

Knowledge-Sharing Behaviour Within a Non-Profit Organisation: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: Despite their heterogeneous compositions, non-profit organisations (NPO) are inherently knowledge-centric, necessitating continued exploration into the influential constructs that shape knowledge-sharing (KS) behaviour among employees. This study offers an in-depth examination of KS behaviour within a community-based service provider in Dublin, Ireland. Using a novel approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), data collection consisted of seventeen semi-structured interviews across multiple locations. Findings show that four overarching themes explain how and why knowledge is shared in this organisational context. The four themes developed through rigorous RTA offer the organisation a greater understanding of its employees' KS behaviours. Practical recommendations are provided to inform organisational policy and improve staff performance in the service of those in its care. Additionally, the novel approach to RTA, the showcasing of axial connections, and the integration of theoretical models represent scholarly advancements in the fields of organisational psychology and motivational theory. By offering a deeper understanding of human interaction within knowledge-intensive work environments, this research informs organisational policy to foster a knowledge-sharing culture. It highlights the importance of supporting employee autonomy, enhancing competence and cultivating stronger workplace relatedness. These developments contribute to creating a psychologically safe environment capable of withstanding increasing social and structural demands.

Keywords: Knowledge-sharing, Qualitative research, Reflexive thematic analysis, Theoretical contributions

1. Introduction

Knowledge management (KM) comprises three fundamental processes: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, and applying that knowledge (Suchitra and Gopinath, 2020). It is a set of activities that permit the organisation to create, use, and share knowledge by integrating people, technologies, processes, and strategy (Andreeva and Kianto, 2012; Swain and Lightfoot, 2016). There is no denying the proliferation of academic research in recent decades on the management of knowledge (Serenko and Bontis, 2004; Serenko and Dumay, 2015b, 2015a, 2017), and, in particular, the interest in KS (Serenko and Bontis, 2016; Ahmad and Karim, 2019). While studies show considerable interest in the public and private sectors (Oliveira and Pinheiro, 2021), there is a need for increased examination of how and why knowledge is shared within a NPO (Bloice and Burnett, 2016). Literature also confirms that numerous factors influence KS behaviour, all of which are dependent upon the context of the research (Issac and Thomas, 2019).

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) state that “the one sure source of competitive advantage is knowledge” (Dinh Tho, 2017, 1240). This is considered critical for success, regardless of whether it is a for-profit organisation or a not-for-profit organisation, since both require knowledge-centric approaches to function effectively (Vakharia *et al.*, 2018). The understanding of knowledge and its meaning has undergone numerous ratifications from Socrates to Polanyi (Anand and Walsh, 2016; Oliveira *et al.*, 2022). This paper honours Polanyi (2009) view that knowledge comprises both tacit and explicit dimensions. Polanyi distinguishes between “knowing what” and “knowing how,” referring to the practicalities of human experience and the theoretical aspects (Polanyi, 2009, p. 7). This view of knowledge continues in contemporary literature (Nguyen, Siri and Malik, 2022; Hadjimichael, Pyrko and Tsoukas, 2024), showcasing that personal knowledge resides in the minds of the individual (Ferber and Rechberg, 2024). Employees cannot be mandated to share knowledge, but they are ore willing if enabled to do so (Tseng, 2017; Zhang, Song and Song, 2020).

The organisation is an “autopoietic system” in which the various independent employees or groups of employees develop and evolve, leading to the creation of new knowledge (Nonaka, Toyama and Konno, 2000, p. 26; Vakharia *et al.*, 2018). These systems function collectively by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, thereby generating new levels of knowing (Nonaka, Toyama and Konno, 2000; Polanyi, 2009). It is based on the reciprocal processes between knower and receiver (Endres and Rhoad, 2016; Zaremohzzabieh and Rasdi, 2025), involving the sharing of experiences and the exchange of best practices (Chou, 2005). The reciprocal interactions among employees are contingent upon multifaceted constructs, with no single construct emerging as the predominant facilitator or inhibitor of KS (Farooq, 2018; Masood *et al.*, 2023).

