

# The Relationship Between Work Autonomy and Work Alienation: The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety Among Service Sector Employees in India

Meurisa Analisa Fernandes<sup>1</sup>, Dimple Bhatia<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, India

**Abstract**—Work autonomy and psychological safety are important factors that influence how employees feel about their work. This study looked at how work autonomy, psychological safety, and work alienation are related among employees in the service sector in India. Data was collected from 234 employees using a structured online questionnaire with standard measures for each variable. Spearman correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between work autonomy and psychological safety, and significant negative relationships between work autonomy and work alienation, and between psychological safety and work alienation. Mediation analysis further indicated that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation. These findings suggest that higher levels of work autonomy are associated with lower levels of work alienation, both directly and indirectly through psychological safety.

**Index Terms**—Psychological Safety, Work Alienation, Work Autonomy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The service sector, one of the fastest-growing segments of the Indian economy, plays a significant role in national development (Thakre & Mathew, 2020). Alongside this growth, organizations increasingly expect employees to take initiative, manage their professional development, and maintain high performance standards (Mustosmäki et al., 2013). While these expectations may improve productivity, they may also contribute to pressure, disconnection, and detachment from work.

Work autonomy, defined as the degree of freedom and discretion employees have in scheduling and performing their tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, as

cited in Breugh, 1985), is an important factor influencing employee motivation and well-being. Greater autonomy promotes ownership, flexibility, engagement, and job satisfaction (Swaroop & Dixit, 2018; Mohite & Sara James, 2024), whereas low autonomy has been associated with stress, withdrawal behaviours, and adverse psychological outcomes (Madsen et al., 2017; Clausen et al., 2021). However, autonomy alone may not always prevent work alienation.

Work alienation refers to a sense of estrangement or disconnection from work (Nair & Vohra, 2012), often characterized by powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and weak organizational identification (Kozhina & Vinokurov, 2020). At a structural level, work alienation is often viewed as a consequence of industrialization related changes, such as large-scale organizational structures, highly specialized roles, and strict hierarchical supervision, which disrupt the alignment between employees personal and work lives (Muttar et al., 2019). This misalignment contributes to reduced dedication, emotional instability, lower productivity, and, in more severe cases, negative impacts on mental health. Behaviourally, work alienation is reflected in employees attaching less importance to their work and investing lower levels of effort than required to perform their roles effectively (Agarwal, 1993).

Previous research on the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation has mainly focused on mediating factors such as organizational and occupational identification, though Özkoç (2016) emphasized the need to explore additional mediating variables. In this context, psychological safety emerges as an important factor. According to

Edmondson (1999), psychological safety is defined as a shared belief among team members that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Similarly, it reflects a sense of confidence that one can express and engage oneself at work without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (Kahn, 1990). Psychologically safe environments encourage speaking up, learning, innovation, and engagement while reducing emotional exhaustion (Frazier et al., 2016) and turnover intentions (Labrague & De Los Santos, 2020). In hierarchical and high-pressure work cultures such as India, psychological safety becomes especially important in helping employees effectively utilize autonomy and express concerns freely (Joseph & Seshadri, 2025). Despite its importance, psychologically safe work environments remain relatively uncommon in practice (McCausland, 2023).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that work autonomy plays an important role in reducing employees' experiences of alienation, as greater discretion and control over work tasks can decrease feelings of powerlessness and disengagement. Özkoç (2016) found that employees who perceived higher levels of autonomy reported lower levels of work alienation. Similarly, greater freedom in scheduling and performing work was associated with reduced detachment from work (Vanderstikken & Caniëls, 2021), while lack of autonomy contributed to reduced commitment, lower job satisfaction, and increased absenteeism (Muttar et al., 2019).

Research also indicates that work autonomy is positively associated with psychological safety. Employees with greater autonomy tend to feel more comfortable expressing ideas and engaging in open communication (Buvik & Tkalich, 2021). Autonomy has further been identified as an important antecedent of psychological safety across workplace settings (Frazier et al., 2016), with greater team independence contributing to psychologically safe environments (Santana et al., 2025).

Existing literature further suggests that psychological safety plays a protective role against disengagement and alienation. Higher psychological safety has been associated with lower burnout and stronger intentions to remain in the organization (Bahadurzada et al.,

2024). It also weakens the negative effects of organizational alienation by encouraging employees to express ideas and participate actively in organizational activities (Yener, 2019), whereas rigid hierarchical structures and lack of support increase withdrawal tendencies (Clarke et al., 2025).

