

THE RELIABILITY-DISCLOSURE PARADOX IN AVIATION

A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

An Identity-Based Conceptual Framework for Mental-Health Disclosure and Help-Seeking

INTRODUCTION

Mental-health disclosure and help-seeking in aviation are influenced by established factors including stigma, aeromedical certification concerns, confidentiality, anticipated occupational consequences and organisational trust. Yet the availability of support does not necessarily lead to its utilisation (Hoffman et al., 2022; Bråstad et al., 2024; EASA, 2026).

This research proposal examines an additional question: may the professional meaning assigned to psychological vulnerability help explain why aviation professionals disclose or seek support in some circumstances but not in others?

RESEARCH QUESTION

How may the internalisation of operational reliability expectations within professional identity influence mental-health disclosure and help-seeking among aviation professionals?

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

THE RELIABILITY-DISCLOSURE PARADOX (RDP)

When reliability-related professional standards are identity-relevant, greater perceived incompatibility between acknowledging psychological vulnerability and those standards may be associated with lower willingness or likelihood of disclosure and help-seeking.

Under other interpretative and contextual conditions, the same standards may instead be compatible with—or potentially support—appropriate acknowledgement, self-monitoring and engagement with assistance.

Theoretical antecedents: Pinsky et al. (2020); Kiouleoglou & Makris (2025); McGrath et al. (2023); Vough et al. (2025).

FIVE TESTABLE PROPOSITIONS

P1 — Identity relevance

Greater identity relevance of reliability-related professional standards is expected to be associated with greater salience of identity appraisal when psychological vulnerability is acknowledged.

P2 — Perceived incompatibility

Among professionals for whom relevant professional standards are identity-relevant, greater perceived incompatibility between acknowledging psychological vulnerability and those standards is expected to be associated with lower willingness or likelihood of disclosure and help-seeking.

P3 — Incremental value

Empirically defensible identity-related variables derived from the framework are expected to provide incremental explanatory or predictive information concerning disclosure and help-seeking beyond established determinants.

P4 — Organisational moderation

The association between perceived identity incompatibility and disclosure or help-seeking is expected to vary as a function of relevant organisational conditions.

P5 — Recursive processes

The characteristics and perceived outcomes of disclosure and help-seeking experiences are expected to be prospectively associated with subsequent identity appraisal, perceived identity compatibility or incompatibility, and future disclosure or help-seeking.

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METHOD

A theory-building conceptual integration was used to connect established perspectives on professional identity, identity appraisal, mental-health disclosure and help-seeking with aviation-specific evidence concerning reliability, health reporting, support utilisation and organisational context.

The literature was used to identify theoretical antecedents, define conceptual boundaries and derive empirically testable propositions, rather than to conduct a systematic evidence synthesis.

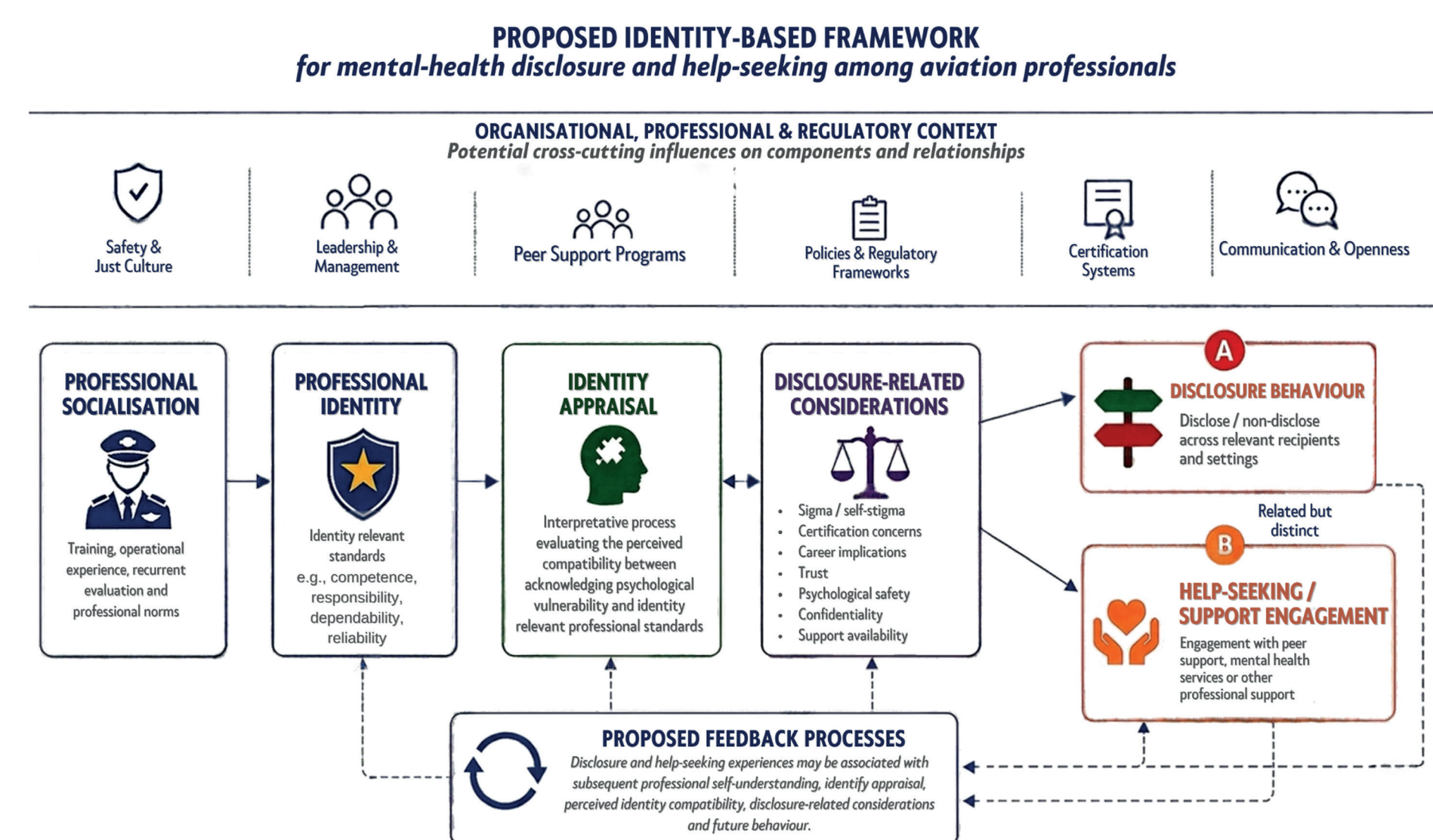


Figure 1. Proposed identity-based conceptual framework for mental-health disclosure and help-seeking among aviation professionals. Arrows represent hypothesised associations, not established causal or fixed temporal relationships.

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

1 | Professional meaning

Research could test whether communication that frames appropriate acknowledgement of psychological difficulty as compatible with responsible professional conduct is associated with lower perceived identity incompatibility.

2 | Organisational context

Psychological safety, credible confidentiality, organisational trust, supportive leadership and Just Culture may moderate the association between perceived identity incompatibility and disclosure or help-seeking (Bråstad et al., 2024).

3 | Support pathways

Peer support and confidential support pathways provide contexts in which research can test whether trusted support interactions are associated with greater perceived compatibility between acknowledging difficulty and professional identity.

These are hypotheses for empirical evaluation, not established intervention recommendations.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Reliability does not necessarily produce silence. What may matter is whether acknowledging psychological vulnerability is perceived as compatible or incompatible with professional identity.