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Bridging the gap: Ethical leadership, human resource practices and organisational justice

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Orientation: Perceived organisational justice (POJ) and the role of human resource (HR) practices have been well documented, researched and argued. The role of leadership, and specifically the perception of ethical leadership in the relationship between HR practices and POJ has not been investigated, especially not in South Africa.

Research purpose: This study aimed to determine the extent to which HRs practices influence POJ and the mediating role of ethical leadership, through a sectoral comparison.

Motivation for the study: It is often, and rightfully, argued that the experience of HR practices determines employees' perception of organisational justice; however, there is paucity in the perception of ethical leadership.

Research approach/design and method: This study used a cross-sectional design and survey methodology. Convenience sampling resulted in 1184 respondents from 20 organisations in the South African private and public sectors.

Main findings: A positive significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship exists between HR practices and POJ, mediated by ethical leadership (mediation 32% for the private sector, 13% for the public sector and 21% for the combined sample).

Practical/managerial implications: This research endeavour has the potential of empowering the leadership to propose concrete HRs strategies to cultivate proactive work behaviours influencing performance and competitiveness.

Contribution/value-add: This study validated the ethical leadership and POJ instruments to be used with confidence in South Africa. It further emphasised the importance, not only of the perceptions of HR practices on the perception of organisational justice but also the role of leadership in this relationship, specifically ethical leadership.

Keywords: perceived organisational justice; human resource practices; ethical leadership; sectoral comparison; mediation.

Introduction

Background

Organisations are highly dependent on their employees to gain an advantage in the competitive market, sustainability and growth, and are strongly reliant on the efficiency of human resources (HRs) and the management thereof (Collins, 2021). Human resource management (HRM) includes responsibilities such as strategic recruiting, employee management, training, development, growth compensation management, efficiency, employee relations, health care, employee satisfaction and the provision of employee services. It further includes providing policies and practices to improve efficiency, engagement of employees and work quality (Abdullahi et al., 2022; Khan & Abdullah, 2019). The contemporary business landscape is characterised by dynamic shifts and complexities, wherein organisations wrestle with multifaceted challenges ranging from globalisation to technological disruptions. Amid these challenges, the significance of human capital as a strategic asset has been accentuated, underscoring the imperative for effective HRM practices. Organisations are increasingly recognising the pivotal role of human resource practices (HRP) in not only attracting and retaining talent but also in shaping employee perceptions of fairness and justice within the organisational context.

Human resource practices are interrelated to the success and performance of the organisation and the perceived organisational justice (POJ) that revolves around perceptions of fairness in the workplace and stands as a fundamental determinant of employee attitudes, behaviours

and organisational outcomes. Perceived organisational justice as a psychological construct, encompasses distributive justice (fairness of outcomes), procedural justice (fairness of processes) and interactional justice (fairness in interpersonal treatment) (Skitka et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated the profound influence of POJ on various organisational outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment and performance. Employees who perceive their organisations as fair and impartial, exhibit positive attitudes and behaviours, contributing to enhanced organisational effectiveness and competitiveness. Skitka et al. (2021) highlighted that justice is deeply embedded in moral assumptions while organisational justice is a two-way relationship between employers and employees. Organisational justice is a fundamental factor that influences employees' ethical behaviour (Ahamed et al., 2023; Rawls, 2020). Several studies have emphasised that ethical leadership (EL) behaviour is a vital originator of organisational justice (Charoensap et al., 2019; Khuzwayo et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2023). At the heart of fostering a climate of organisational justice is EL.

Ethical leadership as characterised by ethical decision-making, integrity, transparency and accountability, serves as a guiding force in shaping organisational cultures and norms. Ethical leaders not only espouse moral principles but enact them in their behaviours, thereby setting a precedent for ethical conduct (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). By emphasising fairness, respect and trustworthiness, ethical leaders create an environment conducive to the cultivation of justice perceptions among employees (Elbæk & Mitkidis, 2023; Treviño & Nelson, 2021; Weiss, 2021). Unethical business practices are a major concern and many ethical scandals have surfaced in the business world. These represent the tip of the iceberg of unethical business practices (Elbæk & Mitkidis, 2023; Treviño & Nelson, 2021; Weiss, 2021). Ego-centric behaviours from people seeking to satisfy their personal and self-interest goals cause severe impairment to the internal and external stakeholders (Hogan et al., 2021; Lunsford & Padilla, 2023). Moral principles, integrity and fairness characterise EL and emerge as a cornerstone in shaping organisational behaviour and fostering conducive environments in which justice perceptions will flourish (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Ethical leadership contributes to employee motivation, well-being and organisational behaviour, and ultimately general organisational performance and economic growth (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Leaders are continuously challenged to choose between maximising profit and administering ethical business practices. Grobler and Grobler (2018) highlighted that when morality comes up against profit, profit seldom loses. Leaders' ethical behaviour is a vital source for continued existence and growth. Complex socio-ecological systems pressure organisational culture and the old behaviour patterns of leaders, which play a role in organisational justice. The relationship between EL and employees' ethical behaviour is shaped by their POJ (Al Halbusi et al., 2023).

