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The impact of person-group fit on knowledge hiding: Mediating role of work-group identification

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Background: Knowledge hiding behaviour (KHB) is a pervasive problem, and many organisations are vigorously pursuing avenues to alleviate this harmful behaviour. In the academic literature, studies investigating the predictors of KHB have been restricted, specifically, in the area of work groups. Therefore, the current study sought to fill this void in the existing literature.

Aim: The aims of the study were twofold. Firstly, to determine the impact of person-group fit (PGF) on KHB, and secondly, to investigate whether work-group identification (WID) mediated the impact of PGF on KHB.

Setting: The study was conducted among respondents in a university in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Method: The study adopted a quantitative design using a survey approach. A convenience sample of 201 respondents, who had experience working in groups, was selected. Data were collected using self-completion questionnaires and analysed by computing descriptive and inferential statistics using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Results: The results show a significant and negative relationship between PGF and KHB, WID and KHB and a significant and positive association between PGF and WID. The results also revealed that WID partially mediated the PGF and KHB relationship.

Conclusion: The results confirmed the importance PGF and WID in reducing the prevalence of KHB among employees in work-groups.

Contribution: The results contribute to person-environment fit theory, social identity theory and the management of KHB in the workplace.

Keywords: knowledge hiding behaviour; person-group fit; work-group identification; person–environment fit theory; social identity theory.

Introduction

The field of knowledge management has generated considerable research and scholarly interest in the past few decades (Edwards & Lönnqvist 2023). Knowledge has been universally recognised as a critical organisational resource and, if properly managed, could be a source of competitive advantage for many organisations (Garg, Kumar & Ganguly 2022). Accordingly, there has been a concerted effort by many organisations to invest heavily in inculcating a culture of knowledge sharing among its employees (Babcock 2004; Wang & Noe 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that knowledge sharing is associated with a host of positive outcomes such as increased innovation, learning and performance (Gagné et al. 2019). Notwithstanding this, managers and employees are still reluctant to share knowledge and instead engage in the practice of concealing knowledge from their co-workers. Scholars have used the terms knowledge hiding behaviour (KHB) to describe this phenomenon. Connelly et al. (2012:65) define knowledge hiding as 'an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person'. This behaviour comprises three specific dimensions, namely playing dumb, evasive and rationalised hiding (Connelly et al. 2012). In recent years, KHB has been the subject of increased academic research (Anand, Offergelt & Anand 2022; Garg et al. 2022; Škerlavaj, Černe & Batistič 2023). It is viewed as a type of counterproductive work behaviour and has been linked to conflict, declining innovation and a lack of trust (Škerlavaj et al. 2023). A few studies have found some positive effects of KHB (Venz & Nesher Shoshan 2022; Xiong et al. 2021). However, the deleterious effects of KHB have propelled it to the foreground, with many organisations actively seeking ways to assuage the levels of this damaging behaviour.

Studies examining the antecedents of KHB have been given disproportionately less attention than research investigating its outcomes (Zhao et al. 2019). The research investigating the antecedents has tended to focus on variables such as personality traits (Pan et al. 2018), workplace ostracism (Zhao et al. 2016), negative workplace gossip (Khan et al. 2023) and workplace bullying (Islam & Chaudhary 2024). Recently, scholars have called for more research into the factors that could prevent KHB behaviour in the workplace (He & Wei 2022). There currently exists a dearth of scholarship exploring the factors that may reduce KHB, particularly, in the context of work groups. A few studies have demonstrated that leader–member exchange (Babič et al. 2019; Zhao et al. 2019) and interactional justice (Ghani et al. 2020) decrease KHB among work-group members. Work groups or teams have become a popular and effective mechanism to undertake work-related tasks and projects (Khawam, DiDona & Hernández 2017). According to Kozlowski (2018:205), 'teams are at the core of how work is accomplished in business, medicine, science, the military and sports – in virtually all human pursuits'. Thus, seeking ways to reduce KHB in work groups is a salient and inescapable undertaking.

One factor that has been given scant attention is person-group fit (PGF). It has been defined as the similarity or compatibility of the individual and other members of his or her group (Li, Kristof-Brown & Nielsen 2019). This congruence could be based on a number dimensions such as personality traits, values, work ethics or other characteristics. Person-group fit is an important predictor variable and has been associated with a host of outcomes such as group cohesion (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson 2005), performance (De Cooman et al. 2016) and commitment (Sung, Seong & Kim 2020). Linking PGF fit to KHB will usher new avenues of research that could potentially unearth novel factors that could play a critical role in reducing this counterproductive work behaviour.

Against the aforementioned backdrop, the current study examined the impact of individuals' PGF on KHB in the context of work groups. To date, there are no studies known to the researchers which have examined these constructs in this way. This study also sought to shed light on the intervening mechanism through which PGF could influence KHB. The construct of work-group identification (WID) was examined as the mediating variable. According to Lindsay, Sheehan and De Cieri (2020), WID relates to:

> [*T*]he extent to which a person defines him or herself in terms of work-group identity and subsequently acts as a member of a group and is 'essential' in determining or mediating employee effort. (p. 436)

Therefore, the validation of WID as a mediating variable in the PGF and KHB relationship is pertinent to our understanding of how this association occurs.