2. Literature Review

While extant literature examines KS from a plethora of sectors, there is still limited research towards the KS behaviour of employees within NPOs (Bloice and Burnett, 2016; Zbucha *et al.*, 2020; Le and Tuamsuk, 2023). Historically, non-profit organisations have been viewed as somewhat underdeveloped in their approach to KM processes, such as examining what enables and/or hinders KS. Additionally, stakeholders within non-profit organisations are more interested in the soft “touchy-feely” returns on investment (Sibghal and Raj Kumar, 2016, p. 227). NPOs are entities characterised by a degree of institutionalisation and autonomy and operate without pursuing personal gain. They are distinct from both the public and private sectors due to their voluntary nature in assisting the local community and broader societal needs (Yi, Qiu and Li, 2025). NPOs are considered knowledge-centric despite their heterogeneous compositions (Vakharia *et al.*, 2018; Mahasuar, 2023). Research suggests that stakeholders tend to rally under a single cause, such as saving or improving the lives of someone or something, or the cause to “fight homelessness”, “end hunger”, or “support children and adults with intellectual disabilities” (Rangan, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, prior research indicates that NPOs tend to depend on external knowledge rather than leveraging the internal knowledge available within the organisation to enhance operational procedures (Sibghal and Raj Kumar, 2016). Contemporary research explores constructs such as authentic leadership and its effects on KS behaviour (Sharif *et al.*, 2023), or the mechanics of KM within NPOs (Mahasuar, 2023). For example, Zbucha *et al.* (2020) explore the influence of the human dimension on the adoption and utilisation of knowledge transfer in NPOs. Although the study does not explicitly define what constitutes the human dimension, it emphasises the importance of KS intentions and behaviour with the NPO. In another study, employees of a Malaysian voluntary organisation highlight the importance of KS in relationships and accountability in improving organisational performance (Mohd Noor, Ah and Idris, 2017). Other research suggests that access to knowledge, the perceived value of knowledge, and the intrinsic motivation to assist colleagues enhance the KS culture within an NPO in Thailand (Le and Tuamsuk, 2023).

3. Research Methodology (1000 Words)

This research follows the guidelines of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a, 2021c). It maintains that “reflexivity focuses on the role the researcher has in knowledge production” (Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy, 2018, p. 371), particularly in generating themes related to knowledge sharing within a community-based service provider. The philosophical lens underpinning the analysis is acknowledged, with the research employing RTA through Heidegger’s philosophy, positioning the researcher’s Dasein (being-there) at the forefront (Heidegger, 2010). This aligns with the need to place the researcher “front and centre” in the interpretive process (Heidegger, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2021b, p. 9). RTA supports a fusion of horizons, recognising that “meaning emerges at the *intersection* of data and the researcher’s contextual and theoretical” positioning (Braun and Clarke, 2021d, p. 210). Addressing Braun and Clarke’s (2021c) methodological concerns, this research introduces the ‘coding family of RTA’ to enhance rigour and trustworthiness in Phase 2 of the systematic data coding process, as shown in Figure 1. This coding family builds on Saldaña (2016), integrating the researcher’s reflexive coding approach.

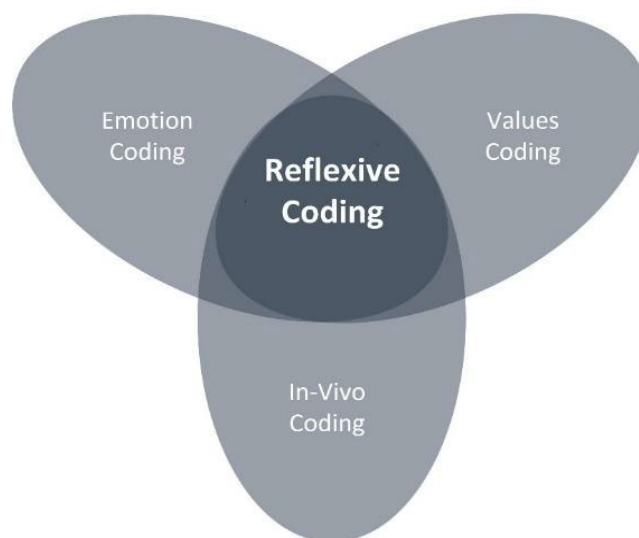


Figure 1: The coding family of RTA

Figure 2 represents emotion and value coding in practice, with Figure 3: In-vivo coding in practice illustrating the analytical process that leads to the creation of the interpretative and reflexive codes. Images are segments taken from data. Notably, the emotion code titles are based on works by Susanto et al. (2020) and Keltner and Cowen (2021). Both Interpretative reflexive coding examples, circled below, illustrate a central idea or scheme pertinent to the participant. This aligns with Braun and Clarke's ideal "to be reflexive, be be reflexive!" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 3). It is the analytical process of becoming immersed in data. Requiring deep reflective questioning of the researcher's 'self', while imagining and questioning "taken for granted thinking" (Braun and Clarke, 2021c, p. 332). This study incorporated manual coding by way of the creation of an Excel workbook. The notebook is akin to a painter's canvas, where the interpretative artistic style is viewed as a craft (Saldaña, 2011).

