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Title: Exploitative Leadership and Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders: Examining the Mediating Role of Interactional Justice in Workplace Dynamics

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Exploitative Leadership and Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders: Examining the Mediating Role of Interactional Justice in Workplace Dynamics

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Abstract

This study focused on the mediating role of interactional justice in the relationship between exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict with leaders in public and private sector educational institutions in Islamabad. A total sample of 250 faculty and administrative staff members from public and private sector schools located in Islamabad was surveyed using validated instruments, including the Exploitative Leadership Scale (ELS), Interactional Justice Scale (IJS), and Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICWS). Present study employed a quantitative design, with data collected through self-administered questionnaires assessing perceptions of leadership behaviors, fairness, and conflicts. SPSS with PROCESS macro and AMOS structural equation modeling (SEM) software, were used to examine the relationships among the study variables. The results confirmed that exploitative leadership was positively related to interpersonal conflict with leaders, while interactional justice acted as a significant partial mediator in this relationship. Specifically, higher levels of interactional justice weakened the positive relationship between exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict, indicating that fair treatment and respectful communication can reduce conflict even in exploitative leadership environments. Based on these findings, practical recommendations were made for educational institutions to implement leadership development programs that emphasize fairness, transparent communication, and mutual respect. Such interventions are expected to foster a positive organizational climate, reduce workplace conflicts, and enhance overall employee well-being. This study provides valuable insights for administrators and policymakers in the educational sector, offering strategies to mitigate the negative effects of exploitative leadership and improve the work environment for faculty and staff.

Keywords: *Exploitative Leadership, Interactional Justice, Mediation, Interpersonal Conflict.*

Introduction

The study of leadership dynamics and how they affect interpersonal interactions at work has drawn a lot of interest in contemporary organizational psychology (Avey, Avolio, & Luthans, 2011; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). Einarsen, Skogstad, Rørvik, Lande, and Nielsen (2018) presented a thorough framework for comprehending and classifying many forms of harmful leadership, including exploitative behaviour. One could classify exploitative leadership as a subset of destructive leadership. These leaders exhibit a great deal of bad behaviour (Schmid, Pircher

Verdorfer, & Peus, 2019). The term "exploitative leadership" (EL) was coined by Schmid et al. (2019) to describe the manipulative and exploitative actions of damaging leaders. Some work-related attitudes and behaviours of employees, such as job satisfaction and turnover intentions, are negatively impacted by exploitative leadership (Tepper, 2007). However, Colquitt (2001) proposed that the impact of EL is lessened by interactional justice (IJ). The intricate relationship between IJ, interpersonal conflict, and EL at workplace is still not fully understood. This calls for a thorough examination of the cumulative impact of the previously listed factors on the dynamics of the workplace. Therefore, the primary goal of this research is to investigate the ways in which exploitative leadership affects interpersonal conflict with the leader (ICWL), and how interactional justice mediates the positive effect of exploitative leadership on ICWL. In order to support organizational leaders in fostering positive working connections and resolving conflicts in the face of potentially exploitative leadership situations, the study attempts to provide light on these relationships and the ensuing research questions are as under:

- a. How does exploitative leadership influence interpersonal conflict with leaders?
- b. How does interactional justice influence the occurrence and intensity of interpersonal conflict between subordinates and exploitative leaders?

