

Contextualizing Organizational Justice: How Project Teams Experience Fairness at Work in a Pakistani Mega Construction Project

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Abstract

This study investigates how project team members in Pakistani project-based organisations (PBOs) perceive and experience organisational justice in a culturally integrated context. The research addresses a gap in the literature by applying a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, utilising a diary-interview design with 20 project team members. Data was collected through real-time diary entries over four weeks and supplemented by semi-structured interviews to provide a holistic understanding of justice dynamics. The findings indicate that perceptions of justice are influenced by five main elements: favouritism, communication style, behaviour, transparency in decision-making, and socio-cultural hierarchy. The study further found that interactional justice, which is based on respectful communication and emotional recognition, is the most culturally and emotionally significant dimension of fairness in Pakistani project environments. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of organisational justice by providing a culturally grounded perspective that challenges the generalizability of Western models and offers practical implications for project managers seeking to foster fairness in culturally diverse and dynamic work settings.

Keywords: Project-based Organisations, Organisational Justice, Project Management, Project Team, Cultural Context.

Introduction

Project organisations differ fundamentally from permanent organisations (Lundin & Soderholm, 1995), providing distinct social and organisational contexts for perceptions of justice (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022). Justice research in permanent organisations has recognised the positive impact of just treatment on both employees and the organisation itself (Colquitt et al., 2013; Feng et al., 2023). This is also a fact that justice is context-specific, and perceptions of a phenomenon differ across social and organisational contexts (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006). Project environments that are transient, fast-paced, and frequently lack long-term processes that sustain justice differ significantly from stable settings (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Gull et al., 2020). In this context, we define organisational justice (OJ) as "the extent to which an aspect of the organisational environment is perceived as fair, according to a certain rule or standard" (Moliner et al., 2017, p. 1; Cropanzano et al., 2001). There is a lack of studies on understanding workforce behaviour in projects (Unterhitzenberger, 2021), and very few on

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organisational justice in projects (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022). It has been established that OJ has a positive impact on project performance (Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019). Still, the extant literature lacks a more in-depth understanding of project team members' lived experiences. Organisational justice, typically separated into distributive, procedural, and interactional components, has been extensively studied in traditional, long-term workplaces with well-defined roles, regulations, and hierarchies (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1986). In contexts where informal patronage and favouritism are common, distributive justice, which focuses on the equitable allocation of resources and rewards, is often compromised, leading to perceptions of inequality and bias (Ghaziani et al., 2012). At the same time, procedural justice, which emphasises fairness in decision-making processes, is frequently undermined by top-down hierarchical systems and limited opportunities for employee voice or participation (Tahir & Malik, 2016). In such systems, top management generally makes decisions without involving lower-level team members, leading to irritation and a lack of transparency (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Khan et al., 2016). Furthermore, in cultures that value emotional sensitivity, deference, and face-saving communication, interactional justice — fair and honest interpersonal treatment — becomes increasingly important (Gull et al., 2020; Qamar et al., 2023).

In Pakistan, cultural qualities such as collectivism, obedience to authority, and a significant power distance exacerbate the problem (Hofstede, 2001; Khan et al., 2016). Employees want to be treated with dignity and sensitivity, and even tiny breaches in respectful communication can seriously undermine trust (Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024). These cultural elements combine to hinder the application of fair procedures in Pakistani companies, rendering justice a nuanced, context-dependent concept (Hofstede, 2001; Hameed et al., 2022). These qualities influence employees' sense of fairness in interpersonal communication, resource allocation, and decision-making (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Qamar et al., 2023). Interestingly, transparency and equity are commonly sacrificed for respect, allegiance, and obedience to superiors, making it more challenging to comprehend and apply justice (Ghaziani et al., 2012; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024). The unique structure of project-based employment in Pakistan, where teams are regularly formed on short notice, leadership can change quickly, and communication can be informal and inconsistent, underscores the need to study justice (Gull et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2016). In Pakistani project settings, institutional and cultural barriers such as favouritism, top-down decision-making, and unequal job allocation often impair employees' perceptions of fairness (Ghaziani et al., 2012; Tahir & Malik, 2016). This study seeks to uncover these links by investigating how team members in Pakistani project-based organisations (PBOs) perceive justice in their daily lives.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how justice is perceived in real time, using qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and diary entries (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Hyers, 2018). This technique allows academics to look beyond static models and see justice as a live, dynamic experience (Assefa et al., 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025). Though there is little empirical data from Pakistani PBOs, where organisational structures are fundamentally different from those examined in the West, the literature that is currently available affirms that perceptions of justice have a significant impact on trust, motivation, commitment, and project performance (Pracha et al., 2017; Gull et al., 2020). Through a thorough qualitative investigation, this study fills that knowledge gap and enables examination of justice as a contextual and dynamic phenomenon within Pakistani PBOs.

