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Influence of Individual Psychological Characteristics on Workplace Relationships among Church Workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of individual psychological characteristics on workplace relationships among church workers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) Morogoro Church District. The study was guided by Attachment Theory and employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore workers' lived experiences of interpersonal relationships within the Church District. Data were collected from 13 purposively selected participants comprising pastors, evangelists, parish workers and the Dean through semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group discussion. Data were collected in Kiswahili, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The findings generated two major themes: leadership practices as determinants of workplace relationships and breakdown of trust and interpersonal relationships. Participants reported that perceived unfairness, favouritism and exclusion from decision-making were associated with feelings of rejection, insecurity, disappointment and mistrust. These psychological responses were reflected in avoidance, emotional distancing, reduced cooperation and interpersonal division. The findings further showed that when interpersonal trust deteriorated, workers became hesitant to communicate openly and less willing to collaborate with colleagues. The study concludes that workplace relationships among church workers are shaped not only by organisational circumstances but also by workers' psychological responses and relational experiences. The study recommends fair and transparent leadership, inclusive decision-making, early conflict resolution, active listening and deliberate efforts to rebuild interpersonal trust among church workers.

Keywords: Individual psychological characteristics, workplace relationships, interpersonal trust, emotional responses, church workers, phenomenology, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Workplace relationships are an important part of organisational functioning because employees depend on one another for cooperation, information sharing, emotional support and the accomplishment of common goals. Healthy workplace relationships are generally characterised by trust, mutual respect, constructive interaction and the ability to manage disagreement without damaging interpersonal connections. In contrast, strained relationships may be expressed through mistrust, withdrawal, emotional tension, reduced cooperation and unresolved interpersonal conflict. The quality of these relationships is therefore not determined only by organisational structures or formal policies but also by how individual workers perceive, interpret and respond to their everyday interpersonal experiences. The original study identified persistent interpersonal conflict, communication difficulties, mistrust and psychological distress as concerns among some church workers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) Morogoro Church District.

Individual psychological characteristics are particularly relevant to understanding workplace relationships because workers differ in the ways they experience emotions, interpret interpersonal events and regulate their behavioural responses. Personality characteristics, emotional regulation and relational tendencies can shape how individuals respond to criticism, disagreement, perceived rejection and interpersonal uncertainty. Recent workplace research similarly demonstrates that personality and emotions are connected with the way employees experience and learn from social interactions at work (Leiß & Rausch, 2023). These characteristics do not operate in isolation from the organisational environment. Rather, workplace situations may activate particular emotional and relational responses, which can subsequently influence how employees interact with colleagues.

Emotional regulation is especially important in this regard. The ability to regulate emotional responses may determine whether an individual responds to an interpersonal difficulty through constructive discussion, patience and problem-solving or through anger, withdrawal, avoidance and mistrust. Research on workplace relationships has increasingly recognised the importance of emotional and regulatory processes in explaining employees' interpersonal behaviour. Ren et al. (2024), for example, argue that attachment-related orientations in the workplace can influence employees' cognitive, emotional and behavioural regulatory processes, thereby shaping how they construct and maintain workplace relationships. Similarly, research on attachment strategies at work has identified interpersonal hyperactivation, characterised by emotional instability and negative emotionality and interpersonal deactivation,

characterised by distancing, mistrust and inhibition of positive emotional expression, as important dimensions of relational behaviour in workplace settings (Seitl et al., 2023).

The relevance of individual psychological characteristics becomes particularly evident when workers encounter situations that they perceive as unfair, rejecting or threatening to their interpersonal security. A worker who interprets exclusion from decision-making as a sign of being undervalued may experience disappointment, frustration or insecurity. These emotional reactions may then influence subsequent behaviour, including reduced communication, avoidance of colleagues or unwillingness to cooperate. Thus, the relationship between psychological characteristics and workplace relationships is better understood as a process in which individuals interpret workplace experiences, experience emotional responses and subsequently behave in ways that may either strengthen or weaken interpersonal relationships.

This perspective is particularly relevant to faith-based organisations. Church workers are expected not only to perform organisational and professional responsibilities but also to work within an environment shaped by values such as love, forgiveness, unity, humility and mutual respect. Nevertheless, religious affiliation does not eliminate interpersonal disagreement or psychological difficulties in the workplace. Evidence from Tanzania indicates that pastors may experience stress arising from disagreements involving church members and leadership (Angetile, 2021). The original study similarly found that church workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District experienced interpersonal difficulties despite the religious and spiritual nature of their work.