Interview data	Emotion Coding	Values coding	Interpretive reflexive coding	Axial connection
It's probably in a way opportunistic because something will crop up...lot of...when did you send that? Where did you send the referral to?	Eager	Opportunity to help others	Wanting to give as much assistance as possible	Organisational commitment

Figure 2: Emotion and values coding in practice

Interview data	Emotion Coding	In-vivo coding	Interpretive reflexive coding	Axial connection
It actually felt nice. I felt honoured and privileged that they asked me	Pride	Honoured and privileged	Having a sense of belonging	Professional Identity

Figure 3: In-vivo coding in practice

The above data samples illustrate the evolution of two of what this research refers to as 'the twelve axial connections'. Axial connections are defined as dynamic, influential constructs that influence employees' KS behaviour. In line with Bronfenbrenner and Morris(2006)s bio-ecological theory (BT), the axial connections are also shaped by participants' interactions.

4. Findings and Discussion

This research presents the four themes that influence employees' KS behaviours with this community-based service provider through a novel approach to RTA. The non-profit sector is increasingly being determined by increased regulatory demands, which are stifling the willingness to KS. There is no denying that organisational challenges, such as a lack of cross-disciplinary understanding, are causing a divide between the professionals within the NPO. This, combined with a reluctance to build meaningful relationships, impacts employee development, reducing employee competence due to a lack of KS behaviour. Autonomy is reduced by increased regulatory demands and a lack of competence, leading to a fear of asking or offering knowledge.

Table 1: The four themes of influence illustrate how each theme tells a story where "the title alone, clearly conveys that this is a shared meaning with a central organising concept theme" (Braun and Clarke, 2021c, p.p. 341-341). Additionally, a description of each theme is accompanied by a representative quote.

Table 1: The four themes of influence

Theme	Description	Representative quote
Increased regulatory demands prevent meaningful employee connection	Employees are concentrating on the demands of the regulator instead of the needs of one another	I don't think these bureaucrats at the top realise that on the ground, those demands are huge
A misplaced sense of hierarchy limits interdisciplinary cooperation	The individual demands require individual focus, regardless of others' opinions	My old job was continuously sharing information, sharing thoughts, and collaboratively working, while here it's a little bit more individualised
Employee's desire to return to the way things were	A sense that things were easier in the past, with a greater sense of camaraderie	A resistance to change can be something...why are we bringing this in when everything else worked previously?
A lack of psychological safety impedes the willingness to share knowledge	Employees no longer feel a sense of personal security	I know there's huge emotional impact to social work and it involves a good bit of trust between us.

The model below Figure 4: Causes of KS reduction, illustrates the slow decrease of KS over time, most of which has gone unnoticed by practitioners. The model illustrates the paradigm shift within the organisation from the employees' perspective. Point A represents the heightened level of KS from the perspective of the way things were (Theme 3). Point B represents the present state of affairs within this community-based service provider.

