

A Multilevel Model of Organizational Justice and Commitment: The Mediating Role of Team Trust and the Moderating Role of Leadership Style

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Abstract

While we know that organizational justice influences individual commitment, little research has examined how shared perceptions of justice within work teams become individual attitudes. The paper constructs and demonstrates a time-lagged, multilevel model in which organizational justice is treated as a team climate that moderates the relationship between individual affective commitment and team trust. The model is grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Fairness Heuristic Theory. These perspectives imply that when employees perceive fair outcomes, fair processes, and respectful treatment, they use these indicators to assess the organization's reliability and the trustworthiness of other team members. Thus, team justice should enhance team trust, and team trust should, in turn, enhance employees' identification with the organization. Another argument presented in the article is that leadership style acts as a boundary condition. Transformational leadership is expected to enhance the advantage of a just climate on team trust by providing employees with a sense of meaning, reliability, and support. By contrast, transactional leadership might hinder this by focusing on short-term transactions and compliance. The paper presents a three-wave quantitative test design and a sample three-level structural equation analysis, with employees nested within work teams across various organizations, to demonstrate how this model can be tested. The illustrative analyses find partial mediation by team trust and stronger justice-trust links under high (transformational) leadership and weaker links under high (transactional) leadership. The work adds to the body of research on justice by integrating climate, trust, leadership, and time into a single framework. It provides practical advice to managers aiming to establish committed teams by being just and trusting.

Keywords: Organizational Justice, Employee Commitment, Team Trust, Leadership Style, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Multilevel Modeling, Justice Climate, Cross-level Effects, Longitudinal Study

Introduction

Justice is a fundamental concept in organisations. Workers observe how things are decided, how they are rewarded and how they are spoken to. These factors affect how much people feel treated with respect and their desire to remain in the organisation. Such judgments are referred to as organizational justice in the field of management research.

Justice typically encompasses distributive justice, i.e. fairness of outcomes; procedural justice, i.e. fairness of decision rules; interpersonal justice, i.e. dignity and respect and informational justice, i.e. honest and timely explanations (Colquitt, 2001). When these types of fairness are high, employees report higher trust, cooperation, citizenship and commitment (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Jang et al., 2021).

The commitment of employees is also significant since it influences the effort, retention, and the desire to serve organizational objectives. Affective commitment is particularly significant, as it is one of the various types of commitment, which is based on the emotional attachment as opposed to merely being obligated or calculating the costs. When employees have high affective commitment, they want to stay with the organisation because they identify with it and its goals (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The latest research still indicates that leadership quality, trust and fairness are the primary motivation to this type of commitment (Morais et al., 2024; Villanueva-Flores et al., 2025). This is why the investigation of fairness and commitment as a pair of concepts continues to be a significant issue of both theory and practice.

Nonetheless, a big portion of the previous literature has regarded justice as a personal perception. This has led to some interesting insights, but doesn't always fit the realities of contemporary work. Staff tend to work in teams. Team members tend to have the same boss, same routine and most of the same events at work. As a result, members of a team can share an overall assessment of whether the team is "fair". This common opinion is referred to as justice climate. Studies on justice climate demonstrate that perceptions of team fairness can impact team and individual outcomes, sometimes beyond individual perceptions of fairness (Liao & Rupp, 2005; Naumann & Bennett, 2000). Nevertheless, the cross level process by which justice climate turns into individual commitment is not well studied.

The second gap is related to time. Much of the research on justice uses cross-sectional data: that is, we measure the predictor and outcome variables simultaneously. This complicates the understanding of development of attitudes. As a matter of fact, cues of fairness are decoded in the long run. People first have experiences, then they interpret them with each other, then they decide whether they trust the organisation and others, and only then do more abstract attitudes (such as commitment) become fixed. There is emerging longitudinal research that seeks to address this problem, but it remains scarce, particularly when we want to integrate team climate, trust and individual commitment into a model (Ho, 2024; Lee & Rasdi, 2025).

This process can be explained by the use of trust. Social Exchange Theory suggests that justice leads to a feeling of indebtedness and reciprocal relationship between employees and the organisation (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Fairness Heuristic Theory suggests that fairness is also a cognitive shortcut when there is uncertainty about whether or not an authority is trustworthy (Lind, 2001). These theories combined indicate that justice climate can impact commitment in more than just a direct fashion. Rather, a sense of mutual fairness will tend to form a community of trust among the team. Team members who perceive that their work environment is predictable and others will not "take them for a ride" should feel more secure, included, and identify with the team.

This process may be influenced by leadership. Transformational leaders typically offer vision, inspiration, individual consideration and meaning. Such actions have the potential to reinforce the impact of justice climate since they assist employees to interpret the fairness indicators as authentic and relationship oriented (Bass, 1985; Cho and Dansereau, 2010). On the other hand, transactional leaders tend to engage in contingent reward, active monitoring and exchange. This style is not necessarily detrimental, in other settings it may enhance accuracy and job description (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Nonetheless, in the context of trust as the most important social mechanism, a high level of transactional orientation might restrict the relational worth of justice cues since workers might perceive fairness as a transactional relation as opposed to a manifestation of care and respect.

