Kindness at Work: An Exploration of Kindness and Its Impact on Employee Trust, Belonging and Wellbeing within Homeless Services

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Introduction

In the current climate of economic uncertainty, with many employers seeking to recruit in a tight labour market (CIPD, 2025), retaining and sustaining employee engagement is paramount. Understanding what motivates and engages employees to ensure retention and high performance is of particular interest to those working in adult social care, where recruitment is extremely challenging. In October 2022, it was reported that there were 165,000 vacant posts in adult social care (Skills for Care, 2022). This doctoral research explores whether kindness, or prosocial behaviour, in the workplace has a positive impact not only on service users in adult social care (Benson & Brennan, 2018) but also on employees, resulting in higher levels of trust and belonging and increased well-being.

Research Question and Objectives

While the overall doctoral study has a broader objective, this paper focuses on a specific research objective: to explore how employees experience and interpret kindness and how these experiences influence their sense of trust, belonging, and well-being.

Relevance and Impact of Research

The research for this study has centred on three organisations within the Liverpool City Region whose focus is working with vulnerable people in adult social care and supported housing within homeless services. However, the focus of this paper centres on data from the largest of the three organisations, which has fully established trauma-informed care (McNally et al., 2022) and supports employees in working in a psychologically informed way. While other studies have shown a relationship between kindness, trust, belonging, and employee wellbeing (Hashim *et al.*, 2022; Olvera *et al.*, 2024), this study aims to further extend research on kindness within the homeless services sector and to apply this to the concept of a psychologically informed environment (Keats *et al.*, 2012).

Literature Review

Kindness can be defined as a behaviour intended to benefit others (Curry *et al.*, 2018; Smith-Merry *et al.*, 2025), although another definition of kindness is that it is a gesture motivated by a genuine, warm feeling for others (Canter, Youngs and Yaneva, 2017), and it is suggested that this is important for those working in helping or care professions (Hake and Post, 2023). Caldwell (2017) suggests that the definition of kindness is very similar to that of prosociality, which Eisenberg et al. (2016) describe as voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another person. For the purposes of this study, the terms kindness and prosocial behaviour are used interchangeably.

Brief and Motowidlo (1986) developed the concept of organisational prosociality, suggesting that it encompassed behaviours intended to promote the welfare of employees and the organisation. It has been suggested that there is a dearth of literature on kindness in organisational settings (Hart and Hart, 2023), although Waddington (2018) has argued that there is currently a compassionate shift that acknowledges the important role of humanity and care within organisations, a factor recognisable in one of the organisations involved in the study. It has also been suggested that there are six fundamental features of the overall term of kindness relevant to an organisational setting: compassion, gratitude, integrity, authenticity, humility, and humour (Gibb and Rahman, 2018). Smith-Merry et al. (2025) argue that organisational kindness occurs when an organisation's structures promote the importance of people by prioritising behaviours and actions that illustrate what it means to be kind. It could be suggested that structures associated with working in a psychologically informed way, such as the importance of reflective practice and relational work, may promote organisational kindness (Gibb and Rahman, 2018).

A further benefit of kindness is that it can promote individual well-being for both the recipient and the giver (Curry et al., 2018; Smith-Merry et al., 2025). It is also suggested that acting prosocially, or with kindness, can serve as a safeguard against burnout and emotional exhaustion (Chancellor et al., 2018), which is particularly relevant for those working in the challenging environment of homeless services. In addition, it has also been shown that behaving in this way can support the development of trust and goodwill (Anderson et al.,

2020). Grant and Shandell (2022) develop this further by proposing that the motivation to act prosocially increases employees' effort in their job role (Feather et al., 2018) and helps them view their jobs more strategically while also making them more open to receiving feedback that may not always be positive. It is believed that employees who receive acts of kindness within teams or organisations are more likely to reciprocate, leading to increased levels of prosocial behaviour (Chancellor et al., 2018).

Research Design

As this study explores the feelings and experiences of people working in homeless services and whether this impacts on trust and belonging, it was felt that a subjective ontological approach (Cassell et al., 2019) alongside an interpretivist epistemological approach (Grix, 2019) was appropriate to the study. Having identified the philosophical approach, the study adopts a qualitative methodology (Scotland, 2012) to understand the experiences and beliefs of those working within the homeless services environment.

Research Method

Research has been undertaken using semi-structured interviews (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A pilot focus group was initially facilitated, with thematic analysis used to analyse the collected data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The pilot focus group has been used as a point of reflection to inform the remainder of the study, and thirty-three semi-structured interviews have been conducted across the three organisations, with eighteen of these in the largest organisation (Organisation 1).

Initial Findings

Analysing data from the study on kindness revealed that both giving and receiving kindness significantly affected employees' perceptions of their well-being. The data also suggests that kindness received from colleagues, managers, and senior leaders affects feelings of trust and belonging within the organisation. There was significant evidence of kindness within teams, as well as evidence of organisational kindness, in the form of specific references to acts of kindness by senior leaders and managers, which supported feelings of organisational trust, belonging, and identification. This organisational kindness was also perceived to have a positive impact on the well-being of employee participants in the study.

The findings from this study suggest that kindness has a positive impact on employees' feelings of belonging and trust toward colleagues and the organisation and serves as a resource that supports their well-being. The data also suggested that employees who felt a sense of belonging, trust, and well-being were more likely to intend to remain with the employer. Given the tight labour market outlined above, these findings could provide a model for other organisations seeking to reduce turnover.

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