

The Relationships between Employees' Perceptions of Organizational Justice, HR Attributions, and Affective Organizational Commitment

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Human resource management
HR attributions
Organizational justice
Organizational commitment

Received 2 March 2023

Revised 18 July 2023

Accepted 20 July 2023

Article Classification:

Research Article

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to test Nishii et al.'s (2008) HR attributions theory with respect to explaining how individual variability in HR perceptions shapes work attitudes.

Design/methodology/approach – Online surveys were sent to the organizational clients of a business consulting company operating in Turkey. Correspondents from organizations were asked to send the forms to a random group among their employees. Survey responses were received from 116 employees from 19 companies. The main and interactive effects of independent variables were tested using moderated multiple regression analyses conducted with SPSS Process macro (Hayes, 2012).

Findings – The results supported the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational justice and affective commitment. Furthermore, as expected, employees' well-being and service quality HR attributions were found to be positively related to commitment, whereas union compliance HR attribution was negatively related to commitment. Cost-cutting and exploitation HR attributions were not found to be significantly related to commitment. Lastly, it was found that the relationship between justice perceptions and organizational commitment was moderated by only one of the five types of HR attributions, namely employee exploitation attribution. Hence, the moderation hypothesis was partially supported.

Discussion – This study explained and provided empirical support for the role of employees' perceptions of causal HR attributions as an important antecedent and regulator of organizational commitment. This implies that organizations should pay attention to understanding, managing, and maintaining employees' idiosyncratic perceptions about the rationale behind the adoption of HR practices. Future research is needed to investigate other potential antecedents and outcomes of these HR attributions.

1. INTRODUCTION

HR practices are the principles and tools that are used for managing the employees in an organization (Jiang et al., 2012). While researchers concur that HR practices have a positive relationship with organizational outcomes (Combs et al., 2006), the mechanisms behind this relationship are less well understood. Employees' perceptions of human resources (HR) have received attention in the literature in terms of its role in shaping employee-related organizational outcomes (Chen and Wang, 2014; Fontinha et al., 2012; Shantz et al., 2016). A growing number of studies have begun focusing on employees' *HR attributions*—which signify what employees perceive as the aim of the HR practices in their organization (Nishii et al., 2008)—and how these perceptions shape individuals' work attitudes. For example, Hewett et al. (2019) explained that, through the implementation of HR practices, top management sends certain messages to employees, which trigger distinct employee reactions. Similarly, based on organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987), researchers have been interested in understanding the influence of employees' perception of the fairness of the organization in the implementation and distribution of HR processes on employee outcomes (Colquitt and Rodel, 2011).

The HRM process model (Nishii & Wright, 2008) has grown in popularity in the field of strategic HRM, as it describes the operational mechanism of HR practices by concentrating on variance in intended, implemented, or perceived HR practices. This concept has stressed the importance of understanding individual employees' unique perspectives of and reactions to their employers' employee management strategies (Wang et al., 2020).

Suggested Citation

Turan, E. G., Aksoy, E. (2023). The Relationships between Employees' Perceptions of Organizational Justice, HR Attributions, and Affective Organizational Commitment, *Journal of Business Research-Turk*, 15 (3), 1705-1714.

The idea of HR attributions, which signify employees' perceptions of the intentions driving their employers' adoption of HRM practices, is a crucial component of this approach (Nishii et al., 2008).

Previous research has expanded our knowledge of the role of employees' HR attributions in shaping their various work attitudes (Hewett, 2019). However, our knowledge is still quite limited in terms of how employees come to perceive the rationale behind HR practices (Van Beurden et al., 2021). Building on this existing literature, the aim of this study is to develop a model that explains the role of fairness as a precursor to HR attributions. Additionally, the study tests the premises of Nishii and Wright's (2008) process model by incorporating organizational commitment as a significant outcome variable of interest. It is argued that employees' individualized perceptions of justice and their understanding of HR practices may have a crucial impact on the formation and expression of shared sensemaking, which ultimately influences their work attitudes.

The current study aims to contribute to a still small but growing body of literature on HR process theory by explaining the theoretical relationships with the fairness literature and providing an empirical test of the effects. Moreover, the study aims to make some important applied contributions by depicting the role of employees' attributional perceptions in organizational outcomes.

The research model is illustrated in Figure 1. The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To analyze the relationship between organizational justice and effective organizational commitment.
- ii. To analyze the influence of HR attributions on affective organizational commitment.
- iii. To analyze the regulatory impact of HR attributions on the relationship between organizational justice and effective organizational commitment.