Research examining psychological safety as a mediator shows that it functions as an important mechanism linking workplace conditions with employee outcomes. Addai (2025) found that psychological safety partially mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and innovation. Similarly, El-Ashry et al. (2025) reported that psychological safety partially mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and implicit absenteeism, while Jindal et al. (2024) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between workplace support and organizational performance. Review-based evidence also highlights psychological safety as an intermediary mechanism linking leadership, team processes, and employee outcomes (Santana et al., 2025).

### Theoretical Framework

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model explains employee well-being by categorizing job characteristics into job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to aspects of work requiring sustained effort and are associated with physiological and psychological costs, whereas job resources facilitate goal attainment, reduce job demands, and promote growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001, as cited in Roskams et al., 2021). Within this framework, resources such as autonomy enhance employee engagement and job performance (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010) while buffering the negative effects of the work environment (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Work autonomy has consistently been associated with lower levels of work alienation (Shantz et al., 2015; Seeman, 1991 as cited in Vanderstikken & Caniëls, 2021). Conversely, insufficient job resources may contribute to stress, burnout, and work alienation (Hobfoll, 1989; Vanderstikken & Caniëls, 2021). Since burnout reflects a state of disengagement in which employees are no longer able or willing to invest effort in their work (Bakker & De Vries, 2021), the JD-R framework can also be extended to explain reductions in work alienation through the presence of job resources. The Conservation of Resources (COR)

Theory, which proposes that individuals strive to acquire and protect valued resources and experience stress when these resources are threatened or lost (Hobfoll, 1988; Hobfoll, 1989). Resources may include both internal and external factors that support well-being and help employees cope with workplace demands (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). In this context, psychological safety can be understood as a critical social resource, as it creates an environment where employees feel encouraged to speak up and learn from mistakes without fear of negative consequences.

Such supportive environments help restore employees emotional and psychological capacities and reduce strain arising from limited resources. Therefore, psychological safety may act as a protective mechanism mediating the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation.

Based on prior research and theoretical framework, following hypothesis were framed:

- H1: There is a significant negative relationship between work autonomy and work alienation.
- H2: There is a significant positive relationship between work autonomy and psychological safety.
- H3: There is a significant negative relationship between psychological safety and work alienation.
- H4: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed to examine the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation, while also assessing the mediating role of psychological safety among service sector employees.

#### Participants

A total of 234 participants who met the inclusion criteria were recruited for the study using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The inclusion criteria required participants to be employed in the service sector in India, belong to the age range of 20–65 years, and be of any gender. The majority of participants belonged to the age group of 20–24 years (43.6%), followed by 25–29 years (14.5%) and 30–34 years (11.1%). In terms of gender, 59.8% of the participants were male and 40.2% were female. Most

participants were employed in the private sector (64.5%), while 35.5% belonged to the public sector. Regarding work arrangement, the majority worked onsite (88%), followed by hybrid (10.3%) and remote arrangements (1.7%). With respect to hierarchical level, 59.4% of the participants were subordinates, 21.4% were managers, and 19.2% were supervisors. In terms of work experience, half of the participants (50%) had 0–4 years of experience, followed by 5–9 years (18.4%), 15 years and above (17.9%), and 10–14 years of experience (13.7%).

#### Measures

The Work Autonomy Scale developed by James A. Breugh (1985) consist of nine items measuring three facets of autonomy: method autonomy, scheduling autonomy, and criteria autonomy. Items are rated on a seven-point continuum ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores are computed by summing responses across all nine items, with higher scores indicating greater work autonomy (Jiang et al., 2012) (Mohsin Ijaz & Hanif Tarar, 2020). The scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .81 to .93 across studies, along with evidence of reliability over time through test–retest correlations above .70. Construct validity was supported through factor analysis confirming the three-factor structure and significant correlations with related constructs such as job satisfaction and supervisory satisfaction (Breugh, 1999).

The Psychological Safety Scale developed by Amy Edmondson (1999) consists of seven items rated on a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Hassane Gharbi et al., 2025). Total psychological safety scores are obtained by summing responses across all seven items, with higher scores indicating greater psychological safety (Srivastava & Kewalramani, 2025). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82. Discriminant validity was supported through factor analysis, which showed that psychological safety items loaded on a distinct factor separate from related constructs such as team efficacy and learning behaviour (Edmondson, 1999). The Work Alienation Scale developed by Nair and Vohra (2009) was used to assess employee's psychological estrangement and disengagement from work. The scale consists of eight

items forming a unidimensional measure, rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (total disagreement) to 7 25 (total agreement).