This article investigated the possible mediating role of EL in the intricate relationship between HRP and POJ.

Purpose and objectives of this study

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between HRP and POJ, and the influence that EL has on this relationship (as a mediator), in both the private and public sectors. A sectoral comparison will thus be conducted. This study consists of four empirical objectives. The first objective focussed on validating the EL and POJ instruments, as they have not been validated within the South African context. Related to the purpose of the study, the second objective was to assess the relationship between HRP, POJ and EL. The third objective was to determine whether EL mediates the relationship between HRP and POJ. The fourth objective was to compare the sectors (private and public) in terms of the strength and nature of the relationships between the variables. Recommendations were made to improve the perception of POJ through the experience of EL and the HRP within an organisation.

Literature review

Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is a critical determinant of organisational effectiveness and employee well-being, especially in the context of South Africa's socio-political landscape. Characterised by leaders' commitment to moral principles, integrity and fairness in decision-making and behaviour (Brown & Treviño, 2006), EL is essential in a country where historical injustices and systemic inequalities continue to influence organisational dynamics. Ethical leadership is crucial for fostering trust, legitimacy and social cohesion, especially in South Africa, because of the country's history (Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2018).

Research indicates that EL behaviours, such as role modelling ethical conduct, promoting transparency and empowering employees to voice concerns, are linked to positive organisational outcomes. These outcomes include higher employee satisfaction, commitment and performance (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Shin & Zhou, 2007). Furthermore, EL is important in addressing ethical dilemmas, establishing trust, and navigating complex challenges inherent in the African context, through the cultivation of an organisational culture that is built on transparency and integrity (Matimbwa & Kamala, 2024).

Despite its importance, translating EL principles into practice poses several challenges. These include pressures to prioritise short-term gains over long-term ethical considerations and cultural norms that may condone unethical behaviours (Van Vuuren & Wiese, 2017). Fostering EL in South Africa requires a concerted effort from organisations, leaders and policymakers to promote ethical awareness, provide ethical training and support and create accountability mechanisms to uphold ethical standards (Van Wyk & Adendorff, 2016).

Ethical leadership holds significant promise in promoting ethical conduct and enhancing organisational effectiveness in South Africa, serving as a catalyst for positive change in the country's business landscape (Grobler & Grobler, 2018). Ethical leadership is critical to enhance employee ethical behaviour. Leaders exercising ethical behaviour in their day-to-day activities become role models (Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018) who are likely to enhance employees' ethical behaviour. They are more likely to be perceived as employees, who foster ethical behaviours (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2009). An ethical climate has been addressed as the best mechanism underlying the EL–employee ethical behaviour relationship (Schminke et al., 2005). Ethical leadership could shape other aspects that play an important role in this relationship. In addition to providing ethical guidance, ethical leaders are fair (Metwally et al., 2019), which entails important aspects such as transparency, balanced decision-making, and giving fair and equal treatment to others (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Metwally et al., 2019), dimensions that are conceptually related to POJ. Leaders, particularly those in upper or middle management positions, are perceived as representatives of the organisation (Grobler & Holtzhauzen, 2018). Therefore, the practice of EL by these individuals should lead employees to view their organisation as fair. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), this perception of fairness may motivate employees to reciprocate with positive, valuable behaviours, such as ethical conduct (Ko et al., 2019). Conversely, if managers behave unethically, employees might doubt the reliability of organisational rules and guidelines (Premeaux, 2009; Xu et al., 2016), potentially leading to a decline in ethical behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2001).

Previous studies have identified social exchange processes as a key mechanism through which ethical leaders can encourage positive outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour (Brown & Treviño, 2006). These processes are also associated with positive employee attitudes and behaviours in contexts where organisational justice is perceived (El Akremi et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2017).

Thus, it seems as if it is a significant challenge for management to convey the organisation's ethical essence to others, thereby building the reputation of EL. Being seen as an ethical leader means being perceived as someone who possesses ethical qualities, engages in ethical actions and makes decisions based on ethical principles. A true ethical leader 'walks the talk' and, in doing so, influences the ethical lives and behaviours of others within the organisation (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2000).

Human resource practices

Historically, South Africa's HRP were heavily influenced by apartheid-era policies, characterised by systemic discrimination and inequity in the workplace (Mkhize & Parumasur, 2022). The HRP in South Africa has evolved significantly in response to the country's unique socio-economic and political landscape. However, since the advent of democracy in 1994, there has been a concerted effort to transform HRP towards promoting diversity, equality and inclusion (Kim et al., 2021). Legislation such as the *Employment Equity Act and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act* has mandated organisations to implement affirmative action measures aimed at redressing past imbalances and promoting demographic representativity in the workforce (Vilakati & Schurink, 2021). Moreover, South African organisations have increasingly adopted progressive HRP, including skills development initiatives, diversity training and performance management systems aligned with transformation objectives (Chilunjika et al., 2022). Despite these advancements, challenges persist, including the under-representation of marginalised groups in leadership positions and disparities in access to employment opportunities (Triana et al., 2021). Additionally, the global trend towards digitalisation and automation presents both opportunities and challenges for HRP in South Africa, necessitating the development of future-oriented strategies to navigate the changing labour market landscape (Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021).