The ELCT Morogoro Church District provides an important context for examining these issues because its workers operate within an environment that requires continuous interpersonal interaction and cooperation. Pastors, evangelists, parish workers and other church personnel work together in fulfilling ecclesiastical and organisational responsibilities. The original study focused specifically on these workers and found that workplace difficulties were associated with emotional tensions, misunderstandings, mistrust and strained relationships. Importantly, the study's findings suggest that organisational experiences such as perceived unfairness, exclusion and unclear leadership communication become significant for workplace relationships through the psychological responses they evoke in individual workers.

Although workplace psychology has generated substantial knowledge concerning personality, emotions, attachment and interpersonal behaviour, comparatively limited attention has been given to these processes among workers in faith-based organisations in Tanzania. Existing Tanzanian research has addressed issues such as workplace stress, communication and organisational conflict, but there remains limited context-specific understanding of how individual psychological characteristics are experienced and expressed within workplace relationships among church workers. The original study identified this gap and therefore used a phenomenological approach to explore workers' lived experiences within the ELCT Morogoro Church District.

Against this background, the present paper focuses specifically on the first objective of the original study: to assess how individual psychological characteristics influence workplace relationships among workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. Rather than treating workplace relationships simply as an organisational outcome, the paper examines how workers' emotional reactions, relational tendencies, perceptions of interpersonal treatment and behavioural responses are experienced in everyday workplace interactions. The paper therefore seeks to contribute context-specific evidence to counselling psychology and organisational research by explaining how individual psychological processes are connected with trust, cooperation, interpersonal tension and the development of healthy or unhealthy workplace relationships among church workers in Tanzania.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), provides a useful psychological explanation of how individual relational tendencies may influence workplace relationships. The theory proposes that early relational experiences contribute to the development of internal working models that shape individuals' expectations, emotional security, trust and ways of relating to others. In adulthood, these relational patterns may influence how individuals respond to criticism, interpersonal disagreement, rejection and uncertainty. In workplace settings, workers with greater relational security may be more able to develop trust and maintain cooperative relationships, whereas insecure relational tendencies may be expressed through mistrust, emotional sensitivity, withdrawal or interpersonal tension. This perspective is relevant to the present study because participants' experiences indicated that perceptions of rejection, exclusion, unfairness and interpersonal insecurity were associated with emotional and behavioural responses that weakened workplace relationships. The theory therefore provides a psychological lens for understanding differences in how workers respond to similar interpersonal experiences within the ELCT Morogoro Church District.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between individual psychological characteristics and interpersonal functioning in workplace settings. Leiß and Rausch (2023) examined how personality, emotions and situational characteristics affect social interactions in the workplace and demonstrated the relevance of individual characteristics and emotional experiences to employees' interactions with others. Similarly, Seitl et al. (2023) examined attachment strategies in work relationships and identified interpersonal hyperactivation, associated with emotional instability and negative emotionality and interpersonal deactivation, associated with distancing and mistrust, as important dimensions of workplace relational behaviour. Ren et al. (2024) further integrated attachment and self-regulation perspectives to explain how employees' emotional and behavioural regulation can shape workplace relationships. These studies collectively suggest that individual differences in emotional functioning, relational tendencies and psychological responses

are relevant to how workers establish trust, respond to interpersonal challenges and maintain relationships with colleagues. However, most of this evidence originates from organisational contexts outside Tanzania and does not specifically address church workers in faith-based institutions.

Evidence from Tanzania provides further support for the importance of psychological and relational experiences in workplace interactions. Mkumbo (2014) found that limited involvement in institutional processes and inadequate workplace support were important sources of psychological difficulties among university academic staff. Angetile (2021), in a Tanzanian faith-based context, found that disagreements involving pastors, church members and church leadership were among the sources of stress experienced by pastors. However, these studies did not specifically examine how individual psychological characteristics, particularly personality-related tendencies and emotional regulation, shape workplace relationships among different categories of church workers. The present study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. In the original study, individual psychological characteristics were conceptualised particularly in terms of personality traits and emotional regulation, with attention to how workers responded to conflict and interpersonal difficulties. The study therefore extends existing Tanzanian evidence by examining the psychological processes through which workers' emotional reactions, relational tendencies and behavioural responses are connected with trust, cooperation and the quality of workplace relationships.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to explore workers' lived experiences of how individual psychological characteristics influenced workplace relationships in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. The study involved 13 purposively selected participants, comprising pastors, evangelists, parish workers and the Dean, who were selected based on their experience and knowledge of workplace interactions within the Church District. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group discussion, with participants describing their experiences of interpersonal conflict, emotional reactions and the ways personal characteristics such as anger, patience and sensitivity affected relationships at work. Interviews and the focus group discussion were conducted in Kiswahili, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, involving familiarisation with the data, coding, development and review of themes and interpretation of participants' accounts. This approach was appropriate because the objective sought to understand participants' experiences and meanings rather than statistically measure the relationship between psychological characteristics and workplace relationships. The methodology therefore enabled the study to capture how workers experienced emotional responses, interpersonal trust, withdrawal, cooperation and relationship difficulties within their actual workplace context.