The total work alienation score is calculated by summing responses across all eight items. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha reported as .86 in both the development and validation samples, along with evidence of good construct validity supported through confirmatory factor analysis and discriminant validity with related work constructs (Nair & Vohra, 2009).

**Procedure**

Data were collected using a questionnaire created through Google Forms, which was distributed via WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other messaging applications. The questionnaire began with an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study, assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity, and clarified that participation was voluntary.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without providing a reason, and consent was indicated by selecting the “I Agree” option before accessing the survey. After providing consent, participants were directed to the demographic section followed by the standardized scales used in the study. The survey link was shared digitally to efficiently reach working individuals in the service sector and collect responses in a secure and organized manner.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi. Data collected through Google Forms were exported to Google Sheets, where demographic information was summarized and raw scores for the Work Autonomy Scale, Psychological Safety Scale, and Work Alienation Scale were computed according to their respective scoring guidelines. The dataset was further organized and prepared for analysis using Google Sheets. Descriptive statistics, including mean, median, mode, standard deviation, variance, skewness, and kurtosis, were calculated to summarize the characteristics of the data, while boxplots were examined to identify outliers. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test to determine the suitability of subsequent analyses. As the assumption of normality was not met, Spearman’s rank-order correlation was conducted to examine the

relationships among the study variables. Assumption testing was subsequently carried out to determine the suitability of conducting mediation analysis. After confirming that the required assumptions were met, mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation. The significance of the indirect effect was evaluated using bootstrapping procedures, and all inferential analyses were conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.6.24).

**IV. RESULTS**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1: Results of Descriptive Statistics for Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety and Work Alienation

	Work Autonomy	Psychological Safety	Work Alienation
N	234	234	234
Mean	35.5	21.9	32.1
Median	36.5	21.5	32.0
Mode	63.0	35.0	8.00
Standard Deviation	19.0	8.72	17.7
Variance	363	76.0	312
Skewness	0.0430	0.103	-0.0331
Kurtosis	-1.55	-1.29	-1.69

Descriptive statistics were calculated for Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety, and Work Alienation. Each variable had a sample size of 234. For Work Autonomy, the mean was 35.5, the median was 36.5, and the mode was 63.0, with a standard deviation of 19.0 and a variance of 363. Psychological Safety had a mean of 21.9, a median of 21.5, and a mode of 35.0, along with a standard deviation of 8.72 and a variance of 76.0. Work Alienation showed a mean of 32.1, a median of 32.0, and a mode of 8.00, with a standard deviation of 17.7 and a variance of 312. Skewness values were 0.0430 for Work Autonomy, 0.103 for Psychological Safety, and -0.0331 for Work Alienation, while the corresponding kurtosis values were -1.55, -1.29, and -1.69.

**Normality Analysis**

Table 2: Tests of Normality for Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety and Work Alienation

Variable	W	p-value
Work Autonomy	0.890	<.001
Psychological Safety	0.922	<.001
Work Alienation	0.856	<.001

Tests of normality were conducted for Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety, and Work Alienation using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The results showed that Work Autonomy ( $W = 0.890, p < .001$ ), Psychological Safety ( $W = 0.922, p < .001$ ), and Work

Alienation ( $W = 0.856, p < .001$ ) all had p-values less than .05. Since the p-values for all three variables were below .05, the data for all three variables deviate significantly from a normal distribution.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Correlation between Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety and Work Alienation

		Work Autonomy	Psychological Safety	Work Alienation
Work Autonomy	Spearman’s rho			
	p-value			
Psychological Safety	Spearman’s rho	0.891***		
	p-value	<.001		
Work Alienation	Spearman’s rho	-0.889***	-0.867***	
	p-value	<.001	<.001	

Note: Spearman’s rho correlations are reported with  $df = 232$

Spearman’s rank-order correlation was conducted to examine the relationships between Work Autonomy, Psychological Safety, and Work Alienation. The results showed a strong positive correlation between Work Autonomy and Psychological Safety ( $\rho = 0.891,$

$p < .001$ ). A strong negative correlation was observed between Work Autonomy and Work Alienation ( $\rho = -0.889, p < .001$ ), as well as between Psychological Safety and Work Alienation ( $\rho = -0.867, p < .001$ ). All correlations were statistically significant.

