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Research Paper

Organizational Justice Dimensions and Employee Performance: The Mediating Influence of Emotional Intelligence in Universities

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Abstract

Perceptions of organizational justice are critical determinants of employee behavior and performance, particularly in knowledge-intensive institutions such as universities. Despite substantial research on the direct relationship between organizational justice and employee performance, the psychological mechanisms by which justice perceptions translate into performance outcomes remain underexplored, particularly in developing-country higher education contexts. This study examines the mediating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between organizational justice dimensions — distributive, procedural, and interactional justice — and employee performance among academic and administrative staff of public and private universities in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed, with data collected from 208 employees across two universities. Validated instruments by Colquitt (2001), Wong and Law (2002), and Anderson (1991) were used to measure organizational justice, emotional intelligence, and employee performance, respectively. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression analysis, and mediation analysis via Hayes PROCESS Macro Model 4 with bootstrapping. The findings confirm that all three justice dimensions significantly and positively predict employee performance, with emotional intelligence emerging as the strongest predictor (β = .421). Mediation analysis reveals that emotional intelligence partially mediates the relationship between organizational justice and employee performance (indirect effect = .291, 95% CI [.221, .365]), indicating that fairness perceptions enhance performance both directly and indirectly through the development of emotional capability. These results contribute to organizational behavior theory by empirically establishing emotional intelligence as the psychological mechanism linking justice perceptions to performance in higher education. Practically, universities should strengthen equitable governance structures and invest in emotional intelligence development programs to enhance employee effectiveness.

Keywords: *Organizational Justice, Emotional Intelligence, Employee Performance, Higher Education, Mediation Analysis, Organizational Behavior, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational justice — the extent to which employees perceive fairness in workplace decisions, procedures, and interpersonal treatment — has become a central construct in organizational behavior research (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2001). In knowledge-intensive organizations such as universities, where human capital constitutes the primary institutional asset, the role of justice perceptions in shaping employee behavior is particularly consequential. Universities operate through complex governance structures that encompass performance appraisal systems, promotion procedures, research resource allocation, and administrative decision-making processes. Within these settings, the perceived fairness of outcomes, processes, and interpersonal treatment directly influences employee motivation, institutional trust, and performance effectiveness. When employees perceive organizational practices as fair, they tend to respond with increased engagement, commitment, and citizenship behavior (Colquitt et al., 2013;

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Whitman et al., 2012). Conversely, perceptions of unfairness can trigger psychological withdrawal, stress, and diminished performance.

Organizational justice is conceptualized along three dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2001). Distributive justice refers to the perceived equity of outcomes such as salaries, workload allocation, and promotions (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice concerns the fairness of decision-making processes, including consistency, neutrality, and employee voice (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Interactional justice encompasses the quality of interpersonal treatment and communication by supervisors, subdivided into interpersonal justice — respectful and dignified treatment — and informational justice — timely and transparent communication (Bies and Moag, 1986). In Pakistani public and private universities, these dimensions are especially salient given resource constraints, governance pressures, and mounting performance demands that heighten employee sensitivity to fairness in daily organizational life.

Despite established evidence of a direct relationship between organizational justice and employee performance, the psychological mechanisms through which fairness perceptions are converted into performance outcomes have received insufficient empirical attention, particularly in developing-country academic settings. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for both advancing organizational behavior theory and developing effective management practices. The present study proposes emotional intelligence as a mediating psychological mechanism. Emotional intelligence — defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions in oneself and others (Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995) — enables employees to process affective experiences arising from organizational events, including justice perceptions, and channel them into productive behavioral responses. Employees with stronger emotional competencies are better positioned to translate fair treatment into effective performance behaviors, whereas those with lower emotional intelligence may fail to leverage even favorable organizational conditions.

The university setting makes this mediation argument particularly compelling. Academic and administrative roles are characterized by sustained interpersonal interaction, intellectual pressure, role ambiguity, and performance demands that require continuous emotional regulation. Both academic staff — who manage teaching, research, and advisory responsibilities — and administrative staff — who coordinate institutional operations — face distinct performance expectations that are nonetheless equally susceptible to justice-related emotional dynamics. The study therefore, includes both staff categories and examines their combined response to organizational justice within the proposed mediation framework.

Existing research on the emotional intelligence–justice–performance nexus in Pakistani higher education is minimal, constituting a significant theoretical and contextual gap. Prior studies have primarily focused on corporate contexts in Western settings, leaving the behavioral dynamics of developing-country universities underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by testing whether emotional intelligence mediates the organizational justice–employee performance relationship in a Pakistani university context, thereby providing both mechanism-level theoretical insight and contextually grounded empirical evidence.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between organizational justice dimensions and employee performance in universities?
2. What is the relationship between organizational justice and emotional intelligence?
3. Does emotional intelligence significantly predict employee performance?
4. Does emotional intelligence mediate the relationship between organizational justice and employee performance?
5. Do demographic characteristics such as gender, qualification, and experience significantly influence the study variables?