2. Literature Review

Schmid et al. (2019) devised and verified a metric to assess this detrimental leadership conduct and defined "A negative leadership style in which the leader (a) displays egoistic behaviour, (b) engages in manipulation by pressuring employees, (c) leaves employees overburdened, and (d) undermines their skills as well as expertise and creates barriers in their personal growth". EL falls under the umbrella of destructive leadership as these leaders display a wide range of negative behaviours (Schmid et al., 2019). Despite research on the leader's self-interest, there is a limited understanding of leader exploitation. Abusive or exploitative leadership can have negative consequences for both individuals and organizations for instance, increased turnover intentions and decreasing job satisfaction of employees (Tepper, 2000). EL more often than not contributes to a noxious work environment, this link has been discussed in detail by (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Mahmood, Zahur, & Al Hassan, 2023). Understanding how ICWL is exacerbated by EL, which is defined as the abuse of power and manipulation, is a crucial aspect of this research (Kessler, Bruursema, Rodopman, & Spector, 2013; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Interpersonal Conflict is defined as disagreements or clashes between individuals, often arising from differing goals, values, or perceptions. Interpersonal conflict refers to the representation of incompatibility, disagreement, or difference between two or more interacting individuals (Afzalur Rahim, 2002; Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Interpersonal conflict can manifest as relationship conflict (personal animosity), task conflict (disagreements about work-related issues), or process conflict (disagreements about how to accomplish tasks). expected that interpersonal conflict would likely relate to a variety of emotional reactions, including anxiety, depression, and frustration. In the short run, conflicts can lead to feelings of frustration (Spector, Gray, & Rosen, 2023; Spector & Jex, 1998).

According to Bies (1986) another branch stemming out from the tree of organizational justice categorized as IJ which focuses on employees' perceptions of the interpersonal behavior exercised during the representation of decisions and procedures. IJ is further divided into two constituents: interpersonal and informational justice. Perceptions of respect, politeness, dignity in one's treatment or when taking decisions are a part of IJ while the sufficiency of the explanations given in terms of their specificity, timeliness, and truthfulness comes under informational justice (Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002; Thompson, Buch, Thompson, & Glasø, 2021). A study by Abas et al., (2018) found that among participants, perceived interactional fairness lessened the negative effects of bargaining approaches on somatic strain and depressive symptoms in subordinates. This suggests that the negative impacts of EL on IJ are mitigated when subordinates believe their bosses to be highly interactively fair.

According to (Colquitt et al., 2013), IJ, which includes treating people fairly and openly in interpersonal interactions, has the potential to lessen the negative impact that EL has on working relationships. The relationship between EL and ICWL can be viewed through the compelling lens of IJ mediation.

Going through the literature one does not come across a study which considers the aforementioned study variables in one comprehensive model within the Pakistani educational context. Therefore, the current study aims to contribute to the evolving understanding of the dynamics between EL, IJ, and ICWL by exploring the mediating role of IJ.

2.1 Hypothesis Formulation

Exploitative leadership is characterized by leaders who prioritize their own interests over the well-being of their subordinates, often leading to a toxic work environment. This behavior can create significant interpersonal conflicts between leaders and their team members, resulting in decreased morale, productivity, and overall organizational effectiveness.

H₁: There is a positive association between exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict with the leader.

Exploitative leadership undermines fairness and respect in leader-follower interactions, leading to lower perceptions of interactional justice. When leaders engage in exploitative behaviors, it creates an environment where employees feel undervalued and disrespected, which diminishes their sense of justice in interactions.

H₂: There is a negative association between exploitative leadership and interactional justice.

Higher interactional justice fosters trust and reduces misunderstandings, thus lowering interpersonal conflict with the leader. When employees perceive fairness in their interactions, they are less likely to engage in conflicts, as trust is built and misunderstandings are minimized.

H₃: There is a negative relationship between interactional justice and interpersonal conflict with the leaders.

Interactional justice mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict with the leader, meaning that exploitative leadership decreases interactional justice, which in turn increases interpersonal conflict with the leader. As employees perceive lower interactional justice due to exploitative leadership, they are more likely to experience conflicts with their leaders, stemming from feelings of unfair treatment.

H₄: Interactional Justice mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict with the leader.

2.2 Theoretical Framework Justification

This study proposes, based on Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, that people assess their connections with leaders according to perceived mutuality and fairness. The present study highlights how peoples' political orientations affect how they perceive and react to organizational justice and leadership behaviours. To put it in scientific terms, interactional justice acts as an intervening factor between interpersonal conflict with the leader and exploitative leadership.

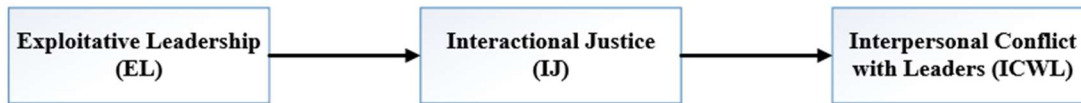


Figure 1. Research Model

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Present study adopts deductive research strategy employing quantitative cross-sectional design with one-time contact with the respondents responding to more than one study variable.