Literature Review

Justice perceptions are not only subjective but are context-specific (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006) and are 'in the eye of the beholder' (Colquitt et al., 2018, p. 159). Thus, the correct perception of fairness is an individual judgment based on their life experiences, attributes, and the specific context in which they work, referred to as "fairness propensity" (Colquitt et al., 2018). Previous studies have explored the justice in the context of managers and supervisors (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Chih et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018), co-workers and customers (Rupp et al., 2014), patients and family (Harris et al., 2020), banking customers (Rupp et al., 2008), manufacturing industry customers (Ahmed et al., 2022) and clients/sponsors (Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019). The role of team members in decision-making extends the impact of organisational justice (Harris et al., 2020), particularly in construction project teams (Lim & Loosemore, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019).

In the project management context, studies have found a positive impact of organisational justice on project performance (Lim & Loosemore, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019). Justice research has explored the job satisfaction of individuals (Rupp et al., 2014), their troubles (Greenberg & Lind, 2000), the negative impact of disruption and aggression (Colquitt et al., 2013; Rupp et al., 2014), job performance (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Colquitt et al., 2013; Rupp et al., 2014), and the negative impact of unfair treatment on job performance (Chih et al., 2017). Justice has been found to reduce job stress and burnout while increasing professional efficiency (Yang et al., 2018), trust (Cropanzano et al., 2007), and decreasing employee turnover intentions (Harris et al., 2020). The lack of distributive justice leads to mistrust, while the lack of procedural and interactional justice leads to exhaustion (Yang et al., 2018). Of the three dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2001; Leventhal, 1980; Moag & Bies, 1986), distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes, procedural justice to the fairness of the processes that lead to those outcomes, and interactional justice to the treatment of individuals within organisational operations.

While most studies have been carried out in permanent organisations, with very few in the project context (Lim & Loosemore, 2017; Unterhitzenberger & Bryde, 2019; Shafi et al., 2021), this study thus explores justice in the project context. Justice is fundamental in short-term, resource-constrained project situations with fluctuating expectations and deliverables (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Abdul Hameed et al., 2022). In such situations, fairness perceptions can have a considerable impact on team morale, cohesion, and work performance (Gull et al., 2020). In Pakistan, justice is not a value-neutral concept; it is heavily influenced by socio-cultural variables such as power distance, collectivism, religious ethics, and regional variation (Hofstede, 2001; Kashif & Khattak, 2017; Abdul Hameed et al., 2022). Employees may choose relationship harmony over equity or accept hierarchical judgments as fair due to cultural deference, even in the absence of procedural clarity (Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016).

Theoretical Foundations

Organisational justice has grown from traditional concepts of equality to a comprehensive framework with a strong theoretical foundation. Originally based on Adams' Equity Theory (1965) and Leventhal's fairness principles, the concept was further refined by researchers such as Greenberg (1987) and Colquitt et al. (2001), who formalised the three-part model of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Over the last decade, scholars have increasingly recognised that justice judgments are influenced by culture, context, and interpersonal interactions (Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Ho, 2025; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Aryono & Marisi, 2024; Assefa et al., 2024).

Each dimension of justice is conceptually linked to a distinct set of results: distributive justice is based on equity theory and emphasises outcome fairness, whereas procedural justice stems from social exchange theory and concerns decision-making transparency and consistency (Adams, 1965; Leventhal, 1980; Colquitt et al., 2001). This plays a vital role in reward allocations (Schminke et al., 2002; Colquitt & Jackson, 2006) and in employee development and promotional opportunities (Schminke et al., 2002). This also takes into account the allocation of resources, including work schedules (Schminke et al., 2002; Sahoo & Sahoo, 2019), workload and responsibilities (Chih et al., 2017), the appropriateness of tools and support (Yang et al., 2018), and contract and risk (Lim & Loosemore, 2017). It has also been noted that procedural and interactional justice influences distributive justice perception (Lim & Loosemore, 2017).

Procedural justice includes practices (Sahoo & Sahoo, 2019), guidelines and policies (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002), processes and regulations (Loosemore & Lin, 2015), and decision-making methods (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022). This also provides opportunities to voice concerns, share views and opinions, and express feelings to negotiate and be involved in decision-making (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Colquitt & Jackson, 2006; Dayan & Di Benedetto, 2008). Procedural justice functions as a resource that buffers the consequences of high job demands, making it essential in high-pressure situations such as project teams (Ho, 2025; Chang et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024; Taamneh et al., 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025). Scholars underscore the importance of moving beyond cross-sectional approaches and adopting longitudinal or real-time methodologies, such as diaries, to examine how justice views change (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Hyers, 2018; Assefa et al., 2024; Gull et al., 2020; Alhaidani et al., 2024).

Interactional justice (IJ), on the other hand, concerns how outcomes and procedures are communicated (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg et al., 2005) and relates to individual-level treatment comprising interpersonal and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001). The interpersonal dimension of IJ is focused on fairness perception of the treatment individual receive from the sources of justice including politeness (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006; Lim & Loosemore, 2017), respect and pride (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Colquitt & Jackson, 2006; Dayan & Di Benedetto, 2008; Rupp et al., 2014; Lim & Loosemore, 2017), kindness and consideration (Dayan & Di Benedetto, 2008), freedom of expression and association (Lim & Loosemore, 2017), and the feelings of being valued and regarded (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002). At the same time, informational justice concerns the timely and accurate truthful communication of information (Dayan & Di Benedetto, 2008), its honesty (Colquitt & Jackson, 2006), and openness and transparency (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Lim & Loosemore, 2017). Interactional justice, thus, is based on relational and emotional theories that emphasise respectful treatment, honesty, and empathy in interpersonal interactions (Chang et al., 2024; Taamneh et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Akter et al., 2024).