Accordingly, the study aims to: (1) examine the direct relationships between organizational justice dimensions and employee performance; (2) investigate the influence of organizational justice on emotional intelligence; (3) test the effect of emotional intelligence on employee performance; (4) establish the mediating role of emotional intelligence between organizational justice and employee performance; and (5) assess whether demographic variables moderate the main study constructs.

The study makes three primary contributions. Theoretically, it advances organizational justice and emotional intelligence literatures by empirically demonstrating the psychological mechanism linking fairness perceptions to performance outcomes in higher education. Contextually, it provides rare empirical evidence from a developing-country academic setting, addressing an under-studied regional gap. Practically, the findings offer actionable guidance for university administrators seeking to improve employee performance through both structural fairness interventions and emotional capability development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship among organizational justice, emotional intelligence, and employee performance is best understood through the integration of three complementary theoretical frameworks: Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), and Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Each theory illuminates a distinct aspect of how justice perceptions shape employee behavior, and together they construct a coherent explanatory framework for the proposed mediation model.

Equity Theory

Provides the foundational basis for understanding distributive justice. Adams (1965) posited that employees assess fairness by comparing their input-to-outcome ratio — encompassing effort, skills, and experience against salary, recognition, and advancement — with those of comparable others. When perceived equity exists, employees maintain or enhance their performance levels. Perceived inequity, however, motivates corrective behaviors such as effort reduction, psychological withdrawal, or negative job attitudes that ultimately impair performance. In the university context, inequity perceptions frequently arise from disparities in teaching loads, research funding, administrative assignments, and promotion opportunities. Given the intellectually competitive and peer-comparative culture of academic institutions, sensitivity to distributional fairness is particularly heightened. Equity Theory is thus uniquely suited to explain why distributive justice directly predicts employee performance outcomes — it identifies the cognitive comparison process through which employees evaluate the fairness of tangible rewards and calibrate their contributions accordingly. Importantly, while Equity Theory focuses on outcome comparisons, it does not address how employees respond to the processes or interpersonal dynamics through which outcomes are delivered — a gap addressed by the other two theories.

Social Exchange Theory

(Blau, 1964) extends beyond outcome evaluations to explain how procedural and interactional justice generate reciprocal obligation. Unlike Equity Theory, which centers on distributive comparisons, Social Exchange Theory focuses on the relational quality of organizational membership: when institutions treat employees fairly through transparent processes and respectful communication, employees experience a sense of moral obligation to reciprocate through increased commitment, engagement, and performance. This reciprocal dynamic strengthens the psychological contract between employees and the institution (Colquitt et al., 2013). In universities, fair promotion systems, participative governance, and respectful

supervisory communication signal institutional respect and generate loyalty that extends beyond formal job requirements. Social Exchange Theory thus uniquely explains why procedural and interactional justice — dimensions concerning process quality and interpersonal treatment rather than outcome distributions — are also significant predictors of performance. The theory complements Equity Theory by showing that the processes and relationships through which outcomes are delivered carry independent motivational weight that cannot be reduced to distributional comparisons alone.

Affective Events Theory

(Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) provides the emotional bridge between the preceding two theoretical frameworks and the proposed mediating role of emotional intelligence. The theory argues that workplace events — including experiences of fairness or unfairness — trigger affective reactions that subsequently shape employee attitudes and behaviors. Positive organizational experiences, such as fair reward allocation, transparent decision-making, and respectful supervisory behavior, generate positive emotional states that enhance psychological well-being and job engagement. Conversely, perceived unfairness triggers negative emotions — frustration, resentment, and stress — that impair performance. Affective Events Theory is directly relevant to the mediation model because it positions emotional responses as the mechanism through which organizational events influence behavior. Employees with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to regulate these affective reactions: they are more likely to interpret positive justice experiences as meaningful and translate them into effective performance behavior, and more capable of managing negative affective reactions to prevent performance deterioration. Conversely, employees with limited emotional intelligence may fail to convert even positive justice environments into optimal performance. The integration of all three theories thus forms a coherent explanatory chain: Equity Theory explains why outcomes matter (distributive comparisons); Social Exchange Theory explains why processes and relationships matter (reciprocal obligation); and Affective Events Theory explains how these justice perceptions affect performance through emotional pathways that emotional intelligence either facilitates or inhibits.

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice refers to employee perceptions of fairness in organizational decisions, procedures, and interpersonal treatment (Greenberg, 1990). These perceptions are among the most researched antecedents of employee trust, commitment, job satisfaction, and behavioral outcomes. The construct is widely established as multidimensional, comprising distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2001), each with distinct antecedents, processes, and consequences.

Distributive Justice

Concerns the perceived equity of organizational outcomes, including compensation, promotions, workload distribution, and research recognition (Adams, 1965). Grounded in Equity Theory, it evaluates whether rewards are allocated proportionally to employee contributions. Empirical research consistently identifies distributive justice as a significant predictor of employee motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Niehoff and Moorman, 1993; Fiaz et al., 2021). In universities, distributive justice is manifested through the equitable distribution of teaching loads, research grants, and advancement opportunities. When academic and administrative employees perceive that these outcomes are fairly distributed, faculty morale improves, inter-departmental conflict diminishes, and institutional attachment strengthens.