3.2 Research Setting

Data was collected from faculty and administrative staff members from 20 public and 20 private sector schools located within the premises of Islamabad urban precincts. Respondents were briefed about the purpose of the study, ensured their anonymity and written consent was obtained from each respondent. Data was collected during recess time and the whole process of gathering data took one week.

3.3 Measuring Instruments

Table 1 displays the instruments used to elicit the requisite information from the respondents.

Table 1. Measurement Scale

Variables	Items	Response Scale	Reference
Exploitative leadership	15	To assess how subordinates perceive exploitative leadership behaviors (manipulation, mistreatment, power abuse). (1= Never to 5 = Every time)	(Schmid et al., 2019)
Interactional Justice.	9	Assesses how fair and respectful leaders are in their treatment of subordinates (they are fair, respectful, and transparent in interactions). (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)	(Colquitt, 2001)
Interpersonal conflict with the leader,	4	Measure the level of conflict subordinates experience in their interactions with leaders (disagreement, frustration, hostility). (1 = less than once per month or never to 5 = several times per day)	(Spector & Jex, 1998)

3.4 Sample Size Determination

Researchers believe that a sample size greater than 200 is considered fairly well for a complex model that involves mediation and moderation models (Marcoulides & Saunders, 2006; Peng & Lai, 2012). Using *G*Power* software with different parameter values as suggested by Cohen (1992) the optimum sample size was worked out at 250. For possible discordance due to faulty reporting or any inadequacy the data were collected from 265 respondents and 15 of the questionnaires thereby subsequently discarded so the respondent rate was 94%.

3.5 Statistical Techniques and Software

For the data analysis approach in this study, the first step would involve conducting descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics of the subordinates (e.g., teachers or staff members) and their responses to the survey items. This would provide an overview of the distribution and central tendencies of the variables, such as EL, IJ, and ICWL. Next, correlation

analysis would be performed to examine the relationships between the variables. This would help determine whether higher levels of EL are associated with increased ICWL and whether IJ is correlated with both EL and ICWL. This step would provide initial insights into the potential direct and indirect relationships between the variables. To test the mediating role of IJ in the relationship between EL and ICWL, mediation analysis would be conducted using statistical methods such as the PROCESS Macro in SPSS. **Hayes and Rockwood (2017) introduced the simple mediation model using OLS regression-based path analysis and illustrated how the effect of an antecedent variable X on some final consequent Y can be partitioned neatly into two paths of influence, direct and indirect.** The present study adapts the procedure adopted by (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017) and would identify the *direct effect* of EL on ICWL, as well as the *indirect effect* through IJ. Finally, the results of the mediation analysis would be interpreted by examining the *significance* of the direct and indirect effects. The **bootstrap confidence intervals** would be used to determine whether the mediation effect is statistically significant. If the *indirect effect* of EL on ICWL through IJ is significant, it would suggest that IJ partially mediates the relationship.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Table 2 provides a demographic summary of the sample based on various characteristics. Regarding gender, 57.9% of participants were male ($n = 136$), while 42.1% were female ($n = 99$). When examining qualifications, the majority (60.0%) held a Master's degree ($n = 141$), followed by 30.2% with an undergraduate degree ($n = 71$) and 9.8% with a Ph.D. ($n = 23$)

Table 1. Sampling Characteristics of Respondents

	Variable	n	%
Gender	Male	136	57.9
	Female	99	42.1
Qualification	Undergraduate	71	30.2
	Master's Degree	141	60.0
	Ph.D.	23	9.8
Organizational Experience	< 6 months	28	11.9
	6 < 18 months	24	10.2
	18 months < 3 years	24	10.2
	3 < 5 years	27	11.5
	> 5 years	132	56.2
Leaders Experience	< 6 months	39	16.6
	6 < 18 months	45	19.1
	18 months < 3 years	35	14.9
	3 < 5 years	50	21.3
	> 5 years	66	28.1
Sector	Private	48	20.4
	Public	187	79.6