Human resource practices are often based on organisational policies that deal with basic to essential areas, such as promoting workforce engagement, evaluation, the application of knowledge, capacity preparation, employee training and retaining staff, along with the management of administration issues (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021), all related to the management functions of strategic HRM (Singh et al., 2020).

Haar et al. (2021) stated that creativity, markets, the ability to adapt technology, access to capital and the existence of a large-enhancing scale are important factors in/or determinants of the profitability, continued viability and/or sustainability of organisations modern competitive market success. Human resource management is crucial for a company's overall success and is among the conditions that allow it to realise various advantages (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021).

The greatest obstacle to any organisations' financial growth and profitability is not being able to understand the services of their skilled workforce, but on the opposite side, development-oriented businesses in several countries are only now still searching for the best HRP to efficiently grow (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021; Troth & Guest, 2020). According to Othman and Mahmood (2022), organisational success is highly dependent on HRP for employee engagement and performance. Recruiting practices such as selective hiring have a positive effect on organisational performance (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021).

The HRP in South Africa reflects a dynamic interplay between historical legacies, legislative imperatives and contemporary organisational realities, with ongoing efforts focussed on fostering inclusive workplaces and driving sustainable socio-economic transformation (Grobler et al., 2019).

Perceived organisational justice

Perceived organisational justice in South Africa has attracted significant attention because of its implications for employee

well-being, organisational effectiveness and social justice. The literature highlighted the multifaceted nature of POJ as ethical; employees will see that justice is present in the (1) outcomes achieved (distributive justice), (2) procedures realised (procedural justice), (3) relationships established (interpersonal justice), and (4) information received (informational justice) in their organisations (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Colquitt, 2001). Studies have shown that perceptions of justice in the workplace are influenced by factors such as organisational policies, leadership behaviours and cultural norms, with implications for employee attitudes and behaviours (Krishnan & Mary, 2012). According to Baldwin (2006), organisational justice is concerned with maintaining fairness in the workplace. Given South Africa's history of systemic inequality and social fragmentation, POJ is particularly prominent in promoting trust, cohesion and legitimacy within organisations, as well as fostering inclusivity and social cohesion in broader society (Lather & Kaur, 2024). However, challenges persist, including disparities in access to opportunities and resources, as well as perceptions of unfair treatment based on demographic factors such as race, gender and socio-economic status (McGrew & Statti, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to promote equity, transparency and accountability in organisational practices, as well as broader societal interventions aimed at addressing structural inequalities and fostering social justice (Banks et al., 2021). This might be even more relevant within the South African context, with its complexities of a post-apartheid society and underscores the importance of justice perceptions in promoting inclusive workplaces and advancing socio-economic transformation.

Several studies have highlighted the need to educate employees about the systems and customs of the organisation. This is especially true when organisations have integrity as a core shared value. Thus, employees are compelled to accept that justice is not only important but also determines whether to continue working in the organisation. In contrast, employees who are cynical and believe there is unfairness and corporate ethics are flawed will not rely on organisational justice, thereby adopting unethical behaviours to achieve their objectives (Brown et al., 2005; Demirtas, 2015; Grobler & Grobler, 2021; Koopman et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 2012; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2002).

Managers are granted authority to oversee employees and organisational resources, undertaking a crucial role within their organisations (Loi et al., 2014) and being in an exclusive position to administer justice (Brown et al., 2005; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2012). Therefore, given that managers are representatives of the organisations (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2018), it enhances the concept of being ethical in the workplace when they are perceived as ethical (Colquitt, 2001). Ethical leadership at senior management levels can have a positive influence on the behaviour of managers, fostering social exchange processes (El Akremi et al., 2010). Procedural justice, which emphasises the perceived fairness of the processes followed to make decisions (Greenberg, 2001), procedures and policies used to determine outcomes or resource distributions (Colquitt, 2001), should lead to more ethical behaviour among employees. In effect, a higher level of perceived procedural justice will be accompanied by employees perceiving that they have some voice over the outcome (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2020). According to the social exchange theory (Ahmad et al., 2023), this is likely to lead employees to engage in positive behaviours (such as ethical behaviour) towards the leader and the organisation (McCain et al., 2010). Employees tend to respond positively when they feel they have a voice in the outcomes.

Interpersonal justice, where individuals feel respected and treated fairly, is another factor that can lead to ethical behaviour. The norm of reciprocity suggests that well-treated employees will respond positively to the organisation. Furthermore, informational justice, characterised by honest and transparent communication, is likely to enhance ethical behaviour levels. When employees feel valued and trusted, they are more inclined to engage in positive behaviours, aligning with reciprocity processes. For instance, in situations such as downsizing, perceptions of informational justice can cultivate trust among employees, fostering social exchange processes (Colquitt et al., 2007).