Research problem

Knowledge hiding behaviour is a problem in many organisations, and there is a need to find ways of reducing and eventually eradicating this behaviour among employees and managers. Past research examining the antecedents that negatively affect KHB has been limited, particularly in the context of work groups. There currently exists no studies known to the researchers who have focused on individuals' PGF as a possible negative antecedent of KHB and WID as the mediating variable in this relationship. Consequently, research understanding the impact of PGF on KHB will help fill this void in the extant literature.

Aims of the study

The aims of the study were twofold. Firstly, to determine the impact of PGF on KHB, and secondly, to investigate whether WID identification mediated the impact of PGF on KHB. Aligned to these aims, the research objectives that were articulated are discussed further in the text.

Research objectives

The research objectives for this study were as follows:

- RO1: To determine the impact of PGF on KHB.
- RO2: To determine the impact of PGF on WID.
- RO3: To determine the impact of WID on KHB.
- RO4: To understand the extent to which WID will mediate the impact of PGF on KHB.

Literature review

Factors increasing knowledge hiding behaviour at work: The roles of adverse experiences and personality traits

People who are treated unfairly at work are inclined to react in negative ways that disrupt collegiality. One such reaction is to engage in knowledge hiding. Previous research has demonstrated that employees who experienced organisational injustice responded by increasing their KHB because they felt psychologically disconnected from their organisations (Jahanzeb, DeClercq & Fatima 2021). Workplace ostracism caused workers employed in several Chinese hotels to increase their levels of evasive hiding and playing dumb (Zhao et al. 2016). Aggressive behaviours directed at employees such as workplace bullying resulted in those affected employees having to react in the form of knowledge hiding (Islam & Chaudhary 2024). Abusive supervision also exacerbated KHB among employees. For example, Pradhan, Srivastava and Mishra's (2020) research on a sample of information technology workers employed by various organisations in India revealed that abusive supervision resulted in these employees engaging in KHB. Khan et al.'s (2023) research revealed that negative workplace gossip intensified knowledge hiding by increasing personal ego depletion in a sample of employees working in Chinese high-technology organisations. The negative experience of psychological danger, whereby an employee feels threatened, fearful and anxious, could propel this employee to engage in counterproductive knowledge behaviours. For example, the findings of Lanke's (2023) study suggest that psychological danger may lead to interpersonal distrust among employees, which in turn, may result in KHB.

People with specific character traits have proclivities to engage in KHB. The dark triad of personality traits is an illustration of this. Pan et al.'s (2018) study reported that all three dark triad of personality traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy were positively linked to knowledge hiding. This finding was corroborated by Karim (2022), who demonstrated a significant, positive and direct relationship between the three dark triads of personality traits and KHB.

Factors reducing knowledge hiding behaviour in the workplace

As highlighted in the introduction, research relating to the prevention of KHB is limited and requires attention (He & Wei 2022). Past research has been restricted to a few antecedents. For example, altruistic leadership was shown to negatively impact subordinates' KHB (Abdillah, Wu & Anita 2022; He & Wei 2022). Prior studies have also confirmed the significance of ethical leadership in mitigating the prevalence of KHB in the workplace (Koay & Lim 2021). Men et al. (2018) also found a negative association between ethical leadership and KHB in a sample of employees belonging to teams in high-technology organisations in China. In an experimental study on work teams, Babič et al. (2019) found that leader–member exchange reduced knowledge hiding among the members. Zhao et al. (2019), who also investigated the influence of leader–member exchange on knowledge hiding in a sample of respondents working in teams in a diversified company in Shanghai, China, demonstrated that leader–member exchange was negatively associated with evasive hiding and playing dumb. Previous research also focused on the part played by organisational justice in attenuating KHB. For example, Ghani et al.'s (2020) study revealed negative associations between interactional justice and all three dimensions of knowledge hiding, namely playing dumb, evasive and rationalised hiding.

Consequences of person-group fit

Person-group fit is a significant predictor variable and has gained traction because of the increased prominence of work groups in contemporary organisations. Past research examining the effects of PGF have linked it to a number of positive work outcomes. For example, De Cooman et al.'s (2016) study findings showed that team members, who shared perceptions of high person-team fit, outperformed those members who did not. In addition, these high-fitting team members reported high levels of satisfaction with the team. Sung et al. (2020) demonstrated that employees who perceived high levels of PGF, person–supervisor fit and person–organisation fit were committed to their teams. In another study, Li et al. (2019) reported that multidimensional perceived PGF fit was positively associated with individuals' satisfaction and commitment to their work groups and cohesion. Pierro et al.'s (2015) research on a sample of employees comprising 30 work groups from two different Italian organisations, revealed that PGF fit on the need for cognitive disclosure was positively linked to job performance and employees' identification with their work groups, partially mediated this relationship. Cheng et al. (2013) showed that when subordinate employees perceived high levels of person-group value congruence, their voice behaviour was enhanced, and this occurred through the intervening variable of psychological safety. In a meta-analysis of 172 studies, Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) concluded that person-group value congruence was positively related to group cohesion, job satisfaction, commitment and negatively related to intention to quit the organisation.