Organizational experience varied among participants, with more than half (56.2%) having over five years of experience ($n = 132$). The remaining respondents had less than 5 years of experience, distributed as follows: 11.9% with less than 6 months ($n = 28$), 10.2% each with 6 to 18 months and 18 months to 3 years ($n = 24$ for both), and 11.5% with 3 to 5 years of experience ($n = 27$). In terms of leadership experience, the largest proportion (28.1%) reported over 5 years ($n = 66$), while smaller proportions reported experience of 3 to 5 years (21.3%, $n = 50$), 6 to 18 months (19.1%, $n = 45$), less than 6 months (16.6%, $n = 39$), and 18 months to 3 years (14.9%, $n = 35$). Lastly, the majority of respondents (79.6%) were from the public sector ($n = 187$), with only 20.4% ($n = 48$)

belonging to the private sector. These statistics provide a detailed demographic profile of the participants, highlighting diversity in organizational tenure, leadership experience, and educational background.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The summary statistics from Table 3 provide insights into the participants' perceptions of EL, IJ, and ICWL. The mean score for **EL** is 2.75, indicating that participants generally perceive low to medium levels of exploitative behavior from their leaders. The standard deviation of 1.07 suggests moderate variability, reflecting some diversity in participants' experiences. For **IJ**, the mean score is relatively high at 3.04, signifying that participants feel fairly treated in workplace interactions. The standard deviation of 0.85 shows less variability, indicating consistent agreement among participants about fairness. In contrast, **ICWL** has a low mean score of 2.31, reflecting minimal reported conflict, with a standard deviation of 0.51, indicating very little variation in responses.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Reliability

	Mean	SD	α	Correlations		
Exploitative Leadership	2.75	1.07	0.964	1		
Interactional Justice	3.04	.85	0.940	-0.457**	1	
Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders	2.31	.51	0.737	-0.437**	0.439**	1

Note. ** $p < 0.001$.

The correlation analysis reveals significant relationships among the constructs. There is a **negative correlation** between EL and IJ ($r = -0.475$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that as EL increases, perceptions of fairness decrease. Additionally, EL shows a **positive correlation** with ICWL ($r = 0.439$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that exploitative behaviors from leaders are associated with heightened interpersonal conflict. Lastly, IJ is **negatively correlated** with ICWL ($r = -0.473$, $p < 0.01$), implying that fair treatment in the workplace can reduce conflict with leaders. These significant correlations highlight the interconnected dynamics of leadership style, justice perceptions, and conflict. Therefore, H_1 , H_2 and H_3 are accepted.

The reliability analysis demonstrates that the scales used to measure these constructs are highly consistent. The 15-item scale for **EL** has an excellent Cronbach's alpha of 0.964, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability in measuring the construct. Similarly, the 9-item scale for **IJ** achieves a Cronbach's alpha of 0.940, also reflecting excellent reliability. The 4-item scale for **ICWL** has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.737, which is within the acceptable range for a shorter scale, indicating that it reliably captures the construct of conflict. The reference often cited for Cronbach's alpha and its range (suggesting that a value above 0.7 is acceptable, with values above 0.8 preferred, and above 0.9 considered excellent) (Nunnally, 1978). These results affirm the robustness of the measures used in the study.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

Results for the present study obtained through PROCESS macro summarized in Table 4. The results indicate that EL significantly impacts both IJ and ICWL. The first model demonstrates that EL has a significant negative effect on interactional justice explaining 22.52% of the variance in interactional justice ($R^2=0.2252$). This suggests that higher levels of exploitative leadership lead to decrease in employees' perceptions of fairness and justice in interactions. In the second model, both EL and IJ significantly predict ICWL ($R^2=0.2830$, $p < 0.001$), with EL having a positive direct effect (0.1320, $p < 0.001$) and IJ having a negative effect (-0.2044 , $p < 0.001$). This indicates that

exploitative leadership increases interpersonal conflict, while higher levels of interactional justice reduce such conflicts. The mediation analysis further reveals that IJ partially mediates the relationship between EL and ICWL. The total effect of EL on ICWL is significant (0.2091, $p < 0.001$) with ($R^2 = 0.1928$, $p < 0.001$), and the direct effect remains significant after accounting for IJ (0.1320, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation. This suggests that EL increases ICWL not only directly but also indirectly by reducing IJ.