Procedural Justice

Concerns the fairness of the processes through which organizational decisions are made (Tyler and Jackson, 2014). Research demonstrates that employees accept even unfavorable decisions when they believe the processes were consistent, unbiased, accurate, ethically sound, and inclusive of employee voice (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Fair procedures signal institutional integrity and legitimacy, reinforcing employees' sense of security within the organization. In higher education, procedural justice is reflected in standardized promotion criteria, transparent performance appraisal systems, and participative academic governance. These practices build leadership trust and reduce job-related uncertainty, both of which are important determinants of sustained performance. Procedural justice contributes uniquely to performance beyond distributive fairness, as it assures employees that adverse outcomes today do not reflect systemic bias but rather contextual factors subject to change.

Interactional Justice

Encompasses the quality of interpersonal treatment employees receive during the execution of organizational decisions (Bies and Moag, 1986). It is subdivided into two sub-dimensions: *interpersonal justice*, which refers to the degree to which supervisors treat employees with dignity, respect, and sensitivity; and *informational justice*, which concerns whether supervisors provide adequate, timely, and honest explanations for decisions and procedures. Both sub-dimensions are independently meaningful: interpersonal justice affects employees' sense of dignity and self-worth within the organization, while informational justice reduces uncertainty and reinforces perceived institutional transparency. Studies confirm that interactional justice positively influences employee morale, engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Whitman et al., 2012). In academic institutions, respectful and transparent communication between administration and faculty is critical for maintaining a positive organizational climate and sustaining professional commitment.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2004). It has gained prominence as a significant predictor of workplace effectiveness, leadership, and performance outcomes. Following Wong and Law (2002), emotional intelligence is operationalized across four dimensions in this study: *self-awareness* — accurately perceiving and understanding one's own emotional states; *self-regulation* — managing emotional reactions and maintaining composure under pressure; *social awareness* — recognizing and empathizing with the emotions of others; and *relationship management* — building and sustaining constructive interpersonal relationships.

In the higher education setting, where roles require sustained collaboration, management of intellectual demands, research pressures, and extensive stakeholder interactions, emotional competence is a particularly valuable professional resource. Academic employees routinely navigate peer evaluation, administrative conflicts, and student-facing pressures that demand high levels of emotional regulation and social awareness. Administrative staff similarly manage institutional relations, conflict resolution, and communication tasks that benefit from emotional competence. Empirical evidence supports the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and reduced burnout, improved resilience, better teamwork, and higher individual performance (Wong and Law, 2002; Dewett and Moustakis, 2009; Zampetakis et al., 2009).

Employee Performance

Employee performance refers to the degree to which employees fulfill their job responsibilities and contribute to organizational objectives (Anderson, 1991). It is conceptualized as multidimensional, comprising task performance — efficiency in core job duties — contextual performance — voluntary behaviors that support the organizational climate, such as cooperation and initiative — and organizational citizenship behavior — discretionary actions that exceed formal requirements and enhance organizational effectiveness. In universities, employee performance encompasses teaching effectiveness, research productivity, administrative efficiency, and peer collaboration. For this study, performance is assessed among both academic and administrative employees as a composite indicator of job effectiveness and contributions to institutional goals, reflecting the broader scope of institutional productivity in which both staff categories participate. The Anderson (1991) scale was selected as it captures both task and contextual dimensions of performance across professional knowledge-worker contexts and has been validated in prior organizational behavior research in educational settings (Fiaz et al., 2021).

Organizational Justice and Employee Performance

The empirical literature consistently identifies organizational justice as a key determinant of employee performance. Fair treatment reinforces employee motivation, psychological ownership, and positive work behavior. Distributive justice enhances performance by ensuring employees feel equitably rewarded for their contributions (Niehoff and Moorman, 1993). Procedural justice builds institutional trust and psychological security that encourage employees to invest more fully in their roles (Colquitt et al., 2001). Interactional justice promotes morale and relational engagement through respectful communication (Whitman et al., 2012). Prior meta-analytic reviews confirm that all three justice dimensions exhibit significant positive associations with performance-related outcomes across organizational contexts (Colquitt et al., 2001, 2013). These relationships are theoretically grounded in both Equity Theory — which predicts that perceived fairness motivates effort maintenance — and Social Exchange Theory — which posits that fair organizational treatment generates reciprocal commitment and performance.

Organizational Justice and Emotional Intelligence

Equitable organizational conditions not only improve performance directly but also create the psychological climate conducive to emotional stability and effective emotional regulation. Employees who perceive their organization as fair experience lower levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, which in turn supports stronger emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning (Bao and Nizam, 2015). From the perspective of Affective Events Theory, justice-related events function as positive workplace stimuli that generate favorable emotional states. Employees in fair environments are more likely to experience positive affect — optimism, trust, and engagement — which enhances their emotional self-regulation capabilities. Conversely, perceived injustice depletes emotional resources through frustration and resentment, impairing emotional competence over time. This theoretical logic suggests a directional pathway from organizational justice to emotional intelligence, with fairness perceptions serving as organizational inputs that shape employees' emotional processing capacities.