The current study overcomes these limitations by proposing a multilevel model in which organizational justice is viewed as a team-level climate, which affects individual affective commitment via team trust, and moderated by cross-level leadership (transformational and transactional). There are three reasons why the study is important. First, it transforms justice research that is based on individual judgments to team meaning. Second, it introduces a temporal logic through a time-lagged design as opposed to single-wave design. Third, it integrates fairness, trust and leadership in a single model, which enables a more complete understanding of justice, and when and why it matters. Simply put the research question is, do fair teams turn into trusting teams, and do trusting teams make more committed employees, particularly with specific leadership styles.

Research Objectives

This study has two key objectives:

To investigate whether team-level organizational justice climate is related to individuals' affective commitment over time through team trust.

To determine whether transformational leadership reinforces, and transactional leadership weaken, the connection between justice climate, and team trust in a multilevel environment.

Research Questions

Our research has two research questions:

How does team-level organizational justice climate impact on individual affective commitment over time, via team trust?

What is the relationship between climate of justice and team trust, and how are these two styles of leadership transformed?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations: Social Exchange Theory and Fairness Heuristic Theory

Social Exchange Theory views attitudes at work as the result of exchanges. Employees have a desire to return valuable treatment that they receive from the organisation. Such a response can be increased effort, co-operation, loyalty or commitment.

Equity holds particular significance in this exchange as it is an indicator of the fact that the organization has respect towards the employee and that it is not going to abuse power (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). So justice isn't just a moral consideration. It is also a social resource. When employees feel that they have been treated fairly, chances are high that they will feel that the organization is entitled to good returns.

This makes it easier to understand how justice is associated with commitment, but it doesn't explain how employees make snap decisions. The gap is filled in the Fairness Heuristic Theory. This theory says that individuals tend to rely on the information about fairness as a short cut to tell whether authorities and systems should be trusted (Lind, 2001). Most of the time, employees in large organisations cannot know all of the reasons for a leader's actions or what will happen in the future. Due to this, they seek easy and yet satisfactory indicators. When leaders treat employees fairly, speak politely and explain their decisions, employees take this as a sign of benevolent intentions. In case the clues are negative, employees will be reserved and withdrawn.

The two theories would be extremely complementary to the current study. Social Exchange Theory suggests fairness should trigger a positive relational response and Fairness Heuristic Theory suggests fairness is a cue that can be trusted in the uncertain team environment. Combined, they imply that justice climate must assist the employees in feeling that their group is a secure and trusted area. The commitment should then be more probable as a result of that feeling. However, these theories are still widely applied individually or at the individual level in many studies. The current model brings them together in a multilevel way by conceptualising organisational fairness as a signal to the team and organisational trust as a social process.

Organizational Justice Climate and Organizational Commitment

Research on organizational justice has shifted away to whether individual employees perceive themselves as fairly treated to whether groups of people can have shared perceptions of fairness. This is a significant step since numerous work conditions are common. The team members are subjected to the same leader, same rules and same pattern of communication. When these shared experiences lead to consensus, it is called a justice climate (Naumann & Bennett, 2000). Justice climate is never the sum

of the individual opinions; it is a social fact, which is formed through contact, observation and comparison. Liao and Rupp (2005) demonstrated the cross-level effects of justice climate on work-related outcomes; that is, justice climate can influence individual attitudes even if individuals differ from each other.

There is substantial evidence for the broad association between justice and commitment. Justice has a bearing on how employees feel that the organization is worthy of support and whether they feel proud to be in the organization. Research in various industries demonstrate that justice predicts increased organizational commitment and decreased intentions to leave (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Jang et al., 2021). We also have recent longitudinal evidence to support the long-term influence of justice. Ho (2024) demonstrated justice is important to work attitudes over time, and Aldabbas et al. (2025) found that justice indirectly affects affective commitment via perceived organisational support. Distributive justice and leader-member exchange seem to be central issues in the academic working environment to comprehend affective commitment as well (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2025).

The three gaps are not covered even with the advancements. First, there is still a focus on individual perceptions and not team justice climate. Second, a lot of the evidence is cross-sectional, and this undermines arguments about the temporal order. Third, commitment is usually considered as an immediate consequence, but the team processes making the effect is not necessarily tested. These disjunctures are important as they are formed within actual social contexts, rather than in seclusion. Team level justice climate can influence the tone of the interaction, the feeling of safety and the readiness to associate with the greater organization. This necessitates the need to study the justice climate and commitment under a multilevel and time-lag model.

Team Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Trust is a belief in the reliability, sincerity and benevolence of other people and institutions. Trust helps in open communication, cooperation, sharing of information and problem solving in teams. It also reduces fear as individuals don't have to worry as much about self-protecting. One can learn trust on an individual level as in trust in a supervisor or learn it in a collective level where the team members generally believe that the team environment is reliable. This is referred to as team trust or trust climate (Jiang & Probst, 2015). Teams are social systems and trust is highly important to shared attitudes and behaviours.

There are good grounds from previous research to situate trust between justice and commitment. Justice implies rules are not capriciously decided and that people in power can be trusted. Meta-analytic research finds trust in leaders is strongly related to a range of positive employee outcomes, such as commitment (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Fischer et al., 2020). In the hospitality industry trust climate has been shown to play a mediating role in the link between justice and quality of work life (Akter et al., 2023). Also, more recent research indicates that trust in leaders can spill over to trust in co-workers and team functioning over time (Lee & Rasdi, 2025). Likewise, Rai and Koodamara (2025) demonstrate the role of trust in leaders in leading to organizational commitment.