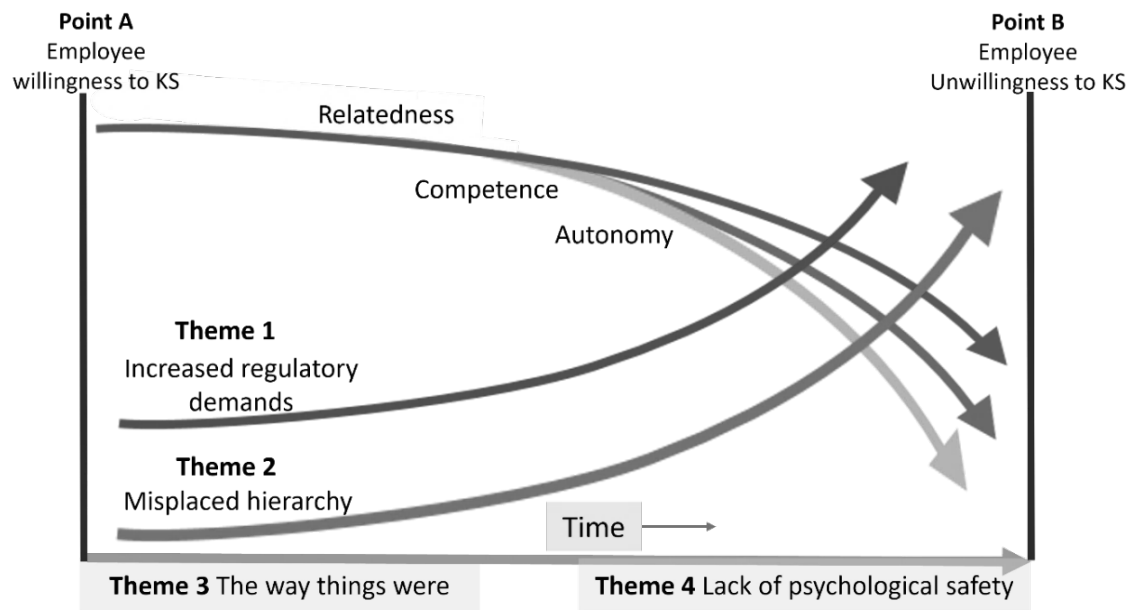


Figure 4: Causes of KS reduction

4.1 Theme 1: Increased Regulatory Demands Prevent Meaningful Employee Connection

Increased regulatory demands demonstrate that KS is negatively affected due to the limited interconnectedness of employees, resulting in reduced competence and autonomous behaviour. Participant 1, for example, expresses the cautionary rhetoric that "first protocol would be to link in with my supervisor." This adherence is essential since employees must "double check that that guidance...was the most appropriate and up to date" (Participant 4). Participant 4 maintains that there is a need to be "15 steps ahead" of the regulator. This adds pressure onto staff members who must consider "what needs to be done and what doesn't need to be done and what needs to be done every month" (Participant 13). This results in knowledge that is formal and produced under the governance of regulatory bodies (Rathi, Given and Forcier, 2016). While having a guided approach to care, there is a sense that the organisation has forgotten that "it's a human service" (Participant 11). In response to a question concerning *offering* knowledge, Participant 6's response, "yeah, that's a tricky one" implies the controlling nature of the regulator. This question is insightful, as it reveals that all participants, bar one, encountered difficulties in the concept of 'offering' knowledge. This suggests a reluctance to share knowledge.

The presence of strict regulations, while accommodating the explicit dimension, constrained employees' intrinsic motivation to share. This situation adversely affects several constructs that facilitate and reinforce a KS culture, such as staff cohesion and strong interpersonal relationships (Kim and Lee, 2012; Rathi, Given and Forcier, 2014; Imam and Zaheer, 2021).

4.2 Theme 2: A Misplaced Sense of Hierarchy Limits Interdisciplinary Cooperation

Undoubtedly, the participants have a passion and drive towards their avocation to support service users "from cradle to grave" (Participant 3). However, over time, participants have developed a need to maintain a hierarchical status within the organisation. Hierarchical mindsets negatively impact the connections among employees, limiting the reciprocal exchange of tacit 'knowing' (Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Ul-Durar *et al.*, 2023). Akhavan *et al.*, (2013) argue that a hierarchical culture, whether intentional or not, inhibits the natural inclination of human beings to share their knowledge. It is asserted that these mindsets have become fixed over time. Due to the need to stay "very much in [your] lane" (Participant 12) or not wanting to "give the wrong answer" (Participant 1) since "it could be some sort of disciplinary thing that you would come into if you don't share the right information with the right people" (Participant 17). This maintains an outdated "hierarchical decision-making" approach to KS (Lettieri, Borga and Savoldelli, 2004; Rhodes and Keogan, 2005). There are elements of traditional hierarchical behaviour that limit intrapersonal KS behaviour. One participant points out that some employees "might use a lot of...like big words, a lot of language that's not accessible to everyone." This results in "other disciplines" not knowing or wanting to ask for advice (Participant 5). The presence of hierarchy indicates that the organisation does not "have that culture of sharing...[but] maybe... in-house, in your team...in your discipline, there might be a little" (Participant 5). Another participant highlights that "clinicians will focus on their therapeutic work...frontline staff will focus on their key working [and] service managers focus on everything. Uh, you know, it depends on your scope of work, where your focus lies." Borders are drawn between what can be shared and what should be shared. This results in a disconnect between employees and limits knowledge creation through the intersection of knowing. Over time, the tacit learning outcomes of the employees are reduced. That is, as one "dominion is established over a lesser power and the latter operates as a function of the greater power, an order of rank...is bound to produce the appearance of an order of means and ends" (Nietzsche, 1968, p.p. 299, 300). However, this order of means and ends does not support KS from all areas of tacit and explicit existence within this service provider.