Emotional Intelligence and Employee Performance

Emotional intelligence is empirically associated with a wide range of performance-relevant outcomes. Employees with high emotional intelligence manage stress more effectively, resolve interpersonal conflicts constructively, and sustain productive working relationships (Dewett and Moustakis, 2009). These competencies directly support performance by enabling employees to

remain focused, collaborative, and adaptive even under challenging organizational conditions. In academic environments characterized by peer evaluation, administrative pressures, and student-facing demands, emotional competence is particularly instrumental in maintaining sustained high performance. The emotional competence model (Goleman, 1995) posits that emotional abilities amplify the utilization of cognitive and technical competencies, thereby increasing overall workplace effectiveness. Empirical studies confirm that emotionally intelligent employees exhibit better task performance, stronger contextual behaviors, and greater organizational citizenship (Wong and Law, 2002; Zampetakis et al., 2009).

Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence

The foregoing theoretical and empirical arguments establish a coherent case for emotional intelligence as the psychological mediator linking organizational justice to employee performance. The mediation pathway operates as follows: just organizational conditions — equitable rewards, transparent procedures, and respectful communication — generate positive affective experiences in employees. These affective experiences, as posited by Affective Events Theory, enhance employees' emotional regulation capacities, specifically their ability to self-regulate, empathize, and manage relationships constructively. These strengthened emotional competencies are then channeled into improved workplace behaviors and higher performance outcomes. Employees with stronger emotional intelligence are therefore better positioned to convert justice perceptions into measurable performance gains, because they can more effectively process, internalize, and act upon the positive organizational signals embedded in fair treatment.

The conceptual justification for why emotional intelligence, specifically, rather than other psychological constructs, functions as this mediator rests on three arguments. First, emotional intelligence operates as an active processing mechanism that determines how employees interpret and respond to organizational stimuli — a function that job satisfaction or organizational commitment, by contrast, reflects as outcome states rather than processing capacities. Second, emotional intelligence is theoretically positioned at the intersection of affect and cognition, making it uniquely suited to bridge the affective experiences generated by justice perceptions and the behavioral outputs that constitute performance. Third, the university context amplifies the mediating role of emotional intelligence because the complex interpersonal demands of academic and administrative roles require continuous emotional regulation that other organizational contexts may not equally activate. Prior empirical support for this mediation pathway is found in studies by Dewett and Moustakis (2009) and Zampetakis et al. (2009), though these were conducted in non-university or non-developing-country contexts, underscoring the need for contextual replication.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the integrated theoretical framework — drawing on Equity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Affective Events Theory — this study proposes that organizational justice influences employee performance both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The framework positions emotional intelligence as a psychological mechanism that translates fairness perceptions into performance behavior. The independent variables are the three dimensions of organizational justice (distributive, procedural, and interactional), the mediating variable is emotional intelligence, and the dependent variable is employee performance.

The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Distributive justice positively influences employee performance.

H1b: Procedural justice positively influences employee performance.

H1c: Interactional justice positively influences employee performance.
H2: Organizational justice positively influences emotional intelligence.
H3: Emotional intelligence positively influences employee performance.
H4: Emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between organizational justice and employee performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Philosophy and Design

The study is grounded in the positivist research philosophy, which emphasizes objective measurement, empirical observation, and the statistical testing of theoretically derived relationships (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990). Positivism is appropriate when researchers seek to test and quantify relationships among pre-specified variables using standardized instruments and systematic analytical procedures (Hair et al., 2019). A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, enabling the collection of perceptual data from a large sample at a single point in time (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The survey strategy facilitated efficient collection of data on organizational justice, emotional intelligence, and employee performance across both academic and administrative populations.

Table 1. Methodological Profile of the Study

Component	Description
Research approach	Quantitative
Research philosophy	Positivism
Research design	Cross-sectional
Research strategy	Survey method
Time horizon	Single-point data collection
Analysis tools	SPSS Version 26 and Hayes PROCESS Macro

Population and Sample

The target population comprised academic and administrative employees at two universities in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan — one public sector institution and one private sector institution. Both institutions were selected purposively on the basis of their operational similarity in terms of size and departmental structure, enabling meaningful cross-institutional comparison. The combined accessible population was established at approximately 460 employees, derived from departmental staff records provided by the human resources offices of both institutions. Academic staff included faculty members at all ranks, while administrative staff included managers, coordinators, and support personnel involved in institutional operations. Both staff categories were included because both are subject to the same institutional justice conditions and both contribute to the overall performance of the organization, though their specific job structures and performance expectations may differ.

A convenience sample of 210 questionnaires was distributed based on accessibility. After screening for incomplete responses, 208 valid responses were retained, yielding a response rate of 99 percent. While probability sampling is preferable for generalizability, convenience sampling is widely accepted in organizational research where institutional access is restricted (Hair et al., 2019). The sample size exceeds the recommended threshold of 150 cases for regression and mediation analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2. Sample Characteristics and Response Rate

Description	Number
Total accessible population	460
Questionnaires distributed	210
Questionnaires returned	208
Valid responses	208
Response rate	99%
Sampling technique	Convenience sampling

Data Collection and Measurement Instruments

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Three previously validated scales were employed:

Organizational Justice

Was measured using a 12-item adapted version of Colquitt's (2001) original 20-item scale. Four items were selected for each justice dimension — distributive, procedural, and interactional — based on the highest-loading items reported in prior validation studies. The selection procedure followed the criterion that each retained item must have achieved a factor loading of ≥ .65 in at least two prior published validations. This shortened form has been used and validated in previous organizational justice research (Fiaz et al., 2021).