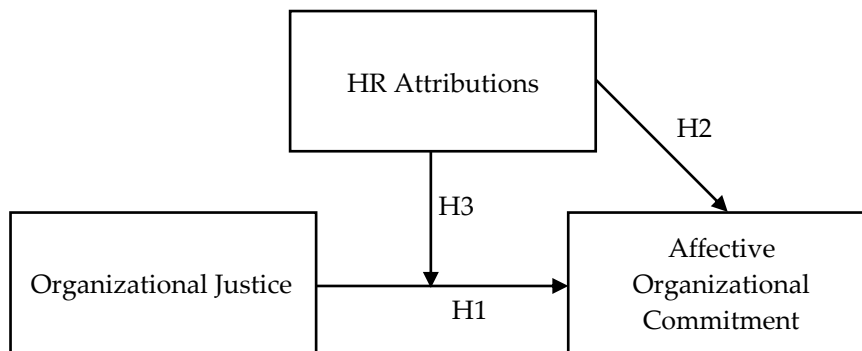


Figure 1. The study model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following section, definitions of organizational justice and organizational commitment are provided. Subsequently, a summary of the literature on the association between organizational justice and organizational commitment is presented, drawing upon prior research. The discussion then shifts to HR attributions of employees and their influence on organizational commitment, as supported by existing literature. Finally, the section concludes by examining the hypothesized moderating effect of HR attributions on the relationship between organizational justice and organizational commitment.

2.1 Organizational Justice and Organizational Commitment

Organizational justice is employees' perception of the fairness of the decision-making processes in the organization (Greenberg, 1987). Organizational justice is a construct that consists of four dimensions: distributive, procedural justice, interactional, and informational. Distributive justice is rooted in equity theory (Adams, 1965), which focuses on employees' perceived fairness in the distribution of rewards, duties, and responsibilities among the workers of the organization. Procedural justice has been defined as the fairness of the organization in the implementation of the procedures the organization (Leventhal, 1980). Individuals tend to prioritize the fairness of the procedures over the outcomes because fair procedures give them control over outcomes and make them feel valuable (Erdogan, 2002). Interactional justice refers to the perceived fairness of the supervisor's treatment during the implementation of the procedures. (Bies and Moag, 1986). Informational

justice is the organization's level of transparency in providing employees with the information they need throughout the process.

Researchers found that the overall perception of organizational justice affects various employee work attitudes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Aryee et al., 2002; Colquitt et al., 2013).

An important employee attitude that has been linked to organizational justice is organizational commitment. It represents a psychological link between the employee and the organization and has significant implications regarding an employee's intentions to stay with or leave the organization (Allen and Meyer, 1996). The most commonly studied component of this construct is affective commitment, which refers to the degree of employees' self-identification with their firm (Allen and Meyer, 1990). More specifically, this notion indicates the degree to which employees associate their personal goals with those of the organization. Under such circumstances, employees may feel more identified with and attached to their organizations. Fair treatment of employees in distributive, procedural, and interactional forms is likely to enhance employees' commitment by establishing a positive social exchange (Blau, 1964), facilitated by increased levels of trust in both the organization and the immediate supervisor (Aryee et al., 2002). Indeed, the justice-commitment relationship has been extensively studied and documented in international (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013) and Turkish employment contexts (Minibas-Poussard et al., 2017; Bağcı, 2013; Ay and Koç, 2014). In line with the theoretical models and previous findings, a positive relationship is expected between organizational justice and affective organizational commitment.

H1: Organizational justice and affective organizational commitment will be positively related.

2.2 HR Attributions and Organizational Commitment

The concept of human resources (HR) attributions was initially introduced by Nishii et al. (2008). The main argument of the HR attribution theory is that employees make certain attributions regarding why management imposes certain HR practices in the organization, and in return, these HR attributions guide employees' attitudes. Accordingly, the theory asserts that employees interpret the environmental signals regarding the meaning behind their management's adoption and implementation of HR practices based on their own characteristics, expectations, and values.