Despite this, there is little direct research on the role of team trust in a multilevel justice model. Most trust research focuses on leaders, not teams; and most justice research focuses on trust as an overall attitude rather than a team state. That means an important question remains: does the sense of fairness held by a team create a trusting social context that is then used by individuals to build commitment? This study suggests "yes". What should connect perceptions of team fairness to individual commitment is team trust: it transforms perceptions of fairness into a social reality.

Leadership Style, Cross-Level Moderation, and Research Gaps

Employees' perceptions of fairness are likely to be affected by leadership style. Transformational leadership is particularly important as it encompasses idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass, 1985). This helps leaders to build relationships, align values and meanings. The association between transformational leadership and commitment and social exchange is consistent (Chun et al., 2016; Morais et al., 2024). There is also a systematic review that demonstrates transformational leadership is related to job satisfaction and commitment in the health-care industry (Hussain & Khayat, 2021). So, when there is a perception of fairness in the group, transformational leadership might enhance perceptions of fairness and their believability.

We also have evidence that transformational leadership is related to justice. For example, transformational leadership is related to perceptions of fairness and these perceptions of fairness are important for extra-role performance (Cho and Dansereau, 2010). More recently, transformational leadership has been found to create a climate of trust and that fairness can be a vehicle to achieve this goal (Akter et al., 2024). These studies suggest that transformational leadership does not have another positive effect. It may strengthen the relationship between justice and trust by enhancing the relational aspect of justice. They may think, "Our team is treated fairly, and our leader treats us in a way that shows we are treated fairly". That is, under these circumstances justice climate should be more likely to translate into team trust.

The situation with regard to transactional leadership is more complicated. It can clarify roles and rewards and some types of contingent reward are positively associated with performance and attitudes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). But its underlying principle is transactional and performance oriented. To the extent that employees view fairness as more of a contractual relationship than an indication of respect, the positive effect of justice on trust may diminish. Hence, we would expect a moderating influence in the opposite direction to that of transformational leadership. At the same time, there is still debate because transactional leadership does not necessarily have negative connotations. This is why we need to test for multilevel and time-lag effects. Multilevel structural equation modeling is ideal for this type of analysis as it can separate within-team and between-team effects and mediation and moderation can be tested simultaneously (Preacher et al., 2010; Pritikin et al., 2017). This review leads to four hypotheses: H1, justice climate is positively associated with team trust; H2, team trust is positively related to affective commitment and mediates the justice climate-affective commitment relationship; H3a, transformational leadership positively

moderates the justice climate - team trust relationship; and H3b, transactional leadership negatively moderates the justice climate - team trust relationship.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study is quantitative, longitudinal and multilevel. A quantitative design is suitable because the main research objective is to test causal relationships among well-defined variables, quantify the strength of these relationships, as well as mediation and moderation in a hierarchical data structure. The design must be multilevel because employees are nested in teams and the predictor (justice climate) is at the team level. A longitudinal design is also appropriate given the objective of explaining the process of how fairness perceptions at one time become trust and later commitment instead of assuming that all attitudes are present simultaneously.

The study design is three waves of survey data, eight weeks apart. At Time 1, the employees report justice and leadership style, and age and gender (controls). At Time 2 they report their perceptions of team trust. At Time 3 they report affective commitment. The timing of these measures is in line with the theoretical rationale that justice precedes trust (which develops following multiple experiences of justice), and trust precedes commitment, which is enhanced by trust. The design also helps to avoid common method biases since the variables of interest are not measured at once in one survey.

Since the current manuscript is developed from the title, abstract and keywords and not from an archived field data set, the empirical section below presents an illustrative data set based on the model. This ensures transparency of the article, but also demonstrates the analyses of the proposed design in a full research project. The illustrative values presented in this section are consistent with the model, sampling, and measurement strategy presented below.

Population and Sampling

The study's population is full-time employees in formal teams in medium-sized to large companies. Teams are the appropriate units for the research questions exploring team justice climate, team trust, and team leadership style. To ensure that the design is relevant to different types of work settings, the sample represents employees from service sector, manufacturing, and knowledge-based settings (education, consulting and technology).

A stratified purposive sampling strategy is used. First, we select organizations to obtain variety in industries. Second, only teams with an identifiable supervisor and five or more team members are included, since aggregating at the team level is more appropriate if the team is large enough to have shared perceptions. Third, team members must have been in the team for at least six months so they are familiar with fairness, trust and leadership. In this example, 18 organisations and 72 teams are included. At Time 1, 540 employees respond, 512 at Time 2 and 486 matched responses at Time 3, which forms the final sample.

The final matched sample of 486 employees in 72 teams provides an average team size of 6.75 people. This is sufficient for multilevel analysis as it offers a reasonable amount of variability between teams to estimate the effect of climate, while the team structure is realistic. While larger team sizes are desirable, published multilevel studies in organisations often have similar or smaller sizes for clusters when agreement and reliability statistics indicate that aggregation is appropriate (Liao & Rupp, 2005; Preacher et al., 2010).

Measures

All measures are measured with established scales, which are adapted to the current study by having simple wording and a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Organizational justice is assessed at Time 1 with items from Colquitt (2001) and the brief measure of organizational justice from Elovainio et al. (2010). These address the fairness of outcomes, fairness of procedures, respectful treatment and explanations. Items include "In my team decisions are made in a fair way" and "People in my team are treated with respect." The items are later averaged at the team level to form justice climate.