Antecedents and consequences of work-group identification

Previous studies have investigated WID by focusing on the mediating role that this construct plays in predictor and outcome relationships. For example, Cicero and Pierro (2007), using two field surveys, reported that charismatic leadership was positively related to WID, which in turn, was positively linked to work effort, job involvement, job satisfaction and negatively associated with turnover intentions. Olkkonen and Lipponen's (2006) study showed that the mediating influence of work-unit identification in the relationship between interactional justice and extra-role behaviour directed towards the work group was significant. Patel, Budhwar and Varma (2012) found that WID mediated the link between overall justice in the workplace and presenteeism and social loafing in a sample of Indian call centre employees. In a study investigating the process of group identity formation through social interaction in work groups, it was shown that only after group members' achievement values converged (a type of PGF), was there an increase in the identification with the relevant work groups and, in turn, this higher identification resulted in an increased work-group performance (Meeussen, Delvaux & Phalet 2014). More recently, Lindsay et al.'s (2020) study results revealed that an employee's preference to identify with his or her work group is heightened by the distinctiveness of a supervisor from a different cultural or national group. This, in turn, results in a decreased turnover intention and knowledge sharing among group members.

Theoretical foundation

Person–environment fit theory: Person–environment (PE) fit theory is rooted in the work of Kurt Lewin who espoused in his seminal formula that a person's behaviour is a function of the person and the environment (Lewin 1951). This principle has led to the germination of a plethora of prominent PE fit theories in the last few decades, which sought to shed light on the formation and changes in a person's PE fit in vocational choice, employee selection, work adjustment, stress and motivation (Vleugels et al. 2023). Broadly, PE fit is defined as the congruence between the person and the environment (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011). Pervin (1968:561) claimed that the similarity between the person and environment is 'viewed as expressing itself in higher performance, satisfaction and little stress in the system' and dissimilarity leads to the opposite. Van Vianen (2018) highlighted the three principles that PE fit theories are grounded on. Firstly, PE fit has a stronger influence on individual outcomes such as job satisfaction than either the person or environment separately. Secondly, outcomes associated with PE fit are the

most optimal when the individual characteristics (e.g. values, needs and abilities) and organisational characteristics (e.g. values, needs and supplies) are congruent irrespective of whether the level of these characterises are low, medium or high. Thirdly, dissimilarities between the individual and environmental characteristics, also known as PE misfit, impact negatively on work outcomes regardless of the direction of these incongruences.

Generally, PE fit will yield beneficial consequences to both the individual and organisation (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005), and PE misfit will result in negative outcomes (Vleugels et al. 2019). People have a distinctive need to achieve a fit with their work environment, and this is accentuated by the premise that the organisational environment may be central to a person's identity (De Cooman, Leuven & Vleugels 2022). The essential need to belong has encouraged people to make comparisons between themselves and others in their social environment. A feeling of belongingness is experienced when an individual perceives that he or she shares characteristics or is similar to other people (Van Vianen 2018).

Social identity theory: The social identity theory, developed in the early 1970s by Tajfel et al. (1971), has emerged as a significant theory in explaining human inter-group behaviour in the last few decades. A person's social identity forms a significant part of a person's self-concept and is derived from membership in a particular group. Thus, a person with a defined social identity may share many characteristic that are representative of the group that he or she is affiliated to (Deaux 2001). Tajfel (1978) eloquently defines a person's social identity as:

> [*T*]hat part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his or her knowledge of his or her membership of a group or groups together with the value and the emotional significance attached to the membership. (p. 63)

A person's self-concept is the perception that an individual has of himself or herself on dimensions such as the physical, social, spiritual and moral being (Gecas 1982:3). Brown (2000) contends that an individual aspires to achieve a positive social identity, which is acquired from favourably comparing his or group (in-group) to that of other relevant groups (out-group). A positive social identity could play a role in enhancing an individual's self-confidence (Brown 2000) and motivate group members to think and behave in ways that accomplish and sustain a positive uniqueness between the in-group and relevant out-groups (Hornsey 2008).

Social identity is linked to the concept of social identification, which is 'the process by which we define ourselves in terms and categories we share with other people' (Deaux 2001:1059). Van Knippenberg and Van Schie (2000) argued that people distinguish themselves as part of different social categories and attribute characteristics that are representative of these categories as their own. Thus, people see themselves not only in terms of their distinctive features but also with the features that they share with the other people in their group. The extent to which a person considers himself or herself as part of a group determines the levels of identification with the group and the degree to which group affiliation control his or her attitude and behaviour. Deaux (2001) noted that individuals who strongly identified with a specific group are more inclined to undertake activities that are beneficial to that group.

Organisational identification occurs when an individual identifies with an organisation as a unified entity is an explicit kind of social identification. Similarly, individuals are inclined to identify with their work groups or other sub-parts of the organisation (Ashforth & Mael 1989). Accordingly, social identity theory is germane to our understanding of the WID construct, its antecedents and consequences.

Hypotheses development

The aforementioned review of the literature and relevant theory set the foundation for the four hypotheses that were developed and discussed hereunder.

There is an absence of research that has directly examined the association between PGF and KHB. However, past studies have demonstrated the fact that employees who perceive high levels of PGF are inclined to have favourable attitudes and act in the best interest of the work group (De Cooman et al. 2016; Li et al. 2019). Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that PGF may embolden employees to decrease their KHB. Furthermore, the PE fit theory suggests that employees who perceive high levels of fit with their environment will produce many positive outcomes for both the individuals and organisations (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). Consequently, the following hypothesis was formulated:

> **H1:** PGF has a significant and negative relationship with KHB.