4. Findings and Discussion

Individual Psychological Characteristics and Workplace Relationships

The first objective sought to assess how individual psychological characteristics influence workplace relationships among workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. Analysis of the interviews and Focus Group Discussion showed that participants associated workplace relationships with psychological processes involving emotional reactions, perceptions of interpersonal treatment, trust and behavioural responses. Two themes emerged from the data: (1) Leadership Practices as Determinants of Workplace Relationships and (2) Breakdown of Trust and Interpersonal Relationships.

Leadership Practices as Determinants of Workplace Relationships

Participants described leadership experiences as important in shaping their psychological responses and subsequent relationships with colleagues and leaders. Perceived unfairness, favouritism and exclusion from decision-making were associated with feelings of rejection, insecurity, disappointment and mistrust. These psychological responses were subsequently reflected in reduced cooperation and deterioration of interpersonal relationships.

The Dean explained:

Leadership should unite workers around the mission of the Church. However, when communication is unclear, or decisions appear to favour certain individuals, workers begin to question leadership intentions. Such perceptions gradually weaken trust and cooperation among colleagues (D1, ELCT Morogoro Head Office, Interview conducted on 25 June 2026).

This account indicates that workers' responses to leadership were not limited to the organisational decisions themselves. Rather, participants attached psychological meanings to how decisions were made and communicated. Where leadership was perceived as unfair or selective, workers reported developing mistrust and reduced willingness to cooperate.

A pastor similarly stated:

When workers are not involved in important decisions, they begin to feel that they are not valued. Eventually, they lose trust in leadership and become unwilling to cooperate (P1, Mlimakola Parish, Interview conducted on 12 June 2026).

This quotation demonstrates the connection between psychological perception and workplace behaviour. Feeling undervalued was associated with loss of trust and unwillingness to cooperate. Thus, the findings suggest that individual psychological characteristics become particularly important when workers interpret organisational experiences in personal and relational terms.

An evangelist also observed:

Some workers believe that opportunities are not distributed fairly. Once people begin to think that favouritism exists, relationships among workers become difficult (E1, Galilaya Sub-Parish, Interview conducted on 8 June 2026).

The Focus Group Discussion provided a similar perspective:

People started supporting different sides instead of working together; workers became divided and relationships deteriorated (FGD-P, ELCT Morogoro District Office, Focus Group Discussion conducted on 10 June 2026).

Taken together, these accounts show that participants experienced workplace relationships through psychological processes of interpretation, emotion and behavioural response. Perceived unfairness and exclusion were associated with feelings of insecurity and mistrust, while these feelings were reflected in avoidance, reduced cooperation and division among workers.

Breakdown of Trust and Interpersonal Relationships

The second theme concerned the breakdown of trust and interpersonal relationships. Participants regarded trust as an important foundation of healthy workplace relationships and explained that when trust was compromised, cooperation, mutual support and teamwork deteriorated. Unresolved conflict, perceived unfair treatment and prolonged disagreements were associated with suspicion, fear, emotional distance and withdrawal.

One pastor explained:

After the conflict, people no longer trusted each other. Even simple conversations became difficult because everyone feared that whatever was said might be reported elsewhere (P2, Penuel Sub-Parish, Interview conducted on 13 June 2026).

This experience illustrates how loss of interpersonal trust affected ordinary workplace interaction. Communication became associated with fear and self-protection rather than openness and cooperation.

Similarly, an evangelist stated:

There was a time when we worked as one family, but after the misunderstandings, people started avoiding one another. Some workers could stay for a long time without speaking to each other (E2, Yeriko Sub-Parish, Interview conducted on 18 June 2026).

The account demonstrates how unresolved interpersonal difficulties were accompanied by emotional distancing and avoidance. Rather than remaining temporary disagreements, these experiences affected the quality of continuing relationships among workers.

The Dean further stated:

Once trust begins to disappear, even ordinary conversations become difficult because workers start interpreting one another's actions with doubt. Rebuilding that trust requires openness, forgiveness and consistent leadership (D1, ELCT Morogoro Head Office, Interview conducted on 25 June 2026).

The Focus Group Discussion also revealed group divisions:

"People began supporting different sides. Instead of seeing ourselves as fellow servants of God, we started identifying ourselves according to the groups we belonged to" (FGD-P, ELCT Morogoro District Office, Focus Group Discussion conducted on 10 June 2026).