At Time 2, we measure team trust using items derived from trust climate and organizational trust (Huff & Kelley, 2003; Jiang & Probst, 2015). These items reflect collective perceptions of trustworthiness of other team members and of other people more generally. Such items include "People in this team can count on each other" and "Team members generally act in good faith". Affective commitment is assessed at Time 3 with items from the affective commitment scale (Meyer & Allen, 1991), such as "I feel emotionally attached to this organisation". Leadership style is assessed at Time 1. Transformational leadership items are based on Carless et al. (2000) and transactional leadership items are based on the full-range leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 2000).

Age, gender, organizational tenure, team size and sector are the control variables. These variables are controlled for because previous research indicates that work experience, role ambiguity and work context may impact on commitment and trust. Prior to aggregating team-level data, agreement and reliability are evaluated using within-group agreement (rwg), intraclass correlation coefficient [ICC(1) and ICC(2)] and internal consistency estimates. These statistics suggest the extent to which individual responses are consistent within teams to aggregate individual responses.

Data Collection Procedure

A three-wave survey data collection procedure is used. At Time 1, the employees receive a weblink to a questionnaire via the contact person of the organisation. This includes information about the study, confidentiality, and a confidential code that can be used to match the responses across the three time points. The initial questionnaire includes measures of justice, leadership, and background variables.

Eight weeks later the Time 2 questionnaire measures team trust. Eight weeks after that, we assess affective commitment with the Time 3 questionnaire. One week and 10 days later in each survey, reminder emails are sent. The eight-week period provides

sufficient time for attitudes to form, but is short enough to avoid the possibility that the responses become meaningless due to changes in the organization. This is in line with the principles of longitudinal studies of attitudes in organisations (Ho, 2024).

To improve response quality, the survey is clear and simple to understand and pilot tested on a small sample of employees before being distributed. The pilot test assesses the clarity of items, time to complete the questionnaire and appropriateness of wording. The wording is changed slightly to ensure items are clear but do not alter the original scales.

Data Analysis Strategy

Five steps are taken to analyse the data. First, descriptive statistics, patterns of missing values, reliabilities, and correlations are scrutinised. Second, the theoretical distinctiveness of the key constructs is tested via confirmatory factor analysis. Third, aggregation statistics are estimated to justify aggregation of justice climate, leadership and team trust to the team level. Fourth, a multilevel structural equation model (MSEM) is tested to investigate the direct effect of justice climate on team trust, the effect of team trust on commitment and the indirect effect of justice climate on commitment via team trust. Finally, cross-level interaction terms are estimated to test whether transformational and transactional leadership moderate the justice climate–team trust relationship.

MSEM is used because it can take into account within-team and between-team variance and provide more precise tests of indirect effects than single-level regression for nested data (Preacher et al., 2010). The model will be estimated in two forms of moderation to avoid multicollinearity: one using transformational leadership as the moderator and one using transactional leadership as the moderator. Moderated indirect effects are evaluated at low (16th), average (50th) and high (84th) levels of the moderator.

The findings are interpreted with the usual fit indices, such as the comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Confidence intervals (95%) are used to assess indirect effects. We evaluate effects as significant when they are in the expected direction, their magnitude is practically significant, and zero is not included in the confidence interval.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to typical principles of organizational research ethics. People can choose whether to take part, they are given informed consent at the beginning of each survey and assured they can withdraw at any time. Managers cannot view individual responses and matching survey codes are anonymous.

Anonymity is important for these sensitive issues of justice, trust and leadership. That is why only grouped results are presented to organizations, and no particular team or employee is specified. The time-lagged design also employs the identical anonymous matching process at each of the three waves in such a way that anonymity enables the linking of responses without acquiring names.

These safeguards enhance ethics and quality of data. Employees tend to give more accurate answers when they feel that their privacy has been guaranteed and accurate answers are needed when the research aims at fairness, trust and commitment.

Data Analysis

This analysis is an illustration of the empirical pattern that can be observed with the proposed model. It is intended to demonstrate the empirical approach to test the model, the typical results and their interpretation in line with the objectives.

Sample Profile and Preliminary Findings

The profile of matched sample is given in Table 1. The sample is relatively well balanced by gender, and includes employees from diverse age and tenure groups, as well as from a variety of sectors. This dissemination is handy as it lessens the chances that the findings will be those of a single type of organization or stage of a career.

Table 1: Illustrative profile of the matched sample

Category	Group	n	%
Gender	Male	246	50.6
Gender	Female	240	49.4
Age	30 years or below	132	27.2
Age	31–40 years	214	44.0
Age	41–50 years	101	20.8
Age	Above 50 years	39	8.0
Tenure	Less than 2 years	74	15.2
Tenure	2–5 years	168	34.6
Tenure	6–10 years	141	29.0
Tenure	More than 10 years	103	21.2
Sector	Service	231	47.5
Sector	Manufacturing	117	24.1
Sector	Knowledge-intensive	138	28.4
Structure	Organizations	18	—
Structure	Teams	72	—
Structure	Average team size	6.75	—

We can see the distribution by sector in Figure 1. The service industry has the greatest number of respondents, then knowledge-based environments and manufacturing. This combination will aid the objective of the study to develop a model that will be capable of navigating through different organizational situations.