The extent to which each of these justice dimensions (distributive, procedural, interpersonal, informational) can be shaped by managers' EL, organisational justice and each of its different dimensions, is likely to mediate the relationship between EL and employee ethical behaviour (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

Relationship between human resource practices and perceived organisational justice

Human resource practices such as fair performance appraisal systems, equitable reward structures and transparent decision-making processes, are seen by employees as indicators of organisational fairness and justice (Colquitt et al., 2001; Takeuchi et al., 2007). When employees perceive that HRPs are implemented fairly and consistently, they are more likely to view the organisation as just and equitable, resulting in higher levels of POJ.

Organisations that emphasise fairness in their HRP generally experience higher levels of employee trust, satisfaction and commitment (Colquitt et al., 2001). Employees tend to perceive distributive justice when they believe that rewards and outcomes are allocated fairly based on performance and merit (Takeuchi et al., 2007). Similarly, perceptions of procedural justice are enhanced when employees view decision-making processes as transparent, participative and unbiased (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2020). Additionally, organisations that prioritise interactional justice, by treating employees with dignity, respect and consideration, tend to achieve higher levels of POJ (Myers & Paul, 2020).

It seems then that by fostering POJ through fair and equitable HRP, organisations create an environment where employees are more likely to trust the organisation, feel valued and engage in discretionary behaviours that

contribute to organisational success. Thus, there is strong empirical support for the positive relationship between HRP and POJ, underscoring the importance of fairness and equity in shaping organisational climates and employee perceptions. Perceived organisational justice is mostly seen as a function or result of employees' experience of the HRP in the organisation; however, for this study, EL is also included in the conceptual framework as a possible mediator.

Research design

Research method

A cross-sectional design and quantitative analysis, utilising a survey method was used in this study.

Population and sample

The population is employees of organisations (consisting of more than 60 individuals) in South Africa. The sample has been drawn from this population, with the inclusion criteria being employees who were permanently employed in the purposefully selected organisations, by co-researchers, from both the private and public sectors.

Participants were employees of 20 organisations, 10 from each of the sectors. The co-researchers identified the organisations, based on availability and proximity. A total of 60 participants were purposively sampled, with English proficiency being the only criterion for inclusion. Twenty co-researchers (Master of Business Administration [MBA] and Master of Business Leadership [MBL] students) did the fieldwork, which formed part of a larger project required for the completion of their qualifications.

The total sample comprised 1200 participants (with 1184 valid responses), 587 from the private sector and 597 from public sector. There were slightly more females (53%) compared to males, with participants from the organisational support environment (59%) being better represented in the sample compared to the participants who perform core organisational functions. In all, 28% of the participants were within management positions, with 72% in the non-managerial positions.

The mean age of the respondents was 37.63 years (standard deviation [SD] = 8.71), with the mean period that the respondents had worked in the specific organisation being 8.53 years (SD = 7.19). The participants, in terms of average age (37.63 years; SD = 8.71) and tenure (8.53 years; SD = 7.19), suggest that they have sufficient organisational experience to provide an accurate assessment of their perceptions of the constructs being measured.

Measuring instruments

Research methodology is the specific procedures or techniques used to address the research objectives, using a survey to gather data (Verma et al., 2024).

Ethical leadership

The Ethical Leadership Questionnaire was used to measure EL as a unidimensional construct. It was developed by Yukl et al. (2013) and consists of nine items that include the perceptions of employees in terms of the ethical values and behaviour of their leaders. The items are developed to measure the broad operational definition of EL, which includes honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, integrity (consistency of actions with values) and ethical guidance. A typical item reads 'My leader holds members accountable for using ethical practices in their work'. A six-point Likert-scale response was used ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha 'coefficient reported by Yukl et al. (2013) is 0.96. The construct validity will however be assessed, as this instrument was not validated within the South African context before.

Human resource practices

The original instrument was developed by Boon et al. (2011), and measures the employees' perceptions of HRP, across 7 dimensions and 38 items. The dimensions (HRP) of the original instrument are: (1) training and development, (2) participation, autonomy and job design, (3) performance appraisal and rewards, (4) teamwork and autonomy, (5) work-life balance, (6) recruitment and selection, as well as (7) employment security. A typical example of an item included in the instrument reads as follows: 'The organisation offers (me) … an above-average salary for this function'. A 5-point interval Likert-type measurement scale was used, with the intervals ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

The instrument was validated by Grobler et al. (2019), which led to a slight adaptation of the original instrument. The adaptation was performed after an extensive exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed, yielding nine dimensions, measured by 37 of the original 38 items. The dimension that Boon et al. (2011) called participation, autonomy and job design was divided into two dimensions, namely job design and participation and autonomy, respectively. The same happened with the original training and development dimension that formed two separate dimensions, namely training and development.