According to De Cooman et al. (2022), employees endeavour to achieve a fit with their work environment, and this is heightened by the idea that the environment may be important for an employee's identity. Van Vianen (2018) avers that a feeling of belongingness is experienced when individuals share values or characteristics with other people. Previous research showed a positive association between PGF and WID (Pierro et al. 2015). Thus, the following hypothesis has been articulated:

> **H2:** PGF has a significant and positive relationship with WID.

There is an absence of research that has investigated the relationship between WID and KHB. Notwithstanding this, the extant literature suggests that employees who perceive that they identify with their work-groups, will contribute towards their groups in positive ways (Meeussen et al. 2014; Olkkonen & Lipponen 2006). In terms of the social identity theory, a person's social identity is derived from being a member of a particular group (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel et al. 1971). Brown (2000) notes that individuals desire to achieve a positive social identity. This positive social identity will enhance individuals' WID, and they will subsequently engage in behaviour that will benefit their groups (Deaux 2001). Thus, it would be rational to assume that employees

with high perceptions of WID will be inclined to engage in less KHB. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was derived:

H3: WID has a significant and negative relationship with KHB.

As highlighted previously, past research has yet to establish an association between PGF and KHB. As a result, not much is known about how these two constructs interact and, more specifically, the intervening variable through which these two constructs interact. Thus, the mediating role that WID could play has not yet been established. Nevertheless, WID has been recognised as an important mediating variable in prior research. For example, studies have shown that WID mediated the associations between interactional justice and extra-role behaviour directed at the work group (Olkkonen & Lipponen 2006) and distinctiveness of supervisor and knowledge sharing and turnover intentions (Lindsay et al. 2020). The social identity theory espouses that a person's self-concept and social identity are important phenomena that are derived from group membership and increasing a person's social identity will yield many positive outcomes for the group. Accordingly, it would be reasonable to assume that employees who fit in with their groups will strongly identify with their groups, and this increased identification will result in a decrease in these employees' KHB. Hence, the following hypothesis was presented:

H4: WID mediates the relationship between PGF fit and KHB.

Research model

Underpinned by the PE fit theory and social identity theory, the research model in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among the different constructs in the study.

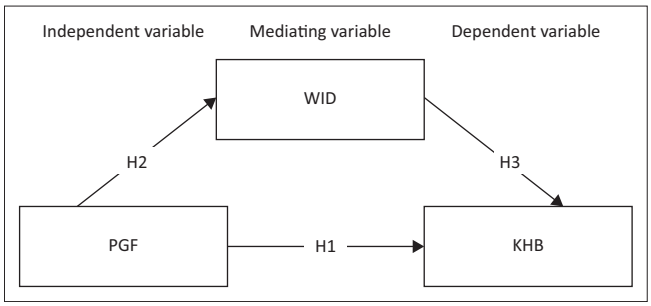
Person-group fit, the independent variable, is depicted as having a direct link with KHB, the dependent variable (H1). Person-group fit is also portrayed as having a direct relationship with WID, the mediating variable (H2). The research model further shows WID as having a direct association with KHB and WID as the mediating variable in the PGF and KHB link.

Methods

In this section, a discussion of the research philosophy, design, target population and sampling approach, as well as the data-collection method, data analysis and ethical considerations is presented.

Research philosophy and design

A positivist research philosophy was embraced. Positivism refers to the philosophical position of the natural scientist, and it involves 'working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations' and undertakes to produce unequivocal and precise knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2023:145). Aligned to this philosophy, a quantitative, descriptive and cross-sectional design was selected as the most apposite way to collect data and test empirical relationships between the different constructs that defined the study.



H1, Hypothesis 1; H2, Hypothesis 2; H3, Hypothesis 3; PGF, Person-group fit; WID, Work-group identification; KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour.

FIGURE 1: Research model of study.

Target population and sample

The target population comprised students registered for degrees in commerce at a research-led higher education institution in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. All students, from first to third as well as postgraduate years of study, were acquainted with group work as it formed an integral part of the assessment strategies of modules comprising these degree programmes. Because of the absence of the sampling frame, the exact size of the target population could not be accurately determined.

A non-probability, convenience sampling method was chosen to select the respondents. This method is suitable when there is an absence of the sampling frame and the existence of challenges regarding the access and willingness of respondents to participate in the study. 'Certainly, in the field of organisation studies, it has been noted that convenience samples are very common and indeed more prominent than are samples based on probability sampling' (Bryman 2016). Accordingly students who were chosen for the sample were selected based on their commitment, readiness and enthusiasm to participate in a study of this nature. The researchers sought permission from the various lecturers to address their students regarding the study and acquire their consent to participate. Those students who had provided an affirmative sign were selected as part of the sample and were given a printed copy of the questionnaire to complete. They were allowed to fill in the questionnaires in a time allotted during the lecture periods for this task. The size of the sample totalled 201 respondents and was slightly below the value of 209 that was suggested by Bartlett, Kotrlik and Higgins (2001) for continuous data and where the population size is 10 000 or greater, margin of error 0.03 and an alpha of 0.01.