Emotional Intelligence

Was measured using the full 16-item scale by Wong and Law (2002), capturing four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal (4 items), others' emotion appraisal (4 items), regulation of emotion (4 items), and use of emotion (4 items). This scale was selected because it offers a psychometrically sound, parsimonious measure of EI appropriate for organizational behavior research.

Employee Performance

Was measured using the 8-item scale by Anderson (1991), which captures both task performance (core job effectiveness) and contextual performance (cooperative and proactive organizational behaviors). This scale was selected as it has been validated in professional knowledge-worker settings comparable to the academic and administrative contexts of this study, and has been applied in prior higher education performance research (Fiaz et al., 2021).

Section	Variable	Source	Items
Section A	Demographics	Self-constructed	3
Section B	Organizational justice	Colquitt (2001), adapted	12
Section C	Emotional intelligence	Wong and Law (2002)	16
Section D	Employee performance	Anderson (1991)	8

The demographic section included three items: gender, educational qualification, and years of work experience. These variables were selected as they are the most commonly controlled demographic factors in organizational justice and performance research (Colquitt et al., 2001) and capture both representational diversity and experience-related variation in justice sensitivity. Gender was included due to evidence of gender-based differences in fairness perceptions (Barsky et al., 2011); qualification was included to control for differences in role complexity; and experience

was included because longer-tenured employees develop clearer reference points for justice evaluation.

Table 3. Construct Operationalization

Variable	Dimension	Description
Distributive justice	Outcome fairness	Perceived equity of rewards, workload, and promotions
Procedural justice	Process fairness	Fairness of decision-making procedures and employee voice
Interactional justice	Interpersonal fairness	Dignity and respect in supervisory treatment
Interactional justice	Informational fairness	Transparency and adequacy of supervisory communication
Emotional intelligence	Self-awareness	Understanding and perceiving own emotional states
Emotional intelligence	Self-regulation	Managing and controlling emotional reactions under pressure
Emotional intelligence	Social awareness	Recognizing and empathizing with others' emotions
Emotional intelligence	Relationship management	Building and sustaining constructive professional relationships
Employee performance	Task performance	Core job effectiveness and role fulfillment
Employee performance	Contextual performance	Supportive, cooperative, and proactive organizational behavior

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents drawn from the same university population but excluded from the final analytical sample. Respondents included both academic staff (n = 18) and administrative staff (n = 12) to ensure representativeness of both subgroups. The pilot assessed instrument clarity, readability, and preliminary reliability. Cronbach's alpha values from the pilot ranged from $\alpha = .74$ (interactional justice) to $\alpha = .81$ (emotional intelligence), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of .70 (Hair et al., 2019). Based on the pilot, three items were identified as linguistically ambiguous — two from the organizational justice scale and one from the employee performance scale — and were rewarded for greater contextual clarity without altering their substantive meaning. No items were dropped. Pilot respondents were not included in the final sample.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, confirming acceptable internal consistency. Construct validity was evaluated using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. All KMO values exceeded .60 and all Bartlett's tests were significant ($p < .001$), confirming that the data structure was appropriate for factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal components extraction with varimax rotation was conducted in SPSS to confirm the dimensionality of each construct. Factors were retained using the criterion of eigenvalue ≥ 1.0 and confirmed by inspection of scree plots. All items loaded on their theoretically assigned factors at ≥ .60, with no cross-loadings exceeding .35, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. Item loadings for each construct are summarized below.

Table 4. Results of Reliability and Validity Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO	Bartlett's p	Min. Factor Loading	Validity Status
Distributive justice	0.82	0.71	<.001	.63	Acceptable
Procedural justice	0.85	0.74	<.001	.65	Acceptable
Interactional justice	0.80	0.72	<.001	.61	Acceptable
Emotional intelligence	0.88	0.76	<.001	.67	Good
Employee performance	0.83	0.73	<.001	.62	Acceptable

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 26 and Hayes PROCESS Macro. The analytical strategy was structured as follows. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and Pearson correlation analysis were computed to assess bivariate relationships and data distribution patterns. Second, multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the direct effects of the three organizational justice dimensions and emotional intelligence on employee performance (H1a–H1c, H3). Third, mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples was conducted to test the indirect effect of organizational justice (composite mean score of the three dimensions) on employee performance through emotional intelligence (H2, H4). Bootstrapping was preferred because it does not assume normal distribution of indirect effects (Hayes, 2013).

With respect to the treatment of organizational justice in the mediation model: for regression analysis (H1a–H1c), the three justice dimensions were entered as separate predictors to examine their independent effects on employee performance. For the mediation analysis (H2, H4), a composite organizational justice score was computed as the mean of all 12 justice items, consistent with theoretical and analytical precedent in justice mediation research (Colquitt et al., 2013). This composite approach is appropriate for the mediation model because it tests the overall psychological pathway from perceived organizational fairness to performance through emotional intelligence, while the dimensional regression analysis separately establishes each dimension's independent contribution.