They found that the original teamwork factor as well as the performance appraisal and reward factors are influenced by the collectivistic work culture of South Africa. An item originally related to performance management was added to the teamwork dimension; the item reads, 'The organisation offers [me] periodic evaluation of my performance'. The only item that was excluded by Grobler et al. (2019) reads as follows: 'The organisation offers (me) fair appraisal of my performance'. The reason for this exclusion is that performance and performance management is seen from a collectivistic perspective, with the focus rather on group performance than individual performance. Subsequently, the initial factor of Boon et al. (2011) called performance appraisal

and rewards were renamed rewards because of the absence of any performance-related items. Grobler et al. (2019) reported acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) for all the dimensions.

Perceived organisational justice

The POJ was measured with an instrument developed by Colquitt (2001) and consists of four dimensions, measured by 20 items in total. The dimensions are: (1) procedural justice (7 items, with a typical item that reads 'Have you been able to express your views and feelings with the application of those procedures on you as an individual?'), (2) distributive justice (4 items, 'Does your compensation reflect the effort you have put into your work?'), (3) interpersonal justice (4 items, 'Has your manager treated you with dignity?'), and (4) informational justice (5 items, 'Has your manager communicated details in a timely manner?'). The instrument used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (to a small extent) to 5 (to a large extent). Acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ranging from 0.90 to 0.93 have been reported. Because of little research on this instrument within the South African context, and the contestation between researchers regarding the number of factors of the POJ instrument, specifically about a 3 of the 4-factor structure, it was decided to perform a CFA on the instrument to ensure construct validity.

Sectoral comparison

Grobler (2022) found that there are sectoral differences and similarities, and that it was important to study to ensure that context-specific recommendations are made. The results of this study, across 12 independent samples over 5 years, supported literature that suggests that there are distinct differences between the private and public sectors. This author argues that it is mainly because of a higher degree of bureaucratic dominance in the public sector, which makes it more difficult to lead, often referred to as leadership constraints, which harm the perceptions of leadership in the sector.

Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM Corp. Released 2023. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 29.0.2.0 Armonk, NY: IBM Corp) and Analysis of Moment Structures (Arbuckle, J.L. [2006]. AMOS [Version 7.0] [Computer Program]. Chicago: SPSS), were used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the distribution of the data.

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the POJ and EL instruments to ensure construct validity. Several fit indices were used, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Chi-square (χ^2), and the ratio of the differences in Chi-square to the differences in degrees of freedom (df)(χ^2/df). Byrne (2016) indicates that there is no one acceptable cut-off value of what constitutes adequate fit, but it is generally acknowledged that a CFI value of 0.90, an RMSEA value of less than 0.05 and χ^2/df, a ratio of 5 or lower indicated good fit.

T-tests, with Levene's test to assess whether equal variances can be assumed (significant value is > 0.05), were used to determine the mean differences between the private and public sectors. Cohen's d values were used to assess the practical significance of the differences with small, medium and large effects indicated by values of 0.15, 0.30 and 0.50, respectively (Pallant, 2020). The strength of the relationship between the constructs was determined using Pearson's product-moment correlations, with correlations of 0.30 to 0.69 and 0.70 and higher to be regarded as small, moderate and strong, respectively. Correlation below 0.30 is regarded to be weak (Pallant, 2020). The Fisher r-to-z transformation methodology was used to determine the differences between the sectors in terms of the reported relationships between the variables. Statistically significant differences are specified when the z-observed value is greater than 1.96 or smaller than -1.96.

The amount of variance explained in the predicted or outcome variable (POJ) by the predictor variables (HRP and EL) was determined through a hierarchical regression analysis. An inspection of the f^2 value was performed to determine the practical significance of the regression analysis. Values of ≥ 0.02, ≥ 0.15, and ≥ 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

The PROCESS Model 4 macro (Hayes & Preacher, 2014) was used in the determination of the possibility of mediation by EL on the relationship between HRP and POJ. In the assessment of the fit of the model, structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted. The guidelines of Byrne (2016) were used to assess the goodness of fit criteria of the Chi-square (χ^2), the ratio of Chi-square to its *df*, Incremental Fit Index (*IFI*), Tucker–Lewis Index (*TLI*), *CFI*, and *RMSEA*. The sectors were assessed separately, as well as the combined sample.

The model and the path diagram were depicted to explain the hypothesised relational chain (Figure 1). This model assumes a three-variable system where two relational paths feed into the outcome variable: the direct influence of the predictor variable (HRP) on the predicted variable (POJ) as Path^c, with the influence of the mediator (EL – Path^b) on the relationship between HRP and POJ.

As recommended by Hayes and Rockwood (2017), mediation was assessed with SPSS PROCESS, for both the sectors separately as well as for the combined sample.

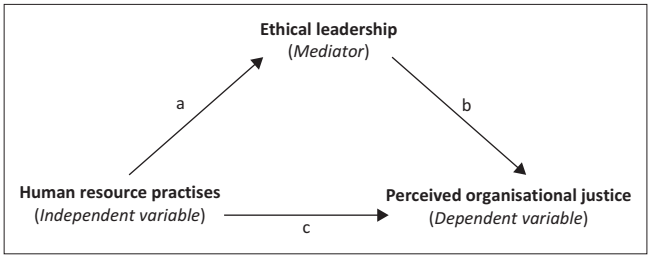


FIGURE 1: Mediation effect of ethical leadership on the relationship between human resource practices and perceived organisational justice.