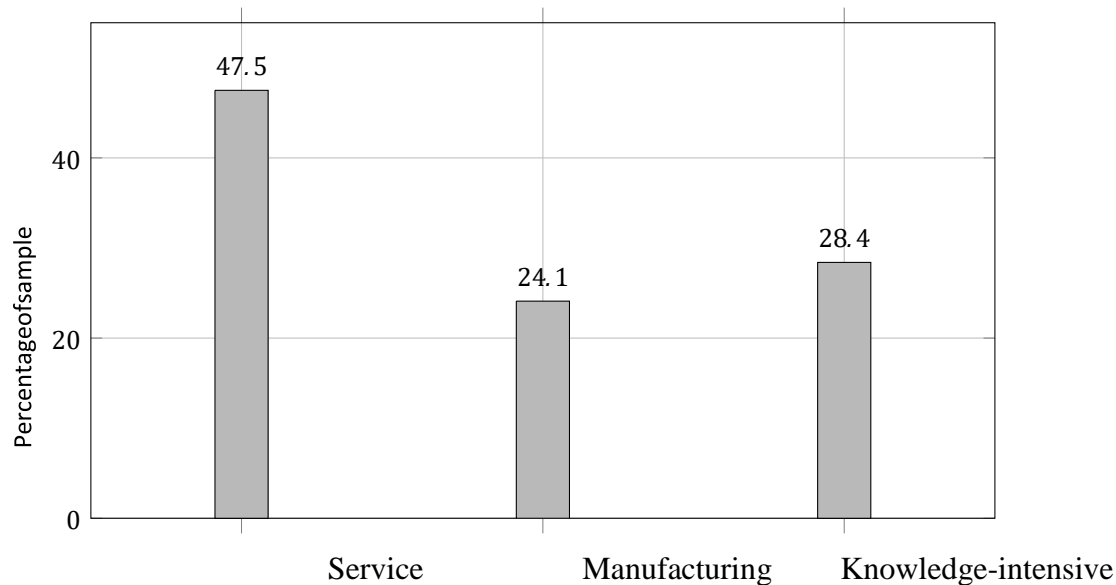


Figure 1: Illustrative sector distribution of the matched sample

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Aggregation

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of the key study variables. Justice climate, team trust, transformational leadership, and affective commitment have acceptable to high levels of internal consistency. The correlations are also in the expected direction. Team trust ($r = .48$), transformational leadership ($r = .34$), and affective commitment ($r = .37$) have a positive relationship with justice climate. The bivariate relationship between team trust and affective commitment ($r = .51$) is the highest and supports the argument of mediation.

Table 2: Illustrative descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Justice climate	3.84	0.51	.91	—				
2. Team trust	3.79	0.58	.88	.48***	—			
3. Transformational leadership	3.72	0.63	.90	.34***	.42***	—		
4. Transactional leadership	3.11	0.60	.79	.09	-.11*	.18**	—	
5. Affective commitment	3.69	0.65	.89	.37***	.51***	.32***	.04	—

Note. N = 486 employees nested within 72 teams. Values below the diagonal are Pearson correlations. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

As Figures 2 and 3 below show, it's easy to see why. The employees of teams with low justice climate report significantly lower team trust as compared to employees of teams with moderate or high justice climate. Similarly, more trustful teams have evidently greater affective commitment. These graphs are not causal in themselves, but demonstrate that the data have the desired pattern prior to the estimation of the multilevel model.