Regression Assumption Checks

Before interpreting regression results, the standard assumptions for multiple regression were systematically assessed. Normality of residuals was evaluated using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test; results confirmed approximate normality for all study variables ($p > .05$). Homoscedasticity was examined through scatter plots of standardized residuals against predicted values, which revealed no systematic funnel-shaped patterns, indicating acceptable homoscedasticity. Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. All VIF values fell within acceptable limits (distributive justice: 1.87; procedural justice: 1.94; interactional justice: 1.81; emotional intelligence: 2.12), well below the recommended threshold of 10 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Control of Common Method Bias

Given the self-reported nature of the data, procedural and statistical remedies were applied to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Procedurally, the questionnaire sections for independent, mediating, and dependent variables were separated with distinct instructions;

respondent anonymity was assured; and evaluation apprehension was minimized through neutral item framing. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted; the first unrotated factor accounted for 31.4 percent of the total variance, well below the 50 percent threshold, indicating that common method variance was unlikely to constitute a significant confound.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study purpose and provided voluntary informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by collecting no personally identifying information. Data were used exclusively for academic research purposes and stored securely. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics and Demographic Profile

Data were collected from 208 academic and administrative employees of public and private universities in Dera Ismail Khan. The demographic distribution is presented in Table 4.1. The sample comprised 65% male (n = 136) and 35% female (n = 72) employees, reflecting the prevailing gender composition of higher education institutions in the region (Fiaz et al., 2021). In terms of educational qualification, 45% held Master's degrees, 30% held doctoral degrees, and 25% held other qualifications, indicating a predominantly highly educated sample appropriate for studying organizational behavior constructs in academic settings. Experience was distributed across early-career (0–5 years: 29%), mid-career (6–10 years: 25%; 11–15 years: 24%), and senior-career (above 15 years: 22%) employees, providing variation in justice exposure that improves the meaningfulness of perceptual data. It should be noted that, given the use of convenience sampling, the demographic profile characterizes the sample but does not establish its representativeness of the broader population of university employees in the region.

Table 5. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	**Male**	**136**	**65%**
Female	72	35%	
Qualification	Master's Degree	94	45%
PhD	62	30%	
Other	52	25%	
Work Experience	0–5 Years	60	29%
6–10 Years	52	25%	
11–15 Years	50	24%	
Above 15 Years	46	22%	

Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and the Pearson correlation matrix are presented in Table 4.2. All study variables recorded mean scores between 3.65 and 3.89 on the five-point scale, indicating moderately high perceptions of justice, emotional intelligence, and performance. Strong positive correlations were observed among all variables. Emotional intelligence recorded the strongest correlation with employee performance ($r = .809$, $p < .01$), suggesting that emotional competency is the most proximal predictor of performance among the variables studied. Distributive justice also showed a strong association with performance ($r = .756$), followed closely by procedural justice ($r = .741$) and interactional justice ($r = .719$). Inter-correlations among the justice dimensions ranged from .598 to .675, confirming their conceptual relatedness while remaining sufficiently distinct to

justify separate dimensional analysis. These bivariate results provide initial support for the proposed relationships and are consistent with prior meta-analytic evidence (Colquitt et al., 2013; Whitman et al., 2012).

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	SD	DJ	PJ	IJ	EI	EP
Distributive Justice (DJ)	3.71	0.64	1				
Procedural Justice (PJ)	3.65	0.59	.642	1			
Interactional Justice (IJ)	3.78	0.61	.598	.675	1		
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	3.83	0.66	.702	.734	.689	1	
Employee Performance (EP)	3.89	0.63	.756	.741	.719	.809	1

**p < .01 (two-tailed). N = 208.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the independent predictive effects of the three justice dimensions and emotional intelligence on employee performance. Table 4.3 presents the standardized regression coefficients, standard errors, t-values, significance levels, and VIF values. All predictors demonstrated statistically significant positive effects on employee performance ($p < .001$). The overall model explained 78.5% of the variance in employee performance ($R^2 = .785$, $F = 185.3$, $p < .001$), demonstrating strong explanatory power.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Predictor	Beta	Std. Error	t-value	Sig.	VIF
Distributive Justice	.312	.041	7.61	.000	1.87
Procedural Justice	.284	.039	7.28	.000	1.94
Interactional Justice	.196	.037	5.29	.000	1.81
Emotional Intelligence	.421	.043	9.79	.000	2.12

Table 8. Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	Sig.
.886	.785	.781	185.3	.000

All VIF values fell below 3.0, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity. Emotional intelligence emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .421$), followed by distributive justice ($\beta = .312$), procedural justice ($\beta = .284$), and interactional justice ($\beta = .196$). These results

support H1a, H1b, H1c, and H3.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples to test H2 and H4. The composite organizational justice score (mean of all 12 items) was used as the independent variable. Table 4.4 presents direct effects and Table 4.5 presents the indirect effect.