Ethical consideration

The Ethics Review Committee of the academic institution granted ethical clearance for this study. The application for ethical clearance (ref nr: 2018_SBL_003_CA) included permission from a senior official of each of the participating organisations, the consent of all the participants as regards their participation in the study, and permission of all co-researchers for the primary researcher to make use of the data for research purposes.

Results

To determine the structural (construct) validity of the POJ and EL instruments, a CFA was conducted. The CFA confirmed a unidimensional structure of the EL instrument, with all nine items loading on the overall factor. The results indicated a good fit ($\chi^2 = 225$, $df = 19$, $\chi^2/df = 11.8$; $p < 0.001$, $IFI = 0.98$, $TLI = 0.96$, $CFI = 0.98$, $RMSEA = 0.09$). The relatively high and significant χ^2/df value is probably the result of the large sample size (Byrne, 2016).

A three-factor structure emerged for the POJ instrument, with interpersonal justice and informational justice forming one factor. All 20 items load onto the three factors, and show good fit. A second-order factor, which is the combination of the three factors was also assessed as this study looks at overall POJ and not the factors *per se*. Acceptable fit was reported, with $\chi^2 = 378$, $df = 129$, $\chi^2/df = 2.93$, $p < 0.001$, $IFI = 0.98$, $TLI = 0.98$, $CFI = 0.99$, $RMSEA = 0.04$. Both these instruments can thus be used with confidence.

The descriptive statistics, as well as the psychometric properties of the instruments, are reported in Table 1.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the instruments (treated as unidimensional constructs), across the private and public sectors, as well as the combined sample, are acceptable (guideline of $\alpha > 0.70$) (Grobler & Flotman, 2021; Pallant, 2020). The data appears to be normally distributed, as the skewness and kurtosis values that did not exceed the critical values of 2 and 7, respectively (West et al., 1995). The negative values of the skewness statistics is an indication that the distribution has relatively few small values and tails off to the left. The private sector reported higher mean scores on HRP (5-point Likert scale), EL (6-point Likert scale) and POJ (5-point Likert scale). In order to determine the statistical significance of the differences between the mean scores across the two sectors, *T*-tests were performed. The results are reported in Table 2.

After inspection of the results of the *t*-test reported in Table 2 as well as the mean scores reported in Table 1, it is clear that the respondents from the private sector reported significantly higher mean scores on all three constructs ($p < 0.05$).

The correlation coefficients between the variables, for the combined group and the sectors separately, are reported in Table 3. The statistical differences between the correlations, in terms of the Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformation, are reported (Grobler & Flotman, 2021).

All correlations reported in Table 3 are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$), ranging from 0.37 between HRP and EL in the private sector, to the highest correlation of 0.61 between HRP and POJ in the private sector. The correlations reported for the sectors on all three variables do not differ significantly if the Fisher *z* values are considered ($-1.96 \geq z_{obs} \geq 1.96$).

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which HRP and EL explained the variance in POJ. The analysis was again conducted on the combined group, as well as on the sectors separately. The results are reported in Table 4 and Table 5 (Grobler & Flotman, 2021).

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics of the variables and reliability coefficients of the instruments (across the sectors).

Factor	Sector	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
HRP	Private sector	3.39	0.62	-0.27	0.44	0.95
	Public sector	3.05	0.62	-0.04	-0.49	0.94
	Combined sample	3.22	0.64	-0.14	-0.03	0.95
EL	Private sector	4.62	1.13	-0.97	0.70	0.94
	Public sector	4.25	1.22	-0.58	-0.13	0.95
	Combined sample	4.43	1.19	-0.76	0.16	0.95
POJ	Private sector	3.28	0.74	-0.26	-0.13	0.92
	Public sector	3.05	0.70	-0.20	-0.13	0.91
	Combined sample	3.16	0.73	-0.19	-0.15	0.91

SD, standard deviation; HRP, Human resource practices; EL, Ethical leadership; POJ, Perceived organisational justice; α, Cronbach's alpha.

TABLE 3: Correlation between servant leadership, team-based learning and hope and optimism, the significance of the differences in the correlations and the marker variable.

Factors	Private sector (r_a)	Public sector (r_b)	Combined sample	*Fisher z*-observed
HRP – EL	0.37*	0.42*	0.42*	-1.15$^{n/s}$
HRP – POJ	0.61*	0.58*	0.60*	0.90$^{n/s}$
EL – POJ	0.46*	0.52*	0.50*	-1.53$^{n/s}$

HRP, Human resource practices; EL, Ethical leadership; POJ, Perceived organisational justice.
*, Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$); $^{n/s}$, Non-significant.

TABLE 2: *T*-test (between-group differences) with sector as grouping variable and human resource practices, ethical leadership and perceived organisational justice.