Data collection

The data-collection method selected was the self-completion questionnaire, and a printed copy was given to each respondent to complete at a time allocated during their lectures. A self-completion questionnaire is popular in survey research and is an appropriate technique to reach large samples in a cost-effective way (Clark et al. 2021). This approach also provided respondents with time to reflect

before answering questions and was undertaken in an environment free from external influences and biases (Bryman 2016). Prior to the start, the researchers provided unequivocal guidelines on how to fill in the questionnaire and provided assurances to respondents with regard to the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The time taken to complete the questionnaire ranged between 20 and 30 min long. There were four parts to the questionnaire: part one consisted of questions pertaining to respondents' demographics such as gender, age, race and level of study; part two contained questions relating to the construct of KHB; part three consisted of questions relating to the WID construct and part four comprised questions concerning the construct of PGF.

Measures

The constructs were assessed using multi-item measuring instruments in which each item was articulated in the form of a statement that required respondents to indicate their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Knowledge hiding behaviour was assessed with a five-item measuring instrument adapted from Lin and Huang (2010:193). A sample of items included: 'During group work and discussions, I give less effort on knowledge contribution than other members', and 'During group work and discussions, I avoid contributing knowledge as much as possible'. Lin and Huang (2010) achieved a Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) of 0.95. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) for this study was 0.809.

Work-group identification was evaluated with a three-item measuring instrument adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992:122). The measuring instrument was adjusted to reflect the work-group context by changing the target of identification from the organisation to the work group. A sample of items included: 'When someone criticises this group, it feels like a personal insult', and 'When I talk about this group, I usually say "we" rather than "they"'. Mael and Ashforth (1992) attained a Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) of 0.87. This study achieved a Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) of 0.698.

Person-group fit was assessed using a four-item measuring instrument. This measuring instrument included three items adapted from Cable and DeRue's (2002:879) measure of person–organisation fit. The focal entity, which was the organisation, was replaced by the work-group in all the items. A sample of items included: 'My work-group's values and culture provide a good fit with the things that I value in life', and 'The things that I value in life are very similar to the things that other members in my work-group value'. The measuring instrument also comprised one-item adapted from Vogel and Feldman (2009:80): 'I get along well with other members in my work-group'. Cable and DeRue (2002) obtained Cronbach's coefficient alpha's (α) of 0.91 and 0.92, respectively. This study achieved a Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) of 0.787.

Data analysis

All questionnaires were checked, coded and processed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 27 software. This software provided a range of statistical tests to help interpret the data and address the research questions. The first step in data analysis involved assessing the normality in the distribution of data by computing the skewness and kurtosis values. Thereafter, the percentage distribution of respondents' demographics such as gender, age, race and year of study were attained. A number of key descriptive statistics that describe the centrality and spread of data were obtained for the three study constructs: PGF, WID and KHB.

Exploratory factor analysis was performed to assess the factor structure of the measuring instruments and to acquire the factor loadings of items comprising the relevant factors. Although the measuring instruments were adapted from previous research, it was deemed prudent to use exploratory factor analysis instead of confirmatory factor analysis because there was some uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of these instruments among student samples (Knekta, Runyon & Eddy 2019). Inferential statistical tests were undertaken to test the relationships among the different constructs in the study. The relationship between PGF and KHB (H1), the relationship PGF and WID (H2) and the relationship between WID and KHB (H3) were tested using linear regression analyses. In these tests, the standardised β weights and levels of significance (p-values) were indicators of the strength and direction of relationships. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the mediating influence of WID in the relationship between PGF and KHB (H4). The researchers were guided by Barron and Kenny's (1986) four-step process to confirm whether WID played a significant mediating role.

Ethical considerations

High level of ethical standards governing research was rigorously applied by the researchers from the inception and up to the end of the study. These standards entailed the researchers acting in a professional manner, with integrity, and upholding the values of honesty and transparency. Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' affiliated academic institution before the process of data collection started. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity by not being required to use their actual names on the questionnaires and the assurance that names that could inadvertently link these respondents would not be revealed in any documents pertaining to the research results. All respondents' answers reflected in the questionnaires were regarded as confidential and accessed only by the two researchers involved in the study. Prior to completing the questionnaire, each respondent was required to peruse and sign an informed consent form. Full approval of ethical clearance was granted on 03 October 2022 by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004757/2022).

Results

Percentage distribution of respondents' demographic variables

The gender distribution of the sample of respondents comprised a disproportionately higher number of females (n = 136, 67.7%) compared to their male counterparts (n = 65, 32.3%). There was a large number of respondents in the age category of 21–23 years (n = 141, 70.1%), making this a relatively young cohort of respondents. In terms of race, the largest category of respondents was black people (n = 110, 54.7%), and this was followed by Indian people (n = 77, 38.3%). The coloured (those who are not black, white or Indian ethnicity) (n = 9, 4.5%) and white (n = 5, 2.5%) respondents were in the minority. A large number of respondents were in their postgraduate years of study (n = 131, 65.2%). There was also significant representation of respondents in their undergraduate, third year of study (n = 57, 28.3%). The percentage distribution of respondents' demographic variables is provided in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for person-group fit, work-group identification and knowledge hiding behaviour

Table 2 presents the key descriptive statistics for the study constructs. The mean and median values for PGF and WID were above the mid-point (2.5) of the five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) that was used in the study. This reveals the fact that many respondents' viewed their levels of fit and identification with their groups in a favourable manner. The construct of KHB displayed mean and median values, which were below the mid-point. These low values indicate that respondents demonstrated an unfavourable attitude towards engaging in hiding knowledge in their work groups.