Table. Direct and Indirect Effects

Outcome	Constructs	β	SE	p-value
Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders	Constant	4.374	0.113	<0.001
	Exploitative Leadership	-0.380	0.046	<0.001
Outcome	Constructs	β	SE	p-value
Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders	Constant	1.7382	0.177	<0.001
	Exploitative Leadership	0.132	0.030	<0.001
	Interactional Justice	0.204	0.037	<0.001
Effects	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effects	0.209	0.028	0.153	0.264
Direct Effects	0.132	0.030	0.072	0.191
Indirect Effects	0.077	0.021	0.038	0.121

Note. Standard Error (SE); Lower Limit Confidence Interval (LLCI); Upper Limit Confidence Interval (ULCI).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that EL significantly reduces perceptions of IJ which subsequently increases ICWS. This is in line with prior research, which has demonstrated that exploitative leadership erodes leader-member exchange quality by fostering perceptions of unfair treatment, thus heightening workplace conflicts (Pircher Verdorfer, Belschak, & Bobbio, 2024). Furthermore, the negative effect of EL on justice perceptions underscores its role in exacerbating employee tensions, particularly through the perception of unequal treatment and manipulation, as observed in earlier studies (Fein, Benea, Idzadikhah, & Tziner, 2020; Richards & Hackett, 2012). Moreover, the mediation analysis indicates that IJ partially mediates the relationship between EL and ICWL. This finding aligns with the broader literature, which highlights the critical role of perceived justice in mitigating the adverse effects of destructive leadership on employee well-being and workplace harmony (Koksal & Mert, 2024). Specifically, the indirect effect suggests that EL not only directly influences ICWL but also operates through diminished fairness perceptions. This supports previous findings that justice perceptions are central to buffering negative leadership effects and reducing workplace deviance (Bajaba, Al-Judibi, Basahal, & Alsabban, 2024; Guo, Luo, & Cheng, 2024). Addressing IJ within organizations can thus serve as a strategy to counteract the harmful impacts of EL and foster a more equitable work environment (González-Cánovas, Trillo, Bretones, & Fernández-Millán, 2024).

5.1 Limitations and Future Direction

- Geographical Limitation (Islamabad Only):** The study is limited to data collected from schools in Islamabad, which may not be representative of the broader educational landscape in Pakistan or other regions. The unique cultural, socio-economic, and educational dynamics of Islamabad could influence the perceptions of exploitative leadership and interpersonal conflict, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other areas.

- b. **Self-Report Bias:** The reliance on self-reported data from subordinates introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where respondents may underreport negative perceptions of their leaders or over-report positive behaviors. This bias could skew the results, especially when participants feel pressured to portray their leaders in a more favorable light or avoid potential repercussions from disclosing negative experiences.
- c. **Limited Use of Qualitative Design:** While the study provides valuable quantitative insights, the lack of qualitative methods (e.g., interviews or focus groups) limits the depth of understanding regarding the nuances of EL and ICWL. Mixed design could offer richer, context-specific insights into the underlying reasons for perceived exploitative behaviors and conflict, which might not be fully captured through standardized surveys alone.

5.2 Implications

This study underscores the significant impact of Exploitative Leadership (EL) on Interpersonal Conflict with Leaders (ICWL), with Interactional Justice (IJ) playing a crucial mediating role. The findings highlight that exploitative leadership behaviors, characterized by unfairness and manipulation, lead to increased interpersonal conflict, whereas higher levels of interactional justice mitigate this effect. Schools should focus on promoting fair, respectful leadership practices through training and policy development to reduce conflict and improve subordinate well-being. Based on the findings, policy makers in educational institutions need to implement leadership development programs that emphasize fairness, transparent communication, and mutual respect. Such interventions will foster a positive organizational climate, reduce workplace conflicts, and enhance overall employee well-being. Future research could explore additional moderators and mediators, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal effects to further understand the long-term implications of leadership behaviors in diverse organizational settings.

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