Factors	Variable	Levene's test for equality of variances		*T*-test for equality of means				
		F	Sig.	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
HRM	Equal variances assumed	0.69	0.41	9.39	1182	< 0.001	0.34	0.04
	Equal variances not assumed			9.39	1182	< 0.001	0.34	0.04
EL	Equal variances assumed	4.25	0.04	5.43	1182	< 0.001	0.37	0.07
	Equal variances not assumed			5.43	1177	< 0.001	0.37	0.07
POJ	Equal variances assumed	2.13	0.14	5.51	1182	< 0.001	0.23	0.04
	Equal variances not assumed			5.50	1175	< 0.001	0.23	0.04

HRM, Human resource management; EL, Ethical leadership; POJ, Perceived organisational justice; Sig., significance; *df*, degrees of freedom; Std., standard.

A multiple regression coefficient of 0.44 was reported for the combined sample. Human resource practices and EL thus explain 44% of the variance in POJ.

This converts to a practical significance of $f^2 = 0.75$, which is regarded to be a large effect. Although the overall variance explained, when the two sectors are compared, is the same (43%), the influence of EL is the highest in the public sector, with the model improving by 9% when EL is hierarchically added to model[b]. The relative strength of the contribution of each of the predictor variables (in terms of its beta coefficients) is reported in Table 5 (Grobler & Grobler, 2021).

The contribution of HRP seems to be higher in the explanation of POJ if the standardised beta values are inspected in Table 5. Values of $\beta = 0.48$, and $\beta = 0.30$ ($p \leq 0.001$) for HRP and EL are reported. The beta values differ slightly when the two sectors are compared with each other. Ethical leadership has a higher standardised beta value for the public sector ($\beta = 0.33$) compared to the private sector ($\beta = 0.28$). Included in the hierarchical regression analysis was the determination of the variance inflation factor (VIF), a test for multi-collinearity. No collinearity issues were found, after inspecting the VIF values, of both sectors and the combined sample (VIF < 5) (Pallant, 2020).

The results reported in Table 3–Table 5 indicate a positive relationship between the predictor variables (HRP and EL) and the predicted or outcome variable, POJ. It was decided to assess the mediating effect of EL on the relationship between HRP and POJ, using SPSS PROCESS with bootstrapping (95% confidence interval), as recommended by Hayes and Rockwood (2017). The results of the mediation analysis (using SPSS PROCESS) are depicted in Figure 2 (Grobler & Flotman, 2021).

The results, as depicted in Figure 2, indicate that HRP affected POJ by 0.72 in the combined sample, with the private and public sectors at 0.77 and 0.67, respectively (all significant at $p \leq 0.001$). A significant indirect effect (mediation) of HRP on POJ through EL was reported for both sectors, with ab = 25 (0.21; 0.29) and ab = 0.09 (0.08; 0.15) for the private and public sectors, respectively. The total effect (c) that is accounted for by the indirect effect (a*b) expressed by a percentage is 32% and 13% for the private and public sectors, respectively, and 21% for the combined sample.

TABLE 4: Model summary of regression analysis – Variance explained in perceived organisational justice by human resource practices and ethical leadership.

Sector	Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	s.e.	R^2 change	Sig.
Private sector	a	0.61	0.37	0.37	0.59	0.06	$p \leq 0.001$
	b	0.66	0.42	0.43	0.56		$p \leq 0.001$
Public sector	a	0.58	0.34	0.34	0.57	0.09	$p \leq 0.001$
	b	0.65	0.43	0.43	0.53		$p \leq 0.001$
Combined sample	a	0.60	0.37	0.37	0.58	0.07	$p \leq 0.001$
	b	0.67	0.44	0.44	0.54		$p \leq 0.001$

Note: Dependent variable: Perceived organisational justice; Model a, Independent variables: (Constant), Human resource practices; Model b, Independent variables: (Constant), Human resource practices and Ethical leadership.

s.e., standard error; Sig., significance.

TABLE 5: Unique contributions of predictors to the variance in perceived organisational justice (only standardised coefficients are presented).

Factors	Private sector		Public sector		Combined sample	
	β	*t*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Constant	-	2.95	-	6.51	-	7.04
HRP	0.50	15.04	0.45	12.98	0.48	20.19
EL	0.28	8.25	0.33	9.56	0.30	12.47

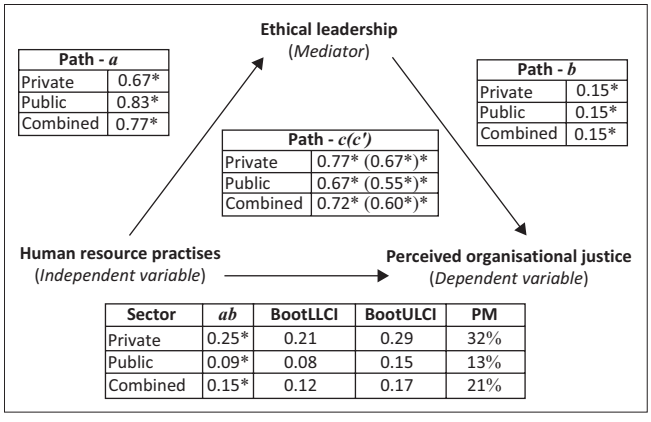
Note: all $p \leq 0.001$.