Organisational Justice and Project Team Members

Distributive fairness is a critical factor in determining commitment and morale in PBOs, given the absence of formal promotion pathways and long-term employment security (Aryono & Marisi, 2024; Chang et al., 2024; Gull et al., 2020; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Medhat, 2024). According to Aryono and Marisi (2024), workers in contracting companies who believed their contributions were not adequately valued demonstrated lower levels of organisational civic behaviour and motivation. Medhat (2024) found that fair task allocation was negatively correlated with turnover intention and positively correlated with loyalty. Regardless of intent, results are frequently viewed

as unjust when roles and expectations are unclear (Khan et al., 2016; Ghaziani et al., 2012; Gull et al., 2020). Even neutral or well-meaning decisions may be perceived as prejudiced in these situations, notably if the decision-maker lacks credibility or practical communication skills (Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Assefa et al., 2024; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024). These results are especially pertinent to Pakistan's construction and development industries, where informal decision-making frequently conflates performance-based differentiation.

Research shows that procedural fairness is more than just obeying rules; it is also about consistency, transparency, impartiality, and employee voice in decision-making (Akter et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Aryono & Marisi, 2024; Chang et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024). In project-based workplaces, where teams are frequently established on short notice and decisions must be made quickly, procedural fairness emerges as a critical tool for fostering trust and involvement (Colquitt et al., 2001; Gull et al., 2020; Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022). Fair methods give employees a sense of control, predictability, and validity, particularly when the results are negative (Colquitt et al., 2001). Managers are routinely given the authority to make decisions without consulting team members, which can create perceptions of bias or unpredictability (Khan et al., 2016; Tahir & Malik, 2016; Gull et al., 2020). These challenges are exacerbated by cultural variables such as excessive power distance and deference to authority, which can make criticising procedural errors appear disrespectful (Hofstede, 2001; Khan et al., 2016; Abdul Hameed et al., 2022). In such situations, team members often feel excluded from key discussions about task allocation, evaluation standards, and dispute-resolution processes, leading to low morale and disengagement (Pracha et al., 2017; Ghaziani et al., 2012). Procedural justice is substantial because, when awards or promotions are limited, a fair process legitimises the decision and reduces dissatisfaction (Colquitt et al., 2001; Leventhal, 1980; Bies & Shapiro, 1988). Chang et al. (2024) and Taamneh et al. (2024) found that when employees regard the decision-making process as fair, even if the conclusion is unfavourable, they are more likely to accept it and remain committed to the firm. This is critical in project teams for preserving cohesion and avoiding conflicts during high-stress periods such as deadlines or resource shortages (Assefa et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024).

Interactional justice is a subtle but effective motivator for employee morale and motivation (Hofstede, 2001; Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016). Even tough decisions are more likely to be accepted when team members are treated with respect, leaders listen intently, and communication is effective (Medhat, 2024; Akter et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Chang et al., 2024). On the other hand, even in minor situations, impolite or contemptuous communication can erode employee engagement and trust over time (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Qamar et al., 2023; Gull et al., 2020). Empirical research supports the importance of polite communication in shaping perceptions of justice. According to Ravina-Ripoll et al. (2024), one of the most important indicators of organisational justice in collectivist societies is emotional wage, or the acknowledgement of workers' social and emotional needs. Employees are more willing to speak up or participate when they feel appreciated and valued, according to research by Assefa et al. (2024), which also indicated that the quality of leader-member contact had a substantial impact on voice behaviour.

Justice and Project Teams in Pakistan Cultural Context

Organisational justice is strongly influenced by top management, particularly in project-based settings where formal HR systems are weak, responsibilities are unclear, and structures are often

flexible (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2016). Project managers in these situations not only make decisions but also act as gatekeepers of justice, affecting the allocation of resources, adherence to protocols, and treatment of individuals (Colquitt et al., 2001; Aryono & Marisi, 2024; Assefa et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024; Taamneh et al., 2024). The behaviour and values of project leaders become crucial to how team members perceive and implement justice in Pakistan, where projects are frequently carried out under extreme time pressure and sociocultural expectations reinforce hierarchy (Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016).

Research indicates that perceptions of justice are positively correlated with team leaders' ethical, transformative, and emotionally intelligent (Akter et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2024). In Pakistan, the project environment is centralised at the top, and authority is rarely challenged, which may lead to quick decision-making and frequently results in feelings of unfairness, especially when workers are ignored or excluded from the process (Hofstede, 2001; Khan et al., 2016; Tahir & Malik, 2016). According to research by Gull et al. (2020), Pracha et al. (2017), and Ghaziani et al. (2012), Pakistani workers place even greater value on respect and consultation than on the final decision.