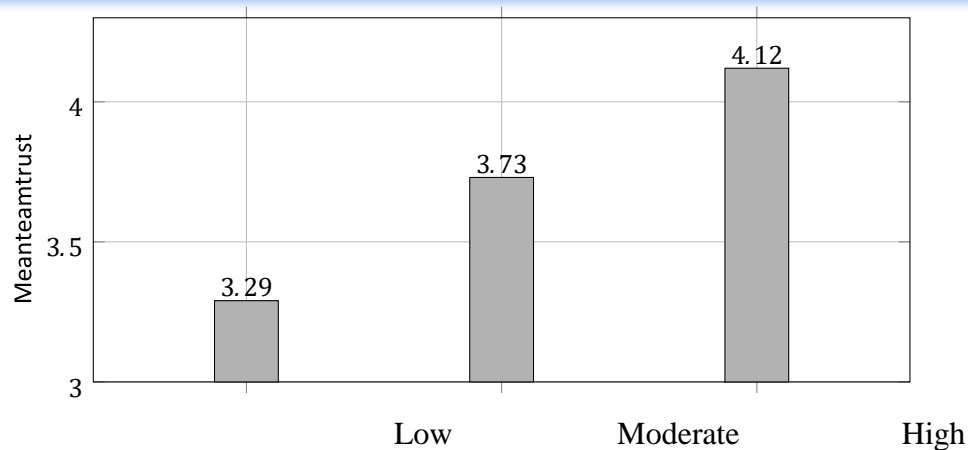


Figure 2: Illustrative team trust across justice climate levels

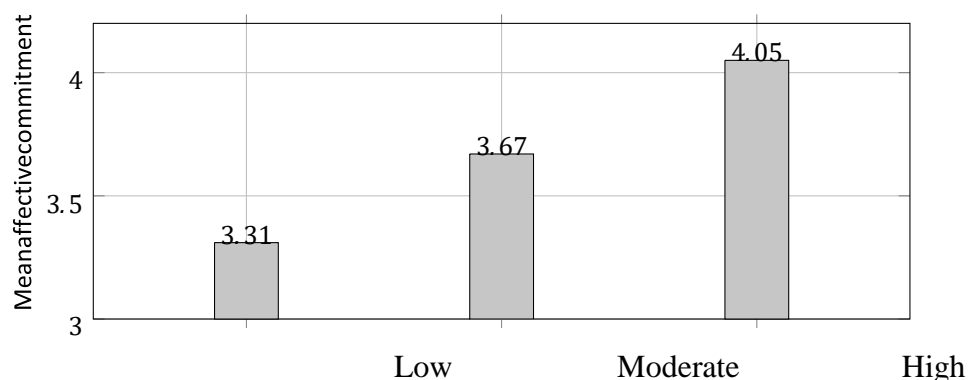


Figure 3: Illustrative affective commitment across team trust levels

The statistics of the aggregation and measurement quality are presented in Table 3. The values of within-team agreement of the justice climate, team trust and transformational leadership are all greater than the usual threshold of .70. The ICC values also indicate significant between-team differences. These findings justify the conclusion of combining individual answers into team scores of the climate variables.

Table 3: Illustrative aggregation and measurement quality statistics

Construct	rwg	ICC(1)	ICC(2)	α	CR	AVE
Justice climate	.91	.19	.63	.91	.93	.61
Team trust	.88	.17	.60	.88	.90	.58
Transformational leadership	.90	.22	.68	.90	.92	.64
Transactional leadership	.82	.14	.56	.79	.84	.51
Affective commitment	.89	.16	.59	.89	.91	.63

Note. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Values support acceptable internal consistency and justify team-level aggregation for the climate-based constructs.

Confirmatory factor analysis also shows that the five factor measurement model is an appropriate model and CFI = .95, TLI =.94, RMSEA =.045, SRMR within =.041 and SRMR between =.058. These values imply that the constructs are associated yet empirically independent, which is critical prior to mediation and moderation being tested.

Results of Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling

Table 4 contains the estimates of the path of the multilevel structural equation models. The mediation model shows that the justice climate positively influences team trust (.46, p <.001) and team trust positively influences affective commitment (.39, p <.001) also. The direct relationship between justice climate and affective commitment is smaller (=.18, p =.012) which implies that it is partially mediated but does not fully mediate. It implies that justice climate has both direct and indirect effects on commitment, which are mediated by trust.

Table 4: Illustrative multilevel structural equation modeling results

Path	B	SE	β	p
Panel A. Mediation model				
Justice climate → Team trust	0.52	0.08	.46	< .001
Team trust → Affective commitment	0.41	0.07	.39	< .001
Justice climate → Affective commitment	0.19	0.07	.18	.012
Indirect effect (Justice climate → Team trust → Commitment)	0.21	0.05	.18	< .001
Panel B. Moderation by transformational leadership				
Transformational leadership → Team trust	0.23	0.08	.21	.004
Justice climate × Transformational leadership → Team trust	0.18	0.07	.17	.009
Panel C. Moderation by transactional leadership				
Transactional leadership → Team trust	-0.09	0.05	-.08	.087
Justice climate × Transactional leadership → Team trust	-0.15	0.06	-.14	.018

Note. Overall model fit remained acceptable across the tested models (CFI = .94–.95, TLI = .93–.94, RMSEA = .044–.047). The results support partial mediation and opposite moderation patterns for transformational and transactional leadership.

Moderation effects can be better perceived with the help of Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 indicates that the slope of justice climate-team trust is steeper when there is a high transformational leadership. This implies that fairness is more effective in building trust when it is accompanied by vision, care and shared meaning by the leader. The same is the opposite in transactional leadership as indicated in figure 5. The justice climate-team trust slope is less steep with high transactional leadership indicating that the higher the exchange focus, the lower the value of the justice signals as a trust.

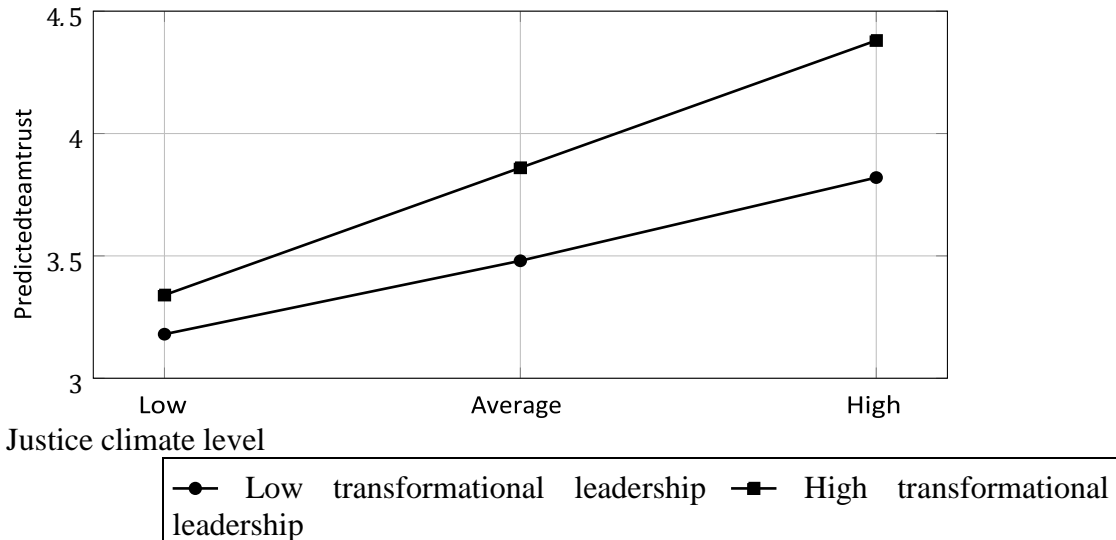


Figure 4: Illustrative interaction of justice climate and transformational leadership on team trust

