

# The Influence of Previous Experience on the Culture of Food Safety in Food Service Establishments in England and Wales.

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## Introduction

Food safety compliance in food service is essential for public health and minimising the risk of foodborne illness (FBI) (Ungku Fatimah Zainal Abidin, 2013). According to the UK Food Standards Agency, the hospitality sector, including restaurants and caterers, accounts for >72% of food establishments across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Food Standards Agency, 2020).

Within this sector, management roles are considered to be important for ensuring that food service employees practice safe food handling behaviours (Arendt et al. 2013). Furthermore, management attitudes, values and behaviour-based strategies are cited as being critical in underpinning a positive food safety culture in the food service industry (Da Cunha, 2021). Thus, when considering the transient nature of the industry, it is important to explore the impact of previous experience of managers on the food safety behaviour and perceptions indicated and modelled by them.

## Purpose

To explore how previous experience, such as training, length of employment and seniority, and personal experience of food safety incidents may influence the way food safety culture is established in a food service business with potential considerations for behavioural change.

## Methods

#### Study design

- Interview schedules were designed based on a review of previous literature and research findings; schedules were piloted prior to use.
- In-depth, semi structured interviews were carried out with food service industry managers in England and Wales (n=21) using face-to-face, online and telephone interview approaches.

#### Data analysis

- Interview data (transcribed using Otter.ai) was analysed using NVivo 1.3 software (QSR International); a thematic analysis occurred according to food safety culture indicators (food safety management system; resources; leadership; risk; communication and commitment) (Griffith et al. 2010).
- The structure of the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974) was used to determine how previous experience may impact behaviours that may influence a positive food safety culture.

**Ethical Approval:** Approval was obtained from the Health Care and Food, Ethics Committee at Cardiff Metropolitan University (Reference Numbers: PGR-4497 and PGR-5508).

## Results

#### Reported awareness of food safety culture in food service

Findings indicated that the majority of food service managers interviewed in this study lacked familiarity and awareness of the term and concept of food safety culture.

Some managers suggested that food safety culture was primarily concerned with producing food safely and understanding the law and how to comply with it. Others perceived that a culture in the kitchen was about how employees can "get stuck in their ways."

Understanding the context of food safety culture in a business can be considered important for behavioural improvement. However, findings from this food service study suggest a more widespread understanding of factors that influence food safety culture, than of the concept itself.

"Food safety is more about understanding of the law and how to comply with it. Food safety culture, I think, is more to do with, how can we achieve that goal in the best possible

to me. .... I'm not too sure to be honest."

"It's a new term ("If you mean the food culture, you mean a different country?'

### Reported role of work experience

Length of work experience was reported to result in acquisition of habits, indeed, one manager indicated "lots of people got so set in their ways". Implementation of habits was considered to result in behavioural norms passed on to junior staff "you end up communicating 'this is what we do."

Some participants felt that their background and experience, both personal and professional, shaped their behaviour and management style, as well as  $\angle$ application of it at subsequent food service establishment positions.

Some managers reported implementing procedures and protocols including due diligence documentation, hygiene practices and rewarding staff from experience gained from a previous workplace.

"It's just applying what I've learned

"I think when you've worked in the industry a long time, it becomes kind of second nature to be monitoring those things."

"[Certain procedures in a previous job] really worked ... for that team, so I've implemented it into my team now and it seems to be doing wonders."

#### Reported risk awareness

expressed personal confidence in awareness and understanding of food safety risks associated with food handling in their business; most also indicated confidence in the risk awareness of their staff. For a few managers, previous experience and training was the reason for this confidence.

Increased risk awareness was reported by managers with previous exposure to foodborne incidents, for example "I want to make sure that no one else has the same experience as I did."

Managers were certain that being aware of the risks to consumers from food is "common sense" and considered that the fear of causing an incident influences food safety compliance.

They're [establishment staff] aware [of food safety risks] because all of my chefs, they come ..... from a hotel, so they got quite good training previously, before they come to work for me, they are professional chef."

"The fear of an extreme event happening - no one wants it on their conscience... people are 100% aware. Most of the time it doesn't even need to be mentioned. It's very much kind of common sense."

#### Leadership and communication

Previous experience was reported to impact food service managers' motivation, perception of susceptibility, and aspects of food safety culture, such as communication and leadership.

Managers reported 'bringing' useful resources from previous places of employment, to facilitate better communication within the team and previous experience may also influence manager's leadership style.

According to most managers in this study, factors that influence the food safety culture of a food service business are determined by the person in charge and some perceived themselves, as managers, to lead by example. Management's recognition as the 'example' and the role they play in the food hygiene behaviours of staff was also recognised in the study by Worsfold and Griffith, (2003) however, the managers in that study admitted to lacking performance standards or reinforcement strategies.

"Culture is something that comes down from senior members of the team to the ones below and not learned from books."

"Sometimes it [implementation of food safety behaviours] genuinely is difficult, because it just doesn't come as fluidly to some people; and it's just means ..... taking a few minutes, just going through the processes with them [food handlers], and kind of just guiding them through the

"In my last two places using WhatsApp not only would I be able to communicate with staff individually, but I could also communicate with the entire team."