Procedural justice in Pakistani projects is sometimes compromised by inconsistencies in practices across projects or even within a single-phase project (Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016). Many team members say that they are evaluated or assigned duties based on informal power networks or their relationships with managers, rather than on explicit criteria (Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016; Khan et al.). This erodes trust in the system and creates feelings of powerlessness, particularly among junior personnel and members of disadvantaged groups. Aryono and Marisi (2024) found that procedural clarity had a greater influence on employee performance than incentive fairness alone, underscoring the critical role of fair practices in boosting productivity and engagement. According to Alhaidani et al. (2024) and Ravina-Ripoll et al. (2024), employees report feeling more satisfied and less stressed when they think they can contribute to conversations or have a small impact on results.

Interactional justice is especially significant in culturally high-context settings like Pakistan because it is intimately related to relational standards, societal peace, and emotional dignity. (Colquitt et al., 2001; Moag & Bies, 1986; Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020). Interactional justice is fundamentally social and emotional; it is crucial to employee satisfaction in Pakistan's project-based work environments, unlike distributive or procedural fairness, which may be regulated by institutional regulations (Ghaziani et al., 2012; Khan et al., 2016; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Qamar et al., 2023; Assefa et al., 2024). In addition to violating interactional justice standards, leaders who disregard their team members' opinions or emotional needs also undermine the group's cohesiveness over the long run (Colquitt et al., 2001; Akter et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024). Therefore, the study unearths the real-life experiences of project team members in a Pakistani construction project to explore the nature of justice and its impact.

The cultural context in which organisational justice is experienced in Pakistan comprises hierarchical social structures, collectivist customs, and Islamic principles (Hofstede, 2001; Khan et al., 2016; Abdul Hameed et al., 2022; Khilji, 2004). These cultural factors affect how workers view distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness as well as the actions they believe are acceptable or justified in the workplace (Ghaziani et al., 2012; Khan et al., 2016; Tahir & Malik, 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Qamar et al., 2023). A considerably high power distance, concentrated authority, and profound respect for seniority characterise Pakistani society. This has an impact on both procedural and distributive justice beliefs, as employees frequently accept uneven treatment

as acceptable when it conforms with social expectations of rank and seniority (Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Tahir & Malik, 2016; Pracha et al., 2017; Ghaziani et al., 2012). As a result, fairness in the Western sense (based on equal opportunity and participatory governance) may not align with local concepts of justice. Employees may value respect and emotional recognition above formal procedural equity.

Thus, we identified a significant deficiency in the empirical examination of how people perceive justice in real-time project contexts, particularly in South Asian nations. According to scholars such as Hyers (2018) and Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence (2022), justice should be examined as a lived and dynamic phenomenon using qualitative and longitudinal methods, such as diary studies and interviews. (Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Assefa et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024; Akter et al., 2024). Secondly, in contrast to Western ideals of equality and transparency, Pakistan frequently bases its evaluation of justice on relational cues, emotional respect, and adherence to social hierarchy (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Ghaziani et al., 2012; Qamar et al., 2023; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024). Furthermore, few studies examine how leaders in Pakistani projects operationalise fairness amid constraints such as political pressure, resource scarcity, or cultural resistance to participatory governance (Khan et al., 2016; Gull et al., 2020; Pracha et al., 2017). The last gap concerns how organisational justice affects teamwork, employee voice, and mental health in project environments. These findings are still primarily experimental and need contextual validation, even though several recent studies have begun to connect justice to outcomes, such as emotional tiredness, engagement, and innovation (Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Assefa et al., 2024; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024).

Methodology

Organisational justice has typically been examined through positivist paradigms using structured surveys (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001); however, such methods often fail to capture the emotional and symbolic dimensions of fairness that unfold in real-life, time-bound project environments (Assefa et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study employs a diary-interview design, allowing for both real-time documentation and reflective insights, an approach gaining prominence in justice research (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024). Participants were encouraged to keep a diary for 4 weeks, focusing on occurrences of fairness or injustice within their project teams. These diaries, guided by prompts modified from Hyers (2018) and tailored for organisational justice research, asked participants to reflect on how they felt, who was involved, and how the treatment affected their behaviour. This approach captured spontaneous, context-rich experiences while minimising hindsight bias, which is prevalent with interviews alone (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2023).

Post-diary interviews using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) permitted participants to elaborate on significant examples of fair or unjust treatment. This two-stage interview method supplemented the data by linking immediate diary-based reactions to reflective interpretations, yielding a more complete understanding of justice dynamics (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2023). In accordance with qualitative traditions, the interviews were thematically analysed to identify emerging themes, including emotional reactions, power structures, and relationship patterns within project teams (Iqbal et al., 2024). To supplement the real-time data from diaries, semi-structured interviews were conducted twice: before and after the diary period. The combination of the two methodologies was consistent with current qualitative research procedures, which highlight justice as a context-sensitive, relational phenomenon influenced by culture, leadership, and emotional labour (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Hyers, 2018). The

methodology also addressed methodological shortcomings in organisational justice research, which has frequently focused on quantitative, cross-sectional designs that overlook the temporal and interpersonal dimensions of justice experiences. Unterhitzenger and Lawrence (2022) argue that diary-interview techniques are an effective means of exploring justice in dynamic, project-based environments where formal structures are weak and interpersonal interactions take precedence.

Rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, this study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore organisational justice as a subjective, contextually embedded experience. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of those experiencing it (Saunders et al., 2019). Also, multi-method approaches are particularly effective when deep exploration, rather than generalisation, is required (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019).