The standard deviation and coefficient of variation values for all the study constructs were below 1, which indicates a data spread close to the mean. In terms of the variance scores, these were also low for all the study constructs.

TABLE 1: Respondents' demographic variables (N = 201).

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	65	32.3
	Female	136	67.7
Age (years)	17–20	16	8.0
	21–23	141	70.1
	24 +	44	21.9
Race	Black people	110	54.7
	Coloured people	9	4.5
	Indian people	77	38.3
	White people	5	2.5
Year of study	First year	5	2.5
	Second year	8	4.0
	Third year	57	28.3
	Postgraduate	131	65.2

Assessment of common method bias

Common method bias is prevalent in cross-sectional surveys that require respondents to complete lengthy questionnaires containing self-reported measuring instruments. In these circumstances, there is a tendency for respondents to answer questions pertaining to constructs in a particular way, often without proper reflection and honesty. Therefore, an element of bias may be introduced, and this may exaggerate the influence of one variable on the other (Podsakoff et al. 2003).

Harman's single-factor test was used to detect the prevalence of a common method bias in the study data. In SPSS version 27, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the principal axis factoring method of extraction, without rotation and by limiting the factors to be extracted to 1. The results revealed that a single factor explained a total variance of 35.747%. This figure was below the recommended threshold value of 50%, suggesting that common method bias is not a major threat to the validity of the study results (Harman 1967).

Exploratory factor analysis

To assess for normal distribution of the data, the skewness values were determined, and these were all within the range of ±1: PGF (skewness = –0.536), WID (skewness = –0.664) and KHB (skewness = 0.807). Therefore, the data were considered to be normally distributed.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were undertaken to assess the factor structure of the measuring instruments. Generally, data with a KMO value of ≥ 0.80 and a Bartlett's test of sphericity that are statistically significant at < 0.001 are regarded as suitable for factor analysis (Shrestha 2021). The KMO value achieved was 0.833, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant at 0.000 (Approximately Chi-square = 878.662, df = 66). Accordingly, the data were regarded as suitable for factor analysis.

In the exploratory factor analysis test in SPSS version 27, the principal component analysis method was used to extract the factors. Guided by the Kaiser–Guttman rule, all factors with eigenvalues > 1 were retained. The data were further subjected to rotation using Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation. This culminated in the extraction of three factors with eigen values of > 1, and these contributed 62.624% of the total variance explained. The resulting rotated component matrix reflected three factors that equated to the constructs in the study. Moreover, all three factors comprised items with factors loadings that were above the minimum threshold of

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics for person-group fit, work-group identification and knowledge hiding behaviour.

Construct	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation	Variance
PGF	3.692	3.00	0.704	0.191	0.495
WID	3.833	3.00	0.740	0.193	0.548
KHB	1.770	2.40	0.671	0.379	0.450

PGF, Person-group fit; WID, Work-group identification; KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour.

0.60 (Field 2024), except for item 5 of KHB, which had a factor loading of 0.521. These factor loadings are shown in Table 3.

Reliability and validity

Internal consistency reliability for the study constructs were measured using the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) tests. These test values are provided in Table 3, which shows that the Cronbach alphas for PGF and KHB exceeded the minimum threshold for acceptable internal consistency reliability of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994). The Cronbach's alpha for WID reflects a nominal drop to below the threshold. In terms of the CR values, all three constructs displayed good internal consistency reliabilities, which were above 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994).

Convergent validity was assessed using two key indicators: average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) scores. The AVE scores of > 0.50 (Anderson & Gerbing 1988) and the CR of > 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994) shows convergent validity of the data. In this study, all three constructs achieved AVE scores of > 0.50 and CR values of > 0.70. Thus, it was concluded that the data demonstrated convergent validity. Discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, which juxtaposes the square root of the AVE with the correlation between constructs. In order for discriminant validity to exist, the square root of the AVE values should be greater than the correlations between the constructs. Table 4 provides the square root of the AVE values, and these are in bold and listed diagonally. The table also shows the correlations between the study constructs. In this study, the square root of AVE values was greater than the correlations between the constructs. Therefore, it was established that discriminant validity was prevalent.

Linear regression analysis

Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between PGF and KHB, PGF and WID and WID and KHB. The standardised regression weights (β), the t-values and significance (p) are depicted in Table 5. The β values show the magnitude of strength and direction between two constructs, and the p values indicate the level of significance.

In this study, the p values for the relationships between the constructs were all significant at $p \leq 0.001$. More specifically, PGF demonstrated a significant and negative relationship with KHB ($\beta = -0.298$, $t = -4.378$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H1 is accepted. Person-group fit showed a significant and positive relationship with WID ($\beta = 0.526$, $t = 8.680$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, H2 is accepted. WID reflected a significant and negative relationship with KHB ($\beta = 0.311$, $t = -4.597$, $p = 0.000$). Consequently, H3 is accepted.

Hierarchical regression analysis

Hierarchical regression was performed to test the mediating influence of WID in the relationship between PGF and KHB. Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step process guided the test for mediation. The first three steps were fulfilled in the linear regression tests that resulted in the acceptance of H1, H2 and H3 (refer to Table 5). In the final step, it was necessary to demonstrate that, for mediation to occur, the addition of the mediating variable in the regression test will reduce or eliminate the influence of the predictor variable on the dependent variable. Table 6 shows the results of the hierarchical regression.