"But I have to be that shining example and I have to be there doing things correctly, and owning up to things when they go wrong as well. So making, you know, making an

### The role of previous experience based on the Health Belief Model

#### HEALTH BELIEF MODEL AND FOOD SAFETY BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

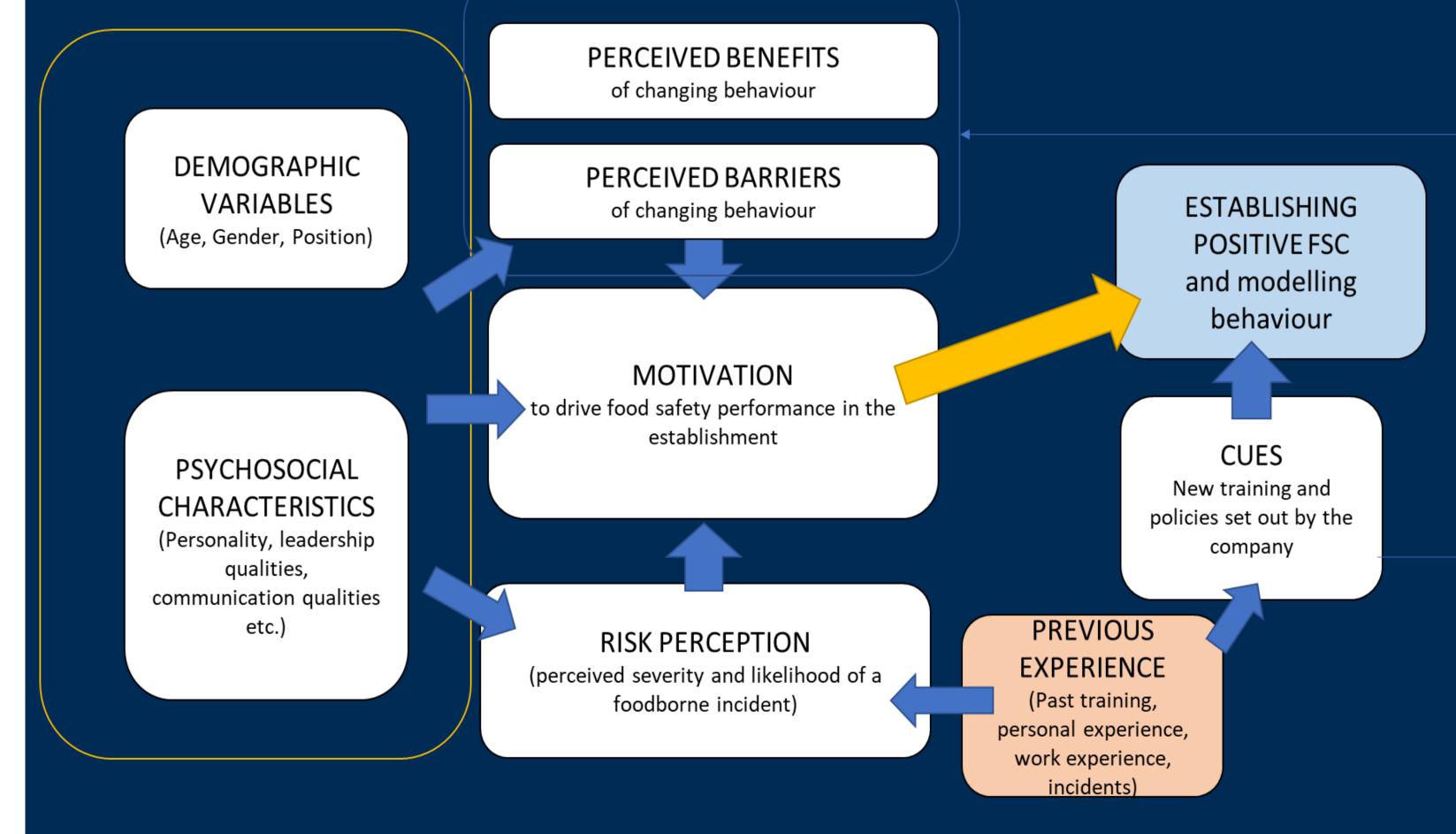


Figure 1. Health Belief Model used as framework for analysis and interpretation, adapted from Rosenstock et al. (1974)

Previous research has reported that exposure to previous incidence of FBI is associated with a tendency to perform appropriate food safety behaviours in food service (Cho et al.

Thus, as with findings from this study, previous experience may act as a cue to action and encourage and motivate food safety culture improvement in food service settings. However, depending on its nature, it can be considered that previous experience may also be a barrier to a positive food safety culture and thus further consideration is required, as noted in Figure 1, within the structure of the Health Belief Model.

## Significance of study

This qualitative study has demonstrated that, depending on its nature, previous experience may be a barrier to a positive food safety culture. Alternatively, previous experience may act as a cue to action and encourage and motivate food safety culture improvement in a food service setting.

Food safety culture should become an integral component of food service management training, designed to highlight the benefits of establishing a positive food safety culture in a business and complementing or counteracting previous experience.

The potential application of the Health Belief Model has been demonstrated as a tool to structure behavioural change in the food service sector, highlighting the importance of 'previous experience' of managers.

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