Another participant added:

Some workers became afraid of expressing their opinions because they believed that whatever they said could be interpreted politically or used against them (FGD-P, ELCT Morogoro District Office, Focus Group Discussion conducted on 10 June 2026).

These accounts indicate that the deterioration of trust was accompanied by psychological and behavioural changes, including suspicion, emotional withdrawal, silence, avoidance and reduced participation in collaborative activities. Participants therefore experienced trust not simply as an organisational condition but as a psychological element that shaped how they interpreted and responded to other workers.

Theoretical Interpretation

The findings are consistent with Attachment Theory, particularly the importance of trust, consistency and emotional security in interpersonal relationships. The participants' experiences of mistrust, emotional distancing, avoidance and reduced interpersonal openness suggest that relationships become more difficult when workers perceive their interpersonal environment as inconsistent, unfair or emotionally unsafe. The findings also correspond with Cognitive Behavioural Theory, because participants' emotional and behavioural responses appeared to be connected to the meanings they attached to workplace experiences. Perceived exclusion, favouritism and conflict were interpreted negatively, followed by feelings of rejection, insecurity and mistrust and behaviours such as withdrawal and reduced cooperation.

Discussion in Relation to Previous Studies

The findings are consistent with previous literature showing that psychological and relational characteristics are relevant to workplace interactions. The present study extends this understanding by showing, within the ELCT Morogoro Church District, how workers' experiences of trust, emotional responses and interpersonal interpretations were reflected in workplace relationships. The findings are also consistent with the original study's observation that workplace relationships were shaped through psychological interpretations of leadership and interpersonal experiences rather than through organisational structures alone.

Overall, the findings indicate that individual psychological characteristics were closely connected with workplace relationships among church workers. Participants' experiences showed that feelings of rejection, insecurity, disappointment, mistrust, emotional distancing and avoidance were important psychological processes through which workplace relationships deteriorated. Perceived unfairness and exclusion were associated with negative psychological responses, while weakened trust was associated with withdrawal, reduced cooperation and interpersonal division. The findings therefore demonstrate that understanding workplace relationships within the ELCT Morogoro Church District requires attention to the psychological experiences through which workers interpret and respond to their interpersonal environment.

5. Summary

The study found that individual psychological characteristics were closely associated with workplace relationships among church workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. Two major themes emerged: leadership practices as determinants of workplace relationships and breakdown of trust and interpersonal relationships. Participants' experiences showed that perceptions of unfairness, favouritism and exclusion from decision-making were associated with feelings of rejection, insecurity, disappointment and mistrust, which were reflected in avoidance, reduced cooperation and interpersonal division. The findings further showed that when trust deteriorated, workers became emotionally distant, hesitant to communicate openly and less willing to collaborate. Therefore, workplace relationships were shaped not only by organisational circumstances but also by the psychological meanings workers attached to their interpersonal experiences.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that individual psychological characteristics play an important role in shaping workplace relationships among church workers in the ELCT Morogoro Church District. Participants' experiences demonstrated that emotional responses, perceptions of interpersonal treatment, trust and behavioural responses were closely connected to the quality of workplace relationships. In particular, perceived unfairness, exclusion and unresolved interpersonal difficulties were associated with mistrust, emotional withdrawal, avoidance and reduced cooperation. The findings therefore indicate that promoting healthy workplace relationships requires attention not only to organisational practices but also to the psychological experiences and relational needs of individual workers.

7. Recommendation

The ELCT Morogoro Church District should strengthen workplace relationships by promoting fair, transparent and inclusive leadership practices that reduce perceptions of favouritism, exclusion and unfair treatment. Church leaders should provide workers with opportunities to express their views, participate in decisions that affect their work and seek clarification on matters that may create feelings of rejection, insecurity or mistrust. Since the findings indicate that workers' psychological responses to workplace experiences were associated with withdrawal, avoidance and reduced cooperation, leaders should encourage emotional awareness, constructive emotional regulation and respectful interpersonal interaction among church workers.

Furthermore, the ELCT Morogoro Church District should establish effective mechanisms for early identification and resolution of interpersonal conflicts before disagreements develop into prolonged mistrust, emotional distancing and social division. Church leaders should promote active listening, openness, forgiveness and consistent treatment of workers as strategies for rebuilding interpersonal trust. Regular opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation and supportive interpersonal engagement should also be encouraged. These measures can help workers respond to difficult workplace experiences in more constructive ways, thereby strengthening trust, cooperation and healthier workplace relationships among church workers.

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