4.3 Theme 3: Employee's Desire to Return to the way Things Were

This theme represents how participants would reflect (emotion code) how, in the past, staff would work together in a more congenial manner, welcoming ideas and suggestions from peers. Recounting that "it's interesting how you forget your past experience and it's only when you're talking about it and going God" (Participant 9). Participant 9 also expressed that "there is a richness or an opportunity that is missing" from the organisation due to the lack of direct human interaction. That "we don't have that culture of sharing" (Participant 5) since "there's a whole lot of new policies and new procedures, new everything" (Participant 7). This sense of acceptance and nostalgia (both emotional codes) illustrates the participants' need and desire to return to the way things were in some capacity. Participants recall the way things were while going out to care for an individual as part of a two-person team, they "just loved it (laugh)...[they] found it really supportive (Participant 2). Data indicates that there are "a lot of experienced people...you feel we should have gone back to basics" (Participant 6) concerning connection with other staff members and communicating thoughts and experiences. Participant 16 provides an insightful understanding of why participants KS in that they "give an example of my previous experience of why this has worked well in the past." Participants expressed the longing for times when they were able and supported each other in the "past coming up the stairs from the canteen, you'd say, oh God, you know what? I just wanted to talk to you" (Participant 2).

4.4 Theme 4: A Lack of Psychological Safety Impedes the Willingness to Share Knowledge

The lack of psychological safety encapsulates the overall sentiment of participants. This theme is determined to be a psychological need that participants require to realise their KS potential. It is proposed that this 'need' is an additional construct to self-determination theory, which previously demonstrated how its constructs influence the behaviour of employees concerning KS (Sedighi *et al.*, 2018; Cai, Li and Shi, 2024). Employees within this service provider 'want' to share what is known to them "organically without being asked" (Participant 4). Participants "know not to overstep [their] boundaries" (Participant 15) and to take care not to "put your head above the parapet" (Participant 5). Psychological safety elicits employees to work together and share what is known through "trusting each other and respecting each other" (Participant 6). Participant 5 states, "for me offering [knowledge], I have to feel like it's in a safe space with people I know and trust." This implies the need

for psychological safety despite the participant having a strong sense of identity and knowledge around social care and its requirements. To have “a sense of security” (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.235) elicits the growth of meaningful relationships that can increase KS behaviour. In certain instances, employees “have to feel like it’s in a safe space” before sharing their knowledge (Participant 5). A lack of psychological safety is evident throughout the organisation, as employees do not feel safe sharing their knowledge with others, resulting in a disconnect. This disconnect generates a forced positionality, reducing autonomy and compromising staff’s sense of competence. Employees aim to work in an environment where they are comfortable expressing new ideas and do not fear asking questions or seeking feedback from their peers (Edmondson, 2004).

5. Conclusion

This research indicates that the knowledge shared within NPOs has undergone a paradigm shift. What was once the sharing of knowings from the tacit dimension is now primarily information being shared through the explicit dimension. To redress this, there is a continued need to reduce the number of rules (Sandhu, Jain and Ahmad, 2011). To provide an environment where employees can explore new ways of ‘doing’ by expressing their experiential ways of ‘doing’. By loosening the chains of the regulator, employees can develop a greater sense of autonomy through constructive interaction, reducing the fear of repercussions or having a sense of ‘them and us’ within this community-based service provider. Employees can create a future where staff have a greater sense of belonging and happiness while working in an already strained sector. Ultimately, this is the fusion of multiple ‘Dasein’ horizons towards a sense of togetherness that is supported in the care for one another (Heidegger, 2010).

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval for this study was obtained from TU Dublin, Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that all procedures complied with established ethical standards

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the purpose, procedures, risks, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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