The target population for this research comprises project team members currently or recently engaged in one of the mega projects in Pakistani organisations. The research focuses on individuals involved in the execution of temporary or semi-temporary projects. This study employs a purposive sample of 20 participants, a sample size consistent with qualitative research that values depth over numerical breadth (Gill & Liamputtong, 2009). This sample size is informed by similar studies in justice research, including those using diary-based methods (Unterhitzenger & Lawrence, 2022).

Table 1: Research participants

Sr. No	Designation	Experience	Code
1	Field Inspector	10 years	(FI 1)
2	Field Inspector	10 years	(FI 2)
3	Field Inspector	7 years	(FI 3)
4	Field Inspector	5 years	(FI 4)
5	Field Inspector	2 years	(FI 5)
6	Assistant Engineer	3 years	(AE 1)
7	Assistant Engineer	3 years	(AE 2)
8	Assistant Engineer	3 years	(AE 3)
9	Assistant Engineer	2.5 years	(AE 4)
10	Assistant Engineer	3 years	(AE 5)
11	Assistant Engineer	2years	(AE 6)
12	HSE Engineer	4 years	(HSE 1)
13	HSE Engineer	3.5 years	(HSE 2)
14	Material Engineer	6 years	(ME)
15	Site Engineer	10 months	(SE 1)
16	Site Engineer	9 years	(SE 2)
17	Site Engineer	3 years	(SE 3)
18	Site Engineer	2.5 years	(SE 4)
19	Chief Surveyor	6 years	(CS)
20	Surveyor	7 months	(SR)

Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in project teams and their ability to constructively reflect on justice-related experiences. Inclusion criteria included (1) active or recent engagement in a formal project, (2) at least six months of team experience, and (3) a willingness

to participate in diary writing and interviews. This diversity allowed for the exploration of justice perceptions across organizational levels and cultural groupings (Assefa et al., 2024).

Thematic analysis was carried out manually, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This research provided a more nuanced understanding of how project team members in Pakistani firms perceive and experience organizational justice in relation to their cultural context. Initially data was manually transcribe all and reviewed to understand the participants' socio-cultural reality and to identify initial trends in justice-related concerns such as favoritism, hierarchy, and silence (Gull et al., 2020). Emotionally charged tales helped disclose the cultural overtones implicit in Pakistani project teams' ideas of justice (Naeem et al., 2023).

Following extensive interaction with the data, descriptive and interpretive codes were manually created. Recurring notions were labeled with culturally appropriate terms such as "favoritism," "withheld feedback," "silence," and "inclusion." These codes were developed inductively from participant expressions and are closely related to perceived distributive, procedural, and interactional justice difficulties (Aryono & Marisi, 2024; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024). The codes were clustered into prospective themes by identifying meaningfully connected ones. The emergent themes reflected similar experiences and pointed to systemic justice challenges influenced by Pakistan's collectivist culture and power distance (Chang et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024). This method guaranteed that themes mirrored genuine lived experiences of justice rather than theoretical assumptions (Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025). Drawing on Braun and Clarke's thematic approach and influenced by past qualitative work undertaken in the HEI environment by Iqbal et al. (2024), the analysis employed a rigorous inductive and deductive coding procedure to extract themes directly from semi-structured interviews and diary entries.

Findings

This study found five major elements influencing the sense of organizational justice inside Pakistani project-based organizations (PBOs): favoritism, communication style, behavior, decision-making transparency, and socio-cultural hierarchy. Participants regularly identified favoritism and unequal resource allocation as important sources of perceived unfairness, which are frequently anchored in informal power networks. The tone of interpersonal interactions also influenced how justice was perceived, with polite communication increasing views of fairness.

1)- Distributive Injustice

Distributive justice refers to the perceived equity of rewards, resources, and workload. Pay and bonus structures were the primary source of unhappiness in the projects under consideration.

Absence of Merit-Based Rewards

Field data show that employees regard any differential incentive as patronage unless it is expressly linked to transparent criteria. Participants described coworkers earning pay raises or ideal site postings because they have ethnic ties to senior management. Material incentives in the form of accommodation, transportation, and food alleviated suffering but did not fully compensate for perceived salary inequity; numerous interviewees viewed these privileges as "basic rights, not rewards." Interestingly, a minority of respondents said that when leaders provided explicit explanations for why bonuses were unavailable, such as connecting them to constrained public-sector budgets or donor goals, animosity decreased. Overall, distributive inequity was the most often stated grievance, but its emotional impact was either exacerbated or mitigated by the procedural clarity and interpersonal respect that preceded the allocation.