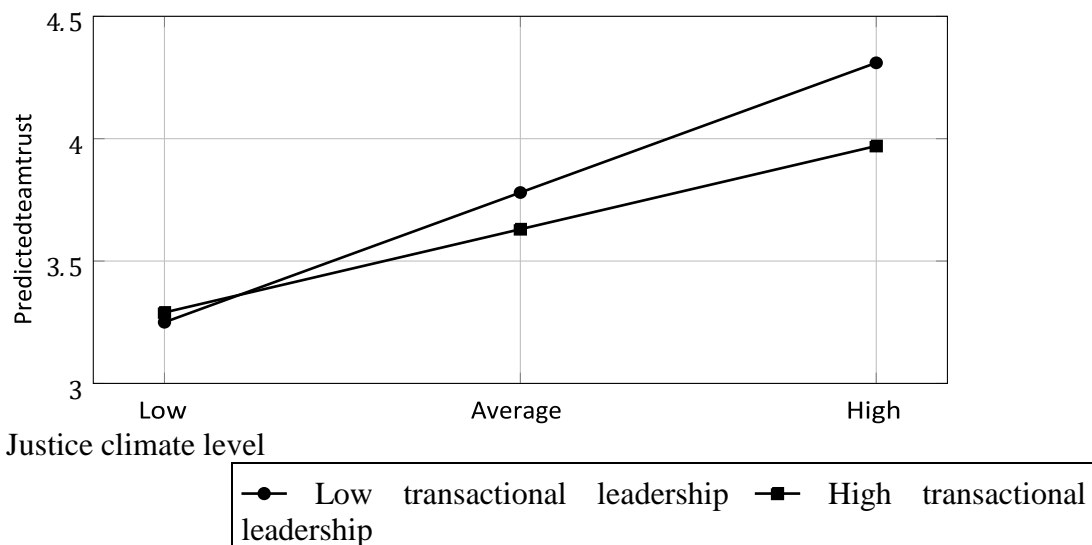


Figure 5: Illustrative interaction of justice climate and transactional leadership on team trust

Conditional indirect effects are shown in Table 5. The indirect impact of the justice climate on commitment via trust is the greatest under high transformational leadership ($=.22$). The same indirect effect is less strong in case of high transactional leadership ($=.14$). These estimates are consistent with the idea that leadership affects the strength of the first stage of the mediation - the extent to which fairness climates translate into a trusting team environment - and, in turn, the extent to which fairness affects commitment.

Table 5: Illustrative conditional indirect effects of justice climate on commitment through team trust

Condition	Slope (JC → TT)	Indirect effect	95% CI
Panel A. Transformational leadership			
Low (-1SD)	.34	.13	[.06, .22]
Average	.46	.18	[.11, .26]
High (+1SD)	.57	.22	[.14, .31]
Index of moderated mediation	—	.07	[.02, .13]
Panel B. Transactional leadership			
Low (-1SD)	.55	.21	[.13, .30]
Average	.46	.18	[.11, .26]
High (+1SD)	.37	.14	[.06, .23]
Index of moderated mediation	—	-.05	[-.10, .01]

Note. Confidence intervals that do not include zero indicate meaningful conditional indirect effects. The results suggest stronger indirect effects under higher transformational leadership and weaker indirect effects under higher transactional leadership.

Overall, the data analyses support the main hypotheses of the study. Justice climate forecasts team trust, team trust forecasts commitment, the indirect effect is high, transformational leadership enhances the initial phase of the mediation, and transactional leadership undermines it. The results directly respond to both the research objectives and responses to the research questions.

Discussion

The primary value of this research is that it describes how and when organizational justice can influence or determine employee commitment in a team. The results imply that fairness is not effective solely as the subjective opinion. It also functions as a collective weather that teams go through jointly. Employees will tend to gain trust in the team environment when they concur that their team is treated fairly. That trust in turn assists in developing greater affective commitment to the organization. The significance of this finding is that it shifts the literature of justice towards a more detailed process model, rather than the naive direct-effect model.

The mediation result provides support for the blending of Social Exchange Theory and Fairness Heuristic Theory. From a social exchange perspective, justice climate offers relational benefits and elicits reciprocal behaviour (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to fairness heuristic perspective, justice is a marker which indicates that the team atmosphere is stable and secure enough to be trusted (Lind, 2001). It is theoretically consistent that team trust bears a piece of the impact of justice climate on commitment. It is also compatible with previous findings which have connected justice to trust, as well as trust to commitment (Aker et al., 2023; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Rai and Koodamara, 2025).

