regression results

Variable	B (SE)	β	t
Constant	0.13 0.35)	—	0.36
Age	0.07 (0.05)	0.05	1.22
Gender	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.03	-0.64
Burnout	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.03	-0.64
Safe at work	0.23 (0.05)	0.20	4.28**
Job security worries	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02	-0.37
Boss values my input	0.34 (0.06)	0.33	5.73**
Workload is fair	0.21 (0.05)	0.22	4.29**
Boss gives me what's needed	0.18 (0.06)	0.18	3.17**

$F_{(8.270)}$ - 46.04, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.58$.
**$p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The present study examined predictors of workplace belonging among 302 human service employees, revealing that personal, psychological, and perceptual workplace factors significantly influence employee's sense of belonging at work. The final hierarchical regression model explained 56-58% of the variance in workplace belonging with four significant predictors emerging. Findings contribute to the growing literature on workplace belonging by identifying specific, modifiable organizational factors that foster connection and engagement in human service jobs.

Feeling valued emerged as the strongest predictor of workplace belonging, which aligns with social identity theory and prior research demonstrating that recognition and validation are fundamental human needs, whether in education (Strayhorn, 2019) or work settings (Strayhorn, in-press). When managers actively seek and value employee input, they communicate respect for employees' expertise and perspectives, which directly enhances belonging. The second strongest predictor, workload fairness, supports organizational justice theory by highlighting how perceptions of equitable treatment influence employee attitudes and behaviors. Results are consistent with others who found that perceived fairness significantly predicted employee engagement and retention in helping professions (Levett-Jones *et al*., 2009). The significant role of psychological safety reinforces previous conceptualizations of such environments as foundational to employee well-being and performance (Waller, 2021). In human service fields, where workers regularly encounter challenging situations and vulnerable populations, the ability to express concerns, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of retribution becomes particularly crucial for individual belonging and service quality.

Findings offer concrete guidance for human resource managers and organizational leaders (e.g., CEOs) seeking to enhance workplace belonging. First, managers should implement regular, structured feedback mechanisms that explicitly solicit and acknowledge employee input on job-related decisions. This could include monthly one-on-one meetings focused on gathering employee perspectives rather than solely providing performance feedback. Second, organizations should conduct systematic workload assessments to ensure equitable distribution of cases, responsibilities, and resources across team members, particularly given the emotional and physical demands inherent in human service work.

Result have implications for future research. Studies might examine the temporal dynamics of these relationships using longitudinal designs to explore causality. Investigating potential moderating effects of organizational details (e.g., size, funding structure) and specific human service sectors could provide more nuanced insights. Exploring the impact of innovative policy interventions (e.g., flex hours, reduced work week) on shifts in workplace belonging is a fruitful site for future study. All in all, the study

makes a worthy contribution to the literature and points a way forward for additional research.

Conclusion

The study explored a constellation of personal, psychological, and perceptual factors that shape employee's sense of belonging in human service workplaces. Through quantitative analysis, the research identified several key predictors that contribute meaningfully to employees' belonging in the workplace. Findings illuminate how both individual traits and broader organizational dynamics work in tandem to influence belonging, underscoring the complexity and multidimensionality of this construct within service-driven industries.

By centering the human service sector—an industry defined by interpersonal work and care—the study adds depth to our understanding of belonging as both a relational and structural phenomenon. Insights offered here affirm that workplace belonging is not incidental, but instead arises from identifiable, intentional, and measurable conditions. These findings provide a critical foundation for understanding how organizations might recognize and reinforce such factors that sustain a sense of connection and community among their workforce, particularly in mission-driven fields where engagement and relationships are paramount.

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Funding Sources

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data presented in this study are on-going and, thus, embargoed and not publicly available due to funding and licensing restrictions.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval of this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Union University.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from participants in this survey study, conforming to standards currently applied in the USA. Privacy rights of human subjects were observed.

Permission To Reproduce Material from Other Sources

Not Applicable.

Author Contribution

The sole author was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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