Invisible workers in paradise: mental health and psychosocial safety in island tourism enclaves

Abstract

Tourism island resorts in Australia operate as enclave environments—geographically and socially isolated workplaces where staff live and work in close proximity, often under casual or seasonal contracts. These unique settings are marked by blurred work-life boundaries, limited access to support services, and high emotional labour demands. Despite anecdotal reports of stress, loneliness, and burnout, there is a striking lack of empirical research into the psychosocial conditions of this workforce. This doctoral research explores how psychosocial safety and social connection influence the mental health of workers in enclave tourism island (ETI) settings. Guided by attachment theory, social baseline theory, and polyvagal theory, the study examines how relationships, isolation, and environmental stressors affect staff wellbeing, coping behaviours, stress regulation, and burnout. A sequential mixed-methods design is used: a national online survey assesses psychosocial safety climate, mental health, and recovery/coping responses; follow-up interviews explore the lived experience of working and living on-site. As Australia introduces new workplace health and safety laws addressing psychosocial risk (Safe Work Australia, 2022), this study arrives at a critical time. The research aims to develop evidence-based guidelines tailored to remote, high-pressure workplaces to improve employee wellbeing, reduce turnover, and build sustainable organisational culture. The outcomes of this study will inform tourism operators, policy makers, and other residential workforce industries such as cruise ships, ski resorts, and remote mining. By shedding light on this overlooked workforce, the project advocates for safer, more supportive working conditions in some of the country's most beautiful—but psychologically demanding—settings.

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