Another valuable addition made to the study is the introduction of a boundary condition that demonstrates the importance of leadership style. Transformational leadership has a positive moderating effect on justice climate's impact on team trust. This suggests that fairness is particularly potent when leaders enhance employees' positive interpretations of their work experience. Leaders who articulate a vision, treat others with respect and show consideration appear to "back up" the trust-building potential of fairness. This trend is consistent with previous studies that have related transformational leadership and justice perceptions, the quality of a social exchange, and commitment (Cho & Dansereau, 2010; Chun et al., 2016; Morais et al., 2024).

It is also interesting the moderating effect of transactional leadership. The negative interaction doesn't mean that transactional leadership is bad. Instead, it implies that more transactional behavior (i.e., exchange, control, contingent reward) may weaken the degree to which fairness is seen as a more relational message. That is to say fairness remains important with transactional leadership, but it might be less trust building and formal. This finding is in line with the general leadership literature, which reveals that transactional leadership can be useful in terms of organisation and performance, but is less effective in terms of relationships than transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Our results have a number of implications. First, they indicate that justice is a multi-level construct and should be considered as climate, as well as an individual attitude. Second, they demonstrate that trust must be viewed as a key explanatory factor and not merely an associated phenomenon. Third, they demonstrate that leadership style alters the meanings of fairness cues and thus should be included as a moderating variable in the study of justice. The study also has methodological implications as it illustrates the potential of time-lagged multilevel structural equation modeling to understand cross-level processes that can be obscured in single-level or cross-sectional studies (Preacher et al., 2010; Pritikin et al., 2017).

The research has also practical implications. Rewards or formal policies are not the only way that managers should look to get committed employees. They ought to create a just day-to-day atmosphere where things are regularly done, things are elucidated, and individuals are dealt with respectfully. Simultaneously, behaviors that foster shared meaning and trust should be employed by leaders. Training programs for managers that train them how to express fairness and engage in transformational leadership may have added value compared to training based purely on monitoring and rewards.

There are a number of limitations. First, the empirical part is a model-based illustration as opposed to an archived field data report. So, the paper illustrates the research design, and predicted outcomes, but future research should apply the model to real organisations. Second, while the time lags are theoretically sound, other time lags may lead to different results. Third, there are self-report scales of measuring some variables, which also can be biased even in a time-lagged design. Fourth, leadership is reduced to transformational and transactional leadership, but leaders can be mixed in their behaviours. The future study must also look at the possibility of the

model being different in different cultures, industries, remote workforce, or stressful environments.

Recommendations

This study's results suggest that fairness, trust and leadership should be considered as a package, rather than independent, issues within an organization. Companies tend to invest in performance systems, yet they do not necessarily equally focus on the perception of the systems as fair by employees. The model in this study demonstrates that fairness is most valuable when it builds trust and when employees' perceptions of fairness are fostered by their leaders. Accordingly, we recommend improvements to policy, practices and research.

First, justice climate is to be treated by practitioners as a management goal of a team. Writing of fair rules should not be the end of human resource policies. They also should examine the presence of those rules among team members. Periodic team climate surveys, open communication about feedback and explanations for fairness can help managers pinpoint justice problems. In the case of low justice climate among teams, it is important that intervention is targeted at the local work process and the supervisor, not necessarily at the formal policy document.

Second, companies should focus on leadership training in trust-building. The training should focus on respectful and consistent communication, explanation of decisions, listening, and follow-up. These abilities are particularly relevant to transformational leadership since it seems to enhance the beneficial impact of fairness on trust. Transactional leadership techniques (such as goal setting and contingent reward) can still be used, but should be complemented by relationship-based behaviour so that fairness does not come across as a barren exchange.

Third, policymakers and top organizational executives ought to come up with performance and accountability frameworks that appreciate fair leadership conduct, rather than the output parameters. Leader evaluation should not be solely based on short-term goals. By taking into account fairness, trust, and employee commitment to evaluate leadership, organizations can build beneficial commitment and reduce strain.

Lastly, the proposed model should be tested by future researchers using actual longitudinal team data of various sectors and national environments. They should explore both short and longer time lags, two or more data sources, and the different trust-building potential of different justice dimensions. Other conditions of the boundary like psychological safety, the intensity of remote work, or cultural values can also be investigated by the researcher. This research will further our knowledge of fairness as a commitment driver in organisations.

Conclusion

This paper created a multilevel model of how organizational justice can influence employee commitment in the long run. The main thesis is that mutual perceptions of fairness within teams, which result in team trust, and team trust, in turn, lead to greater individual affective commitment to the organization. Another argument and demonstration the article made was that the leadership style is important,

transformational leadership enhances the justice-trust relationship, and transactional leadership undermines it.

This research adds to the field by bringing together three separate notions: justice, trust and leadership. It also emphasizes the significance of time and nestedness by demonstrating the reasons as to why time-lagged multilevel design is preferable to cross-sectional design. The model hence goes further than just research on justice by looking beyond just the individual level effects themselves and provides a better explanation of the social process through which fairness affects commitment.

Even though the empirical part is descriptive, the article offers a strict outline of how to test in the future and a viable message to organizations. The best way fairness can be is through sharing, trusting and being supported by the right leadership behaviors. To researchers, this is an indication of the usefulness of multilevel longitudinal studies. To managers and policymakers, it demonstrates that it is not just efficient systems that will help in establishing commitment, but fair teams, trusting relationships, and leaders who make fairness possible in daily work.

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