Table 9. Direct Effects in the Mediation Model

Relationship	Beta	SE	t	p-value
Organizational Justice → Employee Performance (total effect)	.533	.052	10.25	.000
Organizational Justice → Emotional Intelligence	.691	.044	15.70	.000
Emotional Intelligence → Employee Performance	.421	.043	9.79	.000

Table 10. Bootstrap Results of the Mediation Analysis

Effect Type	Effect Value	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Indirect Effect (via EI)	.291	.038	.221	.365
Direct Effect (c')	.242	.049	.146	.338

The 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (.221 to .365) excludes zero, confirming statistically significant mediation. The significant direct effect that remains after controlling for emotional intelligence (c' = .242, 95% CI [.146, .338]) indicates *partial mediation*, supporting H4. Organizational justice significantly predicts emotional intelligence (β = .691, p < .001), supporting H2.

Discussion

Organizational Justice and Employee Performance

The findings confirm that all three justice dimensions significantly and positively predict employee performance, supporting H1a, H1b, and H1c. This is consistent with the predictions of both Equity Theory and Social Exchange Theory. From an Equity Theory perspective, the significant effect of distributive justice (β = .312) confirms that employees who perceive rewards and workloads as equitable respond with higher performance, aligning with Adams's (1965) proposition that perceived equity motivates contribution maintenance. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, the significant effects of procedural justice (β = .284) and interactional justice (β = .196) confirm that fair processes and respectful treatment generate reciprocal commitment that translates into performance. These results are consistent with meta-analytic findings by Colquitt et al. (2001, 2013) and Whitman et al. (2012), extending their generalizability to Pakistani public and private university settings.

The rank ordering of justice effects (distributive > procedural > interactional) warrants specific discussion. The stronger effect of distributive justice may reflect the particular salience of tangible outcome equity — salary, workload, promotion — in the resource-constrained environment of Pakistani higher education, where disparities in research funding and teaching load allocation are common sources of institutional dissatisfaction. Procedural justice ranks second, consistent with evidence that process-level fairness protects employees from perceived arbitrariness in decisions, building a sense of institutional reliability that sustains performance effort. The comparatively weaker direct effect of interactional justice (β = .196), while still significant, may reflect that interpersonal treatment and supervisory communication quality, though meaningful for morale and satisfaction, operate more indirectly through emotional

pathways — a pattern supported by the mediation results, which show that emotional intelligence partially accounts for this relationship.

Organizational Justice and Emotional Intelligence

The strong predictive relationship between organizational justice and emotional intelligence (β = .691, p < .001), supporting H2, is theoretically grounded in Affective Events Theory. Justice perceptions constitute meaningful workplace events that trigger emotional responses: perceived fairness generates positive affect, psychological security, and reduced stress, all of which create conditions conducive to effective emotional regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. Conversely, perceived injustice depletes emotional resources through sustained negative affect that undermines emotional competence. The magnitude of this relationship (β = .691) indicates that organizational justice accounts for a substantial proportion of variance in emotional intelligence, suggesting that institutional climate is a significant organizational antecedent of employees' emotional functioning.

Emotional Intelligence and Employee Performance

Emotional intelligence emerged as the strongest predictor of employee performance (β = .421, p < .001), supporting H3. This finding is consistent with the emotional competence model (Goleman, 1995) and prior evidence linking emotional intelligence to performance in knowledge-intensive environments (Wong and Law, 2002; Dewett and Moustakis, 2009). The relative strength of emotional intelligence over the justice dimensions — including distributive justice (β = .312) — underscores that emotional competency functions as an active performance-enabling capability rather than merely a response to organizational conditions. Employees who effectively perceive, regulate, and utilize emotions can maximize their performance even under imperfect organizational conditions, making emotional intelligence a primary explanatory variable for performance variance in the university context. This finding is particularly significant for academic institutions where the complexity of interpersonal demands — managing students, colleagues, administrators, and research collaborators simultaneously — requires sustained and sophisticated emotional regulation.

Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence

The partial mediation finding (indirect effect = .291, 95% CI [.221, .365]) supports H4 and represents a key theoretical contribution of the study. The partial mediation — rather than full mediation — is theoretically informative: the retained significant direct effect of organizational justice on employee performance (c' = .242) after controlling for emotional intelligence suggests that organizational justice influences performance through at least two distinct pathways. The first is the emotional pathway: justice perceptions enhance emotional intelligence, which in turn improves performance — the mediation mechanism this study demonstrates. The second is a cognitive-behavioral pathway operating independently of emotional processes: employees may respond directly to fair treatment through increased effort, enhanced motivation, and strengthened institutional commitment, consistent with Social Exchange Theory's prediction of reciprocal behavioral obligations that do not necessarily require emotional mediation.

This partial mediation finding advances Affective Events Theory by demonstrating that the affective pathway from organizational events to behavioral outcomes, while significant, does not fully explain the justice-performance relationship. Cognitive appraisal and behavioral reciprocity mechanisms, as posited by Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory, retain independent explanatory power alongside the emotional pathway identified by Affective Events Theory. Future research should examine these parallel pathways simultaneously through moderated mediation or

multi-mediation models to more fully decompose the justice-performance relationship.