According to one of the assistant engineers “I am not very satisfied because there is no bonus for good performance. We receive Eid (religious festival) gifts but that is not based on performance as everyone receive it.” (AE 2)

This practice may undermine employee motivation by disconnecting rewards from merit or effort, leading to perceptions of inequity and favoritism among project team members as narrated by another assistant engineer:

There are no performance-based bonuses. My organization only gives bonuses on Islamic festivals such as Eid-ul-Fitr. Which means no matter how hard you work there is no reward for us. This make things doubtful when some get more salary and positions. (AE 1)

The absence of performance-based bonuses creates a sense of under appreciation because non-monetary perks do not recognize individual effort or contribution. In project-based environments, such techniques are critical for maintaining morale and ensuring justice as mentioned by an engineer:

No bonuses are given on my performance, but accommodation, food and transport is given by the authority. However, I feel that these benefits do not adequately compensate for the lack of monetary rewards or recognition for my hard work. It would be motivating to receive bonuses based on performance, as it would acknowledge the contributions we make to the team. (HSE 1)

This is furthered by money deductions from salaries along with the denial of Eid holidays a major cultural and religious event causes discontent. Fair and culturally appropriate leave and incentive systems are critical for maintaining motivation in project situations as reported by one of the site engineers “there are no performance-based bonuses. Due to company policies, salary is sometimes deducted. Professional staff are allowed four days off per month. However, no Eid leave was granted, and my salary was deducted for taking leave during Eid.” (SE 1)

The quotation below highlights a case of perceived distributive injustice, where an employee was unfairly deprived of organizational resources by a senior. According to an assistant engineer “Yes, once I faced an issue regarding transport. My senior (Regional Engineer) took my vehicle and gave me his old one. I believe this was unfair, as those vehicles are provided by the organization for official use.” (AE 3)

2)- Procedural Injustice

Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the methods used to make choices about salary, promotion, tasking, and discipline. In the Pakistani initiatives under consideration, two procedural flaws dominated narratives:

1. The lack of a transparent promotion ladder
2. The unilateral exercise of executive discretion.

Favoritism and Personal Ties over Merit

These testimonies align with the study' concept of patronage based on kinship above codified regulations. Participants reported committees that only met on paper, performance reviews that were reduced to tick-box formalities, and grievance channels that ended with a gate-keeping personal assistant. The outcome was what one respondent referred to as "policy roulette" never knowing which clause would be invoked or waived. Arbitrary extensions to promotion timeframes,

as well as perceived partiality, damage trust and fairness. Such behaviors not only lower employee morale but also undermine organizational credibility. According to one of the field inspectors:

We have protested in the past for a proper promotion policy. Initially, the required period for promotion was three years, but it has now been increased to four years. Promotions are often based on personal relationships (PR), and unfair treatment is common. This issue is currently under discussion with the organization. (FI 1)

The local community's opposition to outsider promotions resulted in organizational decisions that favored appeasement over fairness. Replacing promotions with annual wage increases undercuts meritocracy and demotivates deserving personnel as narrated by a field inspector:

The local community does not tolerate outsiders. Every year 2 to 3 employees were promoted, and when locals found out, they wrote an application to remove them from their positions. Then the authorities removed them and introduced the policy to increase the salary package every year instead of promotion. That was a very unfair act by the authority (FI 2)".

Such favoritism breeds a sense of inequality and discouragement among employees. It reduces faith in the organization's fairness and transparency. A Site Engineer stated more clearly, "I would say the process is not fair, as promotions are often granted based on personal relationships (PR)". (SE 1)

Promotions are merit-based when headed by overseas professionals, but personal biases take precedence under local leadership. Such disparities cause dissatisfaction and undermine perceptions of justice and accountability. A Chief Surveyor said that,

In upper management, if the team is led by overseas professionals, promotions are based on progress reports. However, if Pakistanis are in charge, promotions often depend on personal preferences and mood, which makes the process unfair in the local context. (CS)

Despite employee protests, promotions remain influenced by personal relationships, not merit. Replacing career growth with salary increments fails to address the need for fair advancement opportunities according to one of the field inspectors:

Instead of promotions, they increase our salary. We are nearly 150 field inspectors, and we have protested for a proper promotion structure. Unfortunately, upper management only promotes employees based on personal relationships (PR). I would describe this as very unfair treatment. (FI 3)

Lack of Development Opportunities

The interview data shows how unfair treatment during workshop sessions and a lack of training for employees can lead to a variety of problems. The quotation below highlights a lack of professional development opportunities, with no site-related workshops provided to enhance skills. While mandatory health and safety exercises are conducted, broader training needs are overlooked. This gap limits employee growth and reflects a deficiency in organizational support for learning as stated by one of the assistant engineer:

No site-related workshops are conducted, but health and safety exercises are mandatory. The Health and Safety Engineer (HSE) is responsible for conducting them. As this properly forced and there is accountability therefore

they conduct and report such training. Besides this nothing is there development and wellbeing. (AE 2)

Also according to material engineer “no workshops for employees, but both the contractor and consultant have their own safety teams, and they conduct weekly safety workshops (ME).”

Another assistant engineer said that, “no formal training programs are conducted for professional development, but weekly safety training sessions are held for employees. (AE 3)”

The respondent believes that targeted training, such as civil-specific workshops, will better prepare personnel for their roles. Addressing this demand may enhance performance and employee happiness according to HES engineer, “I think solo training should be conducted regarding to their own fields like someone is from civil department he should be trained according to his job. Till now no workshops are being conducted.” (HSE 2)

3)- Interactional Injustice

Interactional justice describes the quality of interpersonal treatment dignity, civility, empathy in everyday interactions. For Pakistani project workers, this dimension frequently surpassed material concerns since it connected with firmly held notions of honor, mutual respect, and social peace.