In model 1, the influence of PGF (independent variable) on KHB (dependent variable) was assessed, and the results showed a negative and statistically significant association between these variables ($\beta = -0.298$, $t = -4.378$, $p = 0.000$). In model 2, the impact of PGF (independent variable) and WID (mediating variable) on KHB was examined. The results demonstrated that with the addition of WID, the influence of PGF on KHB was diminished as reflected in the decline of β in model 2 (Model 1: $\beta = -0.298$, Model 2: $\beta = -0.185$).

TABLE 3: Reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Item	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
PGF	-	-	0.787	0.834	0.558
	PGF1	0.690	-	-	-
	PGF2	0.711	-	-	-
	PGF3	0.820	-	-	-
	PGF4	0.759	-	-	-
WID	-	-	0.698	0.779	0.541
	WID1	0.793	-	-	-
	WID2	0.653	-	-	-
	WID3	0.754	-	-	-
KHB	-	-	0.809	0.871	0.580
	KHB1	0.770	-	-	-
	KHB2	0.845	-	-	-
	KHB3	0.764	-	-	-
	KHB4	0.859	-	-	-
	KHB5	0.521	-	-	-

AVE, Average variance extracted; CR, Composite reliability; KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour; PGF, Person-group fit; WID, Work-group identification.

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity.

Construct	KHB	PGF	WID
KHB	**0.762**	-	-
PGF	-0.298**	**0.747**	-
WID	-0.311**	0.526**	**0.736**

Note: All values presented diagonally and in bold font are the square root of the AVE. The values below the diagonal represent the correlation between the constructs.
KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour; PGF, Person-group fit; WID, Work-group identification.
**, Level of significance is $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 5: Linear regression analysis showing standardised beta weights (β), t and p values.

Independent variable and Dependent variable	β	t	p	Conclusion
H1: PGF has a significant and negative relationship with KHB. PGF → KHB	-0.298	-4.378	0.000	H1 is accepted
H2: PGF has a significant and positive relationship with WID. PGF → WID	0.526	8.680	0.000	H2 is accepted
H3: WID has a significant and negative relationship with KHB. WID → KHB	-0.311	-4.597	0.000	H3 is accepted

H1, Hypothesis one; H2, Hypothesis two; H3, Hypothesis three.
PGF, Person-group fit; KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour; WID, work-group identification.
β, Standardised beta weights; t, t-values; p, Levels of significance.

These results suggest that WID played a partial mediating role. Accordingly, H4 is accepted.

Discussion

Knowledge hiding behaviour is a pervasive problem, and many organisations are vigorously pursuing avenues to alleviate this harmful behaviour (Abdillah et al. 2022). In the academic literature, studies investigating the negative antecedents of KHB have been restricted, specifically, in the area of work groups. Therefore, the current study sought to fill this void in the literature by examining the impact of PGF on KHB and the mediating role of WID in this relationship. Accordingly, four hypotheses were tested, namely PGF is negatively related to KHB (H1), PGF is positively related to WID (H2), WID is negatively related to KHB (H3) and WID mediates the relationship between PGF and KHB (H4).

The results endorse a significant and negative link between PGF and KHB; hence, H1 was supported. This demonstrates that individuals who perceive that they fit in with their work groups will tend to display less KHB. Despite there being no study known to the researchers that empirically tested this relationship, PE fit theory and past research provide some validation for this finding. The principles of PE fit theory suggest that, generally, PE fit will result in favourable consequences for both the individual and organisation (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005), and PE misfit will produce negative outcomes (Vleugels et al. 2019). The reduction in KHB as a consequence of individuals' increased PGF is a positive outcome. Van Vianen (2018) submits that a person experiences feelings of belongingness when he or she shares characteristics with other people on a range of factors. Accordingly, in the context of the work group, members who share values, work ethic or have similar personalities will be inclined to act and behave in the best interests of the work group as a collective. Thus, decreasing or eliminating one's tendency to hide knowledge in a work-group setting is a manifestation of the central premises of the PE fit theory. Although not directly investigated, the findings of prior research examining the impact of PGF on criterion variables such as commitment to the team (Sung et al. 2020) and job performance (Pierro et al. 2015) suggest that, perhaps, it is plausible to assume the existence of an inverse relationship between PGF and KHB.

The results confirmed that PGF is significantly and positively associated with WID; thus, H2 was supported. This reveals that an employee who fits in with his or her work group will be inclined to identify with the same group. The findings of past research lends credence to this finding. For example, the work of Meeussen et al. (2014) showed that individuals experiencing person-group value fit demonstrated increased WID. Pierro et al. (2015) reported that PGF on the need for cognitive disclosure was positively associated with individual performance, and this relationship was partially mediated WID. The positive relationship between PGF and WID can also be understood through the lens of the PE fit theory. This theory posits that the similarity between the person and work group will result in positively desirable outcomes. Furthermore, fitting in with other members of the work group may be key to a person's identity, which could lead to stronger identification with the work group.