Mediation Analysis

Table 4: Mediation Model

		95% CI						
Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	$\beta$	z	p
Indirect	Work Autonomy → Psychological Safety → Work Alienation	-0.357	0.0482	-0.491	-0.230	-0.385	-7.40	<.001
Component (a path)	Work Autonomy → Psychological Safety	0.409	0.0134	0.386	0.431	0.894	30.48	<.001
Component (b path)	Psychological Safety → Work Alienation	-0.872	0.1144	-1.203	-0.559	-0.431	-7.62	<.001
Direct	Work Autonomy → Work Alienation	-0.478	0.0524	-0.621	-0.325	-0.516	-9.13	<.001
Total	Work Autonomy → Work Alienation	-0.835	0.0263	-0.870	-0.799	-0.901	-31.75	<.001

Note: Confidence Intervals computed with method: Bias corrected bootstrap

The results indicate that the indirect effect of work autonomy on work alienation through psychological safety was significant ( $B = -0.357, SE = 0.048, 95\% CI [-0.491, -0.230], p < .001$ ), as the confidence interval did not include zero. This suggests that psychological safety mediates the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation. Additionally, work autonomy had a significant positive effect on psychological safety ( $B = 0.409, p < .001$ ), while psychological safety had a significant negative effect on work alienation ( $B = -0.872, p < .001$ ). The direct effect of work autonomy on work alienation remained significant ( $B = -0.478, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation. Furthermore, the total effect of work autonomy on work alienation was also significant ( $B = -0.835, p < .001$ ), suggesting that higher work

autonomy is associated with lower levels of work alienation both directly and indirectly through psychological safety.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings supported H1, indicating a significant negative relationship between work autonomy and work alienation. Employees with greater autonomy were less likely to feel detached or estranged from their work. This is consistent with prior research indicating that autonomy enhances employees’ sense of control, ownership, and meaningful engagement, thereby reducing core dimensions of alienation such as powerlessness and disengagement (Özkoç, 2016; Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021). Muttar et al. (2019)

further emphasized that lack of autonomy is a major contributor to work alienation.

Within the JD-R framework, autonomy functions as a key job resource that promotes motivation and reduces negative outcomes, while from a COR perspective, autonomy represents a valued resource that protects employees from psychological strain and resource loss. The results also supported H2, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between work autonomy and psychological safety. These findings suggest that when employees have greater discretion and control over their work, they are more likely to perceive their environment as safe for interpersonal expression and risk-taking. This is in line with earlier studies suggesting that autonomy encourages open communication, idea sharing, and the admission of mistakes without fear of negative repercussions (Buvik & Tkalic, 2021; Guimarães et al., 2023). Frazier et al. (2016) similarly identified autonomy as an important precursor to psychological safety. From a COR perspective, autonomy may also facilitate resource gains that strengthen employees' psychological capacities and sense of safety.

The findings further supported H3, revealing a significant negative relationship between psychological safety and work alienation. Employees who felt psychologically safe were less likely to experience alienation at work. These findings align with previous research showing that psychologically safe environments reduce disengagement, withdrawal tendencies, and emotional detachment (Gharbi et al., 2025; Clarke et al., 2025; Bahadurzada et al., 2024). When employees feel comfortable expressing themselves and participating actively, they are more likely to experience belonging and connectedness, which in turn reduces feelings of alienation.

With regard to H4, the findings indicated that psychological safety significantly mediated the relationship between work autonomy and work alienation. This suggests that work autonomy reduces work alienation both directly and indirectly through psychological safety. These findings are consistent with earlier research identifying psychological safety as an important mechanism linking workplace conditions with outcomes such as engagement, performance, and innovation (Addai, 2025; Lee & Dahinten, 2021; Li & Tang, 2022; Jindal et al., 2024), while also extending this understanding to work alienation. The partial mediation further suggests that

psychological safety explains part of the autonomy–alienation relationship, while autonomy itself continues to directly enhance employees' sense of control and meaning at work (Muttar et al., 2019; Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021).

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study provides useful insights into the relationships between work autonomy, psychological safety, and work alienation among service sector employees in India; however, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of self-report questionnaires may have introduced response bias, while the online mode of data collection reduced control over the response environment. Since all participants were working individuals, factors such as fatigue, stress, and interruptions during the workday may also have influenced responses. Despite these limitations, the findings highlight important practical implications. Organizations may benefit from designing work roles that enhance employee autonomy through greater control over tasks, schedules, and decision-making, while also fostering psychologically safe environments through open communication, trust, and supportive leadership. Together, these may help reduce feelings of disengagement and disconnection at work. Based on the findings, future research may consider controlling for demographic and work-related variables such as tenure, job role, hierarchical level, and work arrangement, as these may influence the study variables. Collecting data in more controlled settings or using mixed-method approaches may further improve understanding of employees' workplace experiences. Since the findings indicated partial mediation, future studies may also explore additional mediating variables influencing work alienation.

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