Practical Implications

The findings carry specific, actionable implications for university administrators and human resource practitioners in Pakistani higher education institutions.

Given that distributive justice (β = .312) is the second strongest performance predictor, universities should institutionalize annual workload equity audits using standardized criteria for distributing teaching loads, research responsibilities, and administrative duties across faculty ranks. These audits should be transparent, with results communicated to all relevant staff, to reinforce perceptions of distributional fairness.

Given the significant effect of procedural justice (β = .284), promotion and performance appraisal policies should be formalized with explicit, publicly available criteria, consistent application across departments, and structured appeal mechanisms. Academic governance processes should incorporate representative faculty participation to strengthen employee voice — a key component of procedural fairness identified by Thibaut and Walker (1975).

Since emotional intelligence emerges as the strongest predictor of performance (β = .421), universities should integrate structured emotional intelligence development programs into faculty and staff professional development curricula. These programs should target all four Wong and Law (2002) EI dimensions: self-awareness (through reflective practice workshops), self-regulation (through stress management and mindfulness training), social awareness (through empathy and communication training), and relationship management (through conflict resolution and team collaboration programs).

Since interactional justice (β = .196) is the weakest but still significant direct predictor of performance, supervisory and departmental leadership training should emphasize dignity-based communication, provision of timely and transparent explanations for administrative decisions, and respectful treatment of staff concerns. This is particularly important for heads of departments and deans who make day-to-day decisions affecting academic and administrative staff welfare.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the role of emotional intelligence as a psychological mediator between organizational justice and employee performance in public and private universities in Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan. Drawing on Equity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Affective Events Theory, the study proposed and tested a mediation model in which justice perceptions shape employee performance both directly and indirectly through the development of emotional competency. Data from 208 academic and administrative employees were analyzed using multiple regression and Hayes PROCESS mediation analysis.

The results confirm that all three dimensions of organizational justice — distributive, procedural, and interactional — significantly and positively predict employee performance, with distributive justice demonstrating the strongest direct effect among the three. Emotional intelligence emerged as the most powerful predictor of employee performance overall and was significantly predicted by organizational justice. The partial mediation of emotional intelligence in the justice–performance relationship was confirmed. Together, these findings establish that organizational fairness improves employee performance through two complementary mechanisms: an emotional pathway, wherein fair treatment enhances emotional regulation and thereby performance; and a direct cognitive-behavioral pathway, wherein employees reciprocate perceived fairness with increased effort and commitment.

These findings directly address the study's central research objective by demonstrating that emotional intelligence functions as an important psychological mechanism through which

organizational justice influences employee performance in higher education institutions. Universities that invest simultaneously in equitable institutional governance and emotional capability development are therefore more likely to achieve sustainable improvements in employee performance than those addressing only one dimension of the problem.

This study contributes to organizational behavior literature by extending Affective Events Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Equity Theory to a developing-country higher education context, showing that justice-triggered affective experiences and cognitive-behavioral responses operate simultaneously in shaping employee performance. The study further advances the emotional intelligence literature by positioning emotional intelligence not only as a personal trait but also as an organizationally cultivated resource that is responsive to institutional fairness conditions. Moreover, by validating this integrated model within Pakistani universities — a non-Western and underexplored academic context — the study provides contextual evidence that strengthens the broader applicability of organizational justice and emotional intelligence frameworks beyond the Western corporate environments that dominate prior research.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations that define an agenda for future research. The cross-sectional research design, while appropriate for testing concurrent relationships, precludes causal inference; it is not possible to determine from this study whether organizational justice precedes emotional intelligence development or whether pre-existing emotional competence shapes justice perceptions. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs with repeated measurement to establish temporal precedence and causal pathways in the justice-EI-performance chain. The use of convenience sampling from two universities in a single district limits the external validity of the findings; they may not generalize to universities in other regions of Pakistan or to higher education systems in other developing countries. Multi-institutional, multi-regional studies employing probability sampling would significantly strengthen generalizability. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data for all constructs introduces the possibility of common method bias, despite the procedural and statistical controls applied. Future research should incorporate multi-source performance data, such as supervisor-rated performance or institutional output metrics, to triangulate findings. The study also does not examine potential boundary conditions of the mediation model. Future research should investigate moderating variables — such as leadership style, organizational culture, psychological safety, and work engagement — that may amplify or attenuate the mediating effect of emotional intelligence, thereby further specifying the conditions under which the justice-EI-performance pathway is most and least active. Finally, the study did not disaggregate findings by staff type (academic versus administrative); given that these groups differ in performance expectations and daily routines, comparative analyses would yield more targeted theoretical and practical insights.

Policy Recommendations

Higher education regulatory bodies in Pakistan should consider incorporating fairness assessment indicators — covering distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions — into institutional accreditation and evaluation frameworks. Universities should formally include emotional intelligence competencies in faculty development programs and leadership training curricula. Institutional HR policies should periodically conduct fairness audits of promotion, workload allocation, and performance evaluation systems to monitor and strengthen organizational justice conditions. These policy interventions, grounded in the empirical evidence of this study, offer a practical roadmap for enhancing employee performance and institutional effectiveness in the higher education sector.

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