The results corroborated that WID is significantly and negatively related to KHB; consequently, H3 was supported. This means that a person who identifies with his or her work group will tend to exhibit less KHB. Social identity theory asserts that a person's social identity is part of his or her self-concept and is derived from being a member of a particular group (Tajfel 1978). People desire to achieve a positive social identity, and this could increase their self-confidence (Brown 2000). According to Deaux (2001), individuals who strongly identify with particular groups will undertake activities that are favourable to these groups. Hence, a person reducing KHB in response to increased WID could be seen as beneficial to the group. Past research has shown that increased levels of WID among members enhance their performance and work effort on behalf of their groups (Cicero & Pierro 2007). Olkkonen and Lipponen (2006) showed that work-unit identification was positively associated with extra-role behaviour towards the work unit.

The results validated that WID partially mediates the relationship between PGF and KHB; therefore, H4 was supported. This result is noteworthy as it sheds light on a hitherto unproven link between PGF and KHB. WID has proved to be a conceivable intervening variable that helps explain how PGF impacts KHB. Previous studies have tested the effectiveness of WID as a mediating variable using different antecedents and outcome variables. For example, Patel et al. (2012) found that WID mediated the relationship between overall justice and presenteeism and social loafing. Work-group identification was also confirmed to mediate the links between the distinctiveness of a supervisor from a different cultural group and turnover intentions and knowledge sharing among work-group members (Lindsay et al. 2020). The results of this study strengthen the view that employees who perceive that they fit in with their work groups will strongly identify with their relevant groups because being similar to other group members will reinforce their social identity. Consequently, the increased social identity will motivate these employees to act in the interests of their work-groups, which could entail a reduction in KHB.

TABLE 6: Hierarchical regression analysis with standardised beta weights (β), t and p values.

Independent variable and Dependent variable	β	t	p	Conclusion
H4: WID mediates the relationship between PGF and KHB.	-	-	-	H4 is accepted
Model 1: PGF → KHB	-0.298	-4.378	0.000	-
Model 2: PGF → KHB	-0.185	-2.354	0.020	-
WID → KHB	-0.214	-2.716	0.007	-

H4, Hypothesis four.

PGF, Person-group fit; KHB, Knowledge hiding behaviour; WID, work-group identification.

β, Standardised beta weights; t, t-values; p, Levels of significance.

Practical and managerial implications

The study results have a few practical and managerial implications to consider. This article has established the impact of PGF on KHB. In practical terms, this means that employees' KHB in work groups will reduce if they experience increased levels of PGF. Accordingly, this inverse relationship has foregrounded PGF as an important negative antecedent of KHB, thereby offering organisations and its managers a viable alternative to reducing the pervasive and deleterious influence of KHB in work groups.

The article has also demonstrated the significance of WID as the mediating variable in the relationship between PGF and KHB. This result has illuminated our understanding of how PGF could impact on KHB. More specifically, employees who perceive that they fit in with their work groups will be inclined to identify with these groups. Consequently, this increased level of WID will result in lower KHB. Managers and group leaders should recognise the relevance of WID and explore avenues to increase employees' levels of social identity and identification with their groups.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

A few important limitations have emerged from this study and should be emphasised. The first limitation pertains to the area of sampling. In this study, the respondents were university students, who were selected using non-probability, convenience sampling. Accordingly, the type of respondents and sampling approach used may raise concerns regarding the external validity and generalisability of the results. The second limitation relates to the reliance on a single method of data collection, namely the self-completion questionnaire to shed light on the impact of PGF and KHB. Consequently, a lack of data triangulation may have weakened the rigour and validity of study results. The third and final limitation concerns the use of a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships among the three different constructs of the study, namely PGF, WID and KHB. One of the major shortcomings of a cross-sectional design is that it does not adequately capture the actual strength of the cause and effects of different constructs as these are examined at a point in time.

There are several suggestions for future research, which should be highlighted. Firstly, future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study on respondents such as employees who had previous experience working in groups. This will provide a more accurate picture of how PGF impacts on KHB in work groups in the context of business organisations. In addition, by focusing on this new sample of respondents, future research should select these respondents using probability sampling methods such as the simple random sampling to increase the generalisability of the results. Secondly, in addition to the use of self-completion questionnaires, forthcoming studies should include other data-collection methods such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups to augment the results achieved. Thirdly, future research should test the current hypotheses using a longitudinal design. This design will reduce the effects of common method variance and produce a more accurate picture of the relationships among the three constructs under investigation. Fourthly, future studies should examine the impact of PGF on the different dimensions of KHB such as playing dumb, evasive and rationalised hiding to determine its differential effects. Fifthly, further research should include different mediating variables such as work-group commitment or employee psychological empowerment. The inclusion of these variables could improve our understanding of how PGF impacts KHB in work groups.

Conclusion

There is a paucity of research that investigated the factors that reduce individuals' KHB in work groups (Babič et al. 2019; Zhao et al. 2019). This study sought to fill this lacuna by examining the impact of PGF on KHB and the mediating role of WID in this relationship. A significant and negative link between PGF and KHB was established, therefore, revealing a novel antecedent, PGF, which could help reduce the prevalence of KHB among employees in work groups. The results also enhanced our understanding of how PGF impacts on KHB by validating the partially mediating role of WID in the PGF and KHB relationship. It is anticipated that these unique outcomes will serve as a catalyst for further studies examining KHB in work groups, particularly, in seeking ways to reduce or eventually eliminate this unwanted behaviour.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.K.W., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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