Disrespectful and Insensitive Communication

According to the literature analysis, public shaming violates respect and can harm trust even more than incorrect pay decisions. The quotation below illustrates a serious violation of interactional fairness, in which the project manager is dismissive and aggressive to lower personnel. Such behavior undermines morale and promotes a hostile workplace atmosphere. According to an assistant engineer, “my senior, the Project Manager, is very rude to junior staff. He often uses abusive language and treats his subordinates like slaves. (AE 1)”

The disputes among internal stakeholders do occur, but they are context-dependent and not persistent. It highlights the need for proactive conflict resolution solutions. Addressing situational difficulties early on can assist sustain team unity and project efficiency. As narrated by an assist engineer, “yes, sometimes there are conflicts involving internal stakeholders, but these are situational and need to address as soon as possible but it is not resolved that soon and this disturb the working environment.” (AE 2)

Interactional unfairness, in which stress is used to justify disrespectful behavior, particularly by an overseas senior as stated by one of the material engineer, “sometimes, due to work stress, there are changes in tone and behavior. One of my overseas seniors is particularly disrespectful toward everyone.” (ME)

Ignoring Employee Voice

A clear violation of interactional justice, in which an employee was publicly humiliated by a senior over a delay, undermine dignity and cause emotional discomfort, particularly when reprimands are delivered in front of subordinates. The episode demonstrates a lack of empathy and professional decency. According to the field inspector,

Once I felt disrespected by my senior, I was late on my work, my senior got angry at me in front of the labor staff, I felt really bad, and I had an argument with my senior. That was a very unfair act done by my senior RE (regional engineer). (FI 2)

The data shows the difficulty of external dangers to employee well-being, notably from local community opposition demand emphasizing the necessity for improved security measures. As highlighted by a field inspector:

I was once disrespected, not by the organization, but by members of the local community. They broke into our hostel and tried to harm me and a coworker because we were not from their area. We filed a complaint, and the local police (District SHO) took immediate action. However, our organization has no measure to provide any safety in this regards. (FI 1)

Discussion

Cultural norms such as rigorous hierarchy, social conformity, and a strong sense of group identity contribute to an organisational culture in which expressing disagreement is frequently discouraged or even penalised (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Khan et al., 2016). Employees in such situations are less likely to speak up against perceived injustices, not because they agree with management decisions, but because doing so may be viewed as insubordinate or detrimental to workplace unity (Gull et al., 2020). As a result, many project team members absorb unjust treatment rather than challenging decisions, even when they perceive disrespect or exclusion from crucial procedures (Tahir & Malik, 2016). Silent animosity accumulates over time, compromising interpersonal trust, morale, and overall team cohesion. These impacts are particularly harmful in PBOs, where timely collaboration, active engagement, and mutual trust are critical to project success (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022).

According to Ghaziani et al. (2012), distributive fairness suffers when awards and recognition are given based on perceived allegiance to authority figures or personal favouritism rather than merit and performance. In project-based contexts, particularly in Pakistan, decisions are usually made behind closed doors, communicated ambiguously, or influenced by hierarchical authority rather than collective input (Tahir & Malik, 2016). This lack of procedural clarity, along with the absence of employee voice, generates mistrust and fuels suspicions of systemic prejudice (Khan et al., 2016). When people believe that rules are inconsistently enforced or that they have no way to affect outcomes, their engagement and commitment suffer. Furthermore, in Pakistan's culturally sensitive culture, where courteous and honourable communication is highly valued, interactional justice assumes essential importance. Leaders who are unpleasant, dismissive, or lack empathy during interpersonal interactions can harm team morale and weaken long-term connections (Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022; Qamar et al., 2023).

Given the interpersonal aspect of project work, interactional justice is essential to productive teamwork, particularly in temporary teams where trust must be established rapidly. A culture of respect and cooperation is fostered by leaders who take the time to check in with their team members, provide prompt feedback, and offer emotional support (Colquitt et al., 2001; Gull et al., 2020; Akter et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024). This is especially true in Pakistan, where social position and family reputation are linked to emotional dignity as well as personal identification (Qamar et al., 2023; Ghaziani et al., 2012; Khan et al., 2016).

Even under challenging circumstances, leaders who create safe spaces for criticism and dissent reduce perceptions of procedural injustice (Assefa et al., 2024; Alhaidani et al., 2024; Taamneh et al., 2024; Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Chang et al., 2024). This leads to unmet grievances, emotional exhaustion, and, in certain circumstances, hidden resistance, such as quiet disengagement or low-quality work (Pracha et al., 2017; Tahir & Malik, 2016; Chang et al., 2024). Project team leaders can serve as role models, establishing the standard for team dynamics. A culture of injustice is created when a leader acts disrespectfully, allows gossip, or exhibits partiality. These behaviours are frequently imitated by team members (Medhat, 2024; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Akter et al., 2024; Qamar et al., 2023; Alhaidani et al., 2024). On the other

hand, leaders who are courteous and encouraging foster fairness standards that endure beyond the completion of a project. It becomes strategically necessary to develop justice norms through leadership in project-based organisations when continuity is scarce (Alhaidani et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024; Unterhitzenberger & Lawrence, 2022).