HRP, human resource practices; EL, ethical leadership.

Discussion of findings

Literature often provides a one-dimensional POJ, where it is argued that the HR department, and specifically the HRP has a direct influence on it. This is arguably correct, as the perceptions of HRP (such as training and development, participation, autonomy and job design, performance appraisal and rewards, teamwork; work-life balance, recruitment and selection, as well as employment security) will have an important role in the POJ, with specific reference to procedural justice, distributive justice, interpersonal justice and informational justice. This study adds another dimension to this conceptual framework, in terms of the inclusion of EL as a possible mediator between HRP and POJ. The inclusion is based on the social learning and social exchange theories, which are fundamentally based on role modelling (emanating effect) and the reciprocal nature of leadership, respectively. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between HRP and POJ, and the influence that EL has on this relationship (as a mediator). The relationship between the variables was studied from a sectoral perspective, in both the private and public sectors.

The study consisted of four empirical objectives. Firstly, the EL and POJ were validated, with the EL remaining the same as the original instrument by Yukl et al. (2013), unidimensional and consisting of nine items and very good fit indexes. A three-factor structure emerged for the POJ instrument, with interpersonal justice and informational justice forming one factor. All 20 items load onto the three factors, with good fit indexes, also for the second order factor (POJ), which is the combination of the three factors.



PM, Percentage mediation.

*, $p \leq 0.001$.

FIGURE 2: Mediation effect of ethical leadership on the relationship between the perception of the human resource practices and perceived organisational justice.

Secondly, the relationship between the three variables was investigated. It was found that there are statistically significant (positive) relationships ($p < 0.001$) between all three variables and that the strength of the relationships does not differ significantly across the two sectors. The respondents from the private sector reported significantly higher mean scores ($p < 0.05$) on all three constructs. The multiple regression that was conducted indicated that 44% of the variance in POJ is explained by HRP and EL with EL's contribution being 7% (for the combined sample). Very similar results were reported for the sectors, respectively. With the inspection of the standardised beta values, it is evident that the contribution of HRP seems to be higher in the explanation of POJ compared to EL. Thirdly, this led to the objective to namely, to determine the possible mediating effect of EL on the relationship between HRP and POJ. A significant indirect effect (mediation) of EL was reported for both sectors, with the mediation of EL being 32% and 13% for the private and public sectors, respectively, and 21% for the combined sample.

Fourthly, the objective was to investigate significant differences between the private and public sectors. Except for the significantly higher mean scores reported for the private sector sample, which is consistent with the results of Grobler (2022), no real and significant differences could be found between the two sectors. The only exception that could be mentioned is the slightly higher mediating effect of EL on the relationship between HRP and POJ for the private sector. This might be the result of the higher degree of freedom to lead in the private sector, compared to the regulated and bureaucratic nature of the public sector (Grobler, 2022).

Practical and managerial implications

The results support the overall conceptual framework and the argument that HRP has a direct influence on the POJ of employees. It is therefore necessary that HR ensures that there are policies and practices, developed through participative processes, well communicated to all employees, and consistently and transparently applied. This will enhance POJ on all levels, namely procedural, distributive, interpersonal and informational justice. Participation in the developmental process is especially important within the South African context, because of the history of the country and the unilateral application of processes in the past. Grobler et al. (2018) highlighted the collectivistic nature of the culture, which plays an important role in the HRP – participation, involvement, trust and good communication are thus of the essence for POJ, specifically for the HR department and the HRP.

A further practical and managerial implication of this study is the role of leadership in the whole process. These results indicate the perception of leadership, and specifically EL mediates the relationship between HRP and POJ. Practically what does this mean? The HR department can deliver the best service to the organisational clients, and one would assume that this will lead to excellent POJ. This is not necessarily the case, as the perception of employees in terms of their leaders (ethically) would influence their POJ. Leaders should therefore be seen as ethical role models (social learning theory) and individuals who intend to do good to their followers. The followers will then return the good and positive behaviour, following the reciprocal nature of leadership as explained by the social exchange theory.

A practical and academic contribution of this study is in terms of the validated instruments (EL and adapted POJ) that could now be used with confidence within the South African context, by academics, organisational behaviour and leadership scholars.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, the use of a cross-sectional design poses challenges in terms of inflated and artificial relationships between the variables, and the difficulty to determine causal inferences concerning the associations between the variables. Secondly, the use of a mono-method technique, only surveys, which might lead to common method bias.

Future research should investigate the relationship between the constructs through longitudinal research. A further recommendation is to conduct additional research by investigating the influence of demographic characteristics and other work-related attitudes and organisation behavioural constructs (Grobler & Flotman, 2021).

Conclusion

There is thus a direct, positive relationship between HRP and POJ, but the importance of EL is also evident, and it is necessary to consider organisational processes as a system rather than in isolation, as there are many interdependencies, and leadership is central to many of them.

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