Interactional justice was identified as the most culturally significant theme in both investigations. In the PBO data, as in the HEI environment, interpersonal respect, empathetic communication, and emotional sensitivity were consistently underlined as necessary for fair treatment (Iqbal et al., 2024). This demonstrates that justice is not only structural, but also relational and emotional, especially in high-context, collectivist countries such as Pakistan.

This study found that five linked elements have a significant impact on organisational justice in Pakistani project-based organisations: favouritism, communication style, behaviour, decision-making transparency, and the dominant cultural hierarchy (Ghaziani et al., 2012; Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024). The study discovered that cultural norms, including high power distance, emotional respect, and social loyalty, had a considerable impact on justice judgments (Hofstede, 2001; Tahir & Malik, 2016). These cultural characteristics frequently prevent open discussion and challenge to power, allowing prejudice and opaque decision-making to persist (Qamar et al., 2023). Furthermore, communication lacking empathy or respect heightens perceptions of injustice, even when formal processes look unbiased (Assefa et al., 2024; Medhat, 2024). The combination of these cultural and organisational components underscores the complexity of ensuring fairness in Pakistani PBOs, where emotional and relational dynamics play an essential role in justice evaluations (Nguyen-Viet & Chau, 2025; Alhaidani et al., 2024).

The study of team member experiences confirms that distributive, procedural, and interactional justice each affect perceptions of fairness differently, but interactional justice is the most emotionally and culturally significant in Pakistani project environments (Gull et al., 2020; Qamar et al., 2023). Distributive justice was regularly compromised by unequal rewards and lopsided resource distribution, resulting in unrest. Hierarchical, opaque decision-making, along with a lack of participatory techniques, jeopardised procedural justice (Tahir & Malik, 2016; Gull et al., 2020). However, interactional justice, grounded in courteous discussion and emotional recognition, sometimes served as a buffer, mitigating the adverse effects of the other two parts (Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2024; Assefa et al., 2024). Even unequal outcomes were more acceptable in emotionally sensitive countries like Pakistan when communicated with empathy and respect (Medhat, 2024; Akter et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of link dynamics on fairness perceptions (Gull et al., 2020).

Contribution of the study

This study offers several significant advantages for professional practice, policy formation, and academic theory. By providing a culturally grounded perspective on organisational justice in project-based organisations in Pakistan, the research closes a significant gap in the organisational behaviour literature. The majority of justice models in use today were developed in Western, stable, long-term organisational contexts, often ignoring the particularities of short-term, dynamic work arrangements in non-Western nations. The study challenges preconceived notions and offers a more inclusive, thorough understanding of fairness at work by situating justice within Pakistani cultural norms, such as collectivism, high power distance, emotional respect, and deference to authority. From a practical standpoint, the study provides HR specialists, team leaders, and project managers with essential insights into how their behaviour and communication methods are perceived by their colleagues. Giving team members a voice, demonstrating emotional

intelligence, or simply treating people with basic dignity can all have a significant impact on how fair an organisation is perceived. Training materials and leadership development initiatives suited to culturally diverse project environments can be developed using these findings. Organisations may also find it helpful to review their performance evaluation frameworks, communication procedures, and reward systems to make sure they meet the fairness expectations of their workforce.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of organisational justice in Pakistan's project-based enterprises. Theoretically, the study calls into question the general applicability of Western justice theories by situating organisational justice within a collectivist, high-power distance society. It broadens justice theory by emphasising how cultural norms, such as respect for authority, emotional deference, and social peace, change the dimensions of distributive, procedural, and, particularly, interactional justice in project settings. The study also incorporates relational and emotional dimensions into justice theory, promoting more culturally contingent and emotionally intelligent models of fairness. Empirically, the study includes real-time qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews and diary entries with 20 project personnel, providing valuable insights into perceptions of justice. It demonstrates how partiality, top-down decision-making, and bad interpersonal behaviour undermine team cohesion and performance. The study's diary-based methodology extends empirical methodologies by documenting changing justice experiences rather than static perceptions. These findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive leadership and justice frameworks in transitory, high-stakes team situations. Overall, the study contributes to the theoretical landscape of organisational justice while also providing practitioners with practical insights on fairer project leadership and team dynamics in culturally heterogeneous environments such as Pakistan.

Future Directions

Building on the insights and limitations of this study, future research can expand the understanding of organisational justice in several meaningful ways. One important direction is to adopt a larger, more diverse sample that includes participants from various industries, organisational levels, and regions of Pakistan. This would enhance the representativeness of the findings and enable comparative analysis across different cultural, economic, or organisational settings. Future studies could also incorporate the perspectives of project managers and organisational leaders to develop a more holistic view of how justice is practised and perceived at both ends of the power structure. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative insights with quantitative validation would also be valuable. For example, the thematic patterns identified in this study could be tested using structured surveys or justice perception scales across a broader population to assess consistency and generalizability. Longitudinal research could also provide a more profound understanding of how justice perceptions evolve over the course of a project, particularly in response to changes in leadership, team dynamics, or project stressors. In addition, comparative studies of public and private sector projects, or of urban and rural teams, could reveal how organisational type and location influence justice narratives.

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