Based on Nishii et al.'s (2008) typology, HR attributions consist of 2 main dimensions: *internal* and *external* HR attributions. While *performance/service quality improvement, employee well-being improvement, cost reduction, and employee exploitation* are categorized as internal HR attributions, *union compliance* is an external attribution. In service quality and employee well-being HR attributions (i.e., *commitment-focused HR attributions*), employees perceive that HR practices exist for the purpose of enhancing their well-being or performance. When employees high levels of have service quality and employee well-being HR attributions, they believe that their management values them and their interests are aligned with the management's interests. Therefore, employees are more likely to embrace their organizations, which in turn influences their attachment and identification with their organizations. On the other hand, in cost-reduction and exploitation HR attributions (i.e., *control-focused HR attributions*), employees think that the management's implementation of HR practices has the intention of reducing costs, and profiting from employees as much as possible. Such perceptions create a misalignment of interests, even potentially creating conflict between employees and the employer. Indeed, such perceptions of negative intentions are likely to reduce employees' level of commitment to their organizations (Hewett et al., 2019). Lastly, when employees believe that their organization is only adopting certain HR practices to comply with union demands, those practices would be likely to be seen as disingenuous and ostensible. Hence, such beliefs would be associated with lower levels of commitment. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Employees' HR attributions will be related to their affective organizational commitment. Employees' HR attributions of well-being and service quality attributions will be positively related to affective organizational commitment whereas exploitation and union compliance attributions will be negatively related to affective organizational commitment.

1.3.3 Moderating Role of HR Attributions on Organizational Justice and Commitment Relationship

In addition to the general effects mentioned earlier, it is anticipated that HR attributions will moderate the relationship between justice perceptions and commitment. The nature of these employee attributions is expected to either strengthen or weaken the association between organizational justice and affective commitment, depending on the specific type of HR attribution. Specifically, when employees perceive their managers adopting fair employment practices, their commitment to the organization is likely to be further strengthened if they also believe that these practices aim to improve employee well-being and performance. Therefore, it is hypothesized that attributions related to employee well-being and service quality/performance will enhance the positive effect on commitment.

Conversely, employees are likely to interpret the organizational efforts to establish fairness more cynically and are likely to question the authenticity of those efforts if they have generally negative HR attributions, i.e., cost reduction, employee exploitation, and union compliance. Thus, these negative feelings and thoughts regarding their organization are expected to weaken the relationship between organizational justice and affective commitment. In a similar line of arguments, Hewett et al. (2019) found that organizational cynicism moderated the influence of distributive and procedural fairness on HR attributions. High levels of cynicism were generally found to buffer the effects of fairness on control-oriented HR attributions while they had a strengthening effect on external attributions. Hence, extending these mechanisms to the justice-commitment relationship, we hypothesize the following:

H3: Employees' HR attributions will moderate the relationship between organizational justice and affective organizational commitment such that:

(a) Employees' HR attributions of service quality and employee well-being will strengthen the relationship between organizational justice and affective commitment.

(b) Employees' HR attributions of union compliance, cost reduction, and employee exploitation will weaken the relationship between organizational justice and affective commitment.

2. METHOD

The study method in terms of data collection process, participants, and the measures used were as follows.

2.1 Participants

The study was carried out by contacting the organizational clients of a business consulting company. Initially, the companies were contacted by phone, and a brief explanation of the study was provided. The firms were then requested to randomly select 10 employees from different departments and provide their email contacts to the researchers. Subsequently, each employee received an informative email containing details about the study and a link to an online survey. In total, 116 employees completed the online survey.

The sample includes firms from various industries such as transportation, machinery, and chemistry located in Istanbul, Turkey. The sample consists of small- and medium-sized firms with the total number of employees ranging from 150 to 350. This diverse sample allowed for a broader perspective on the influence of the employment context across different industries.

Demographically, 46.1% of the sample respondents were female. The mean age of respondents was 34.2 ($SD = 7.58$), ranging from 21 to 60. The mean organizational tenure was 68.8 months ($SD = 58.8$, min = 1.50, max = 267).

2.1 Measures

For all study measures, a five-point Likert response format was used (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). All items are presented in Appendix 1.

Organizational justice is measured with seven items that are modified from Colquitt (2001). The items were specifically selected and modified to reflect the fairness of HR practices.

HR attributions were measured following Nishi et al.'s (2008) items. Five different types of attributions were measured: enhancing service quality; cost-cutting; promoting employee well-being; employee exploitation; and, complying with union requirements.

Affective organizational commitment was measured using four items from Mayer and Allen (1990).

To minimize potential confounding effects, the effects of several demographic factors—including age, tenure, and gender—were controlled for, as these factors have been known to be related to employee attitudes.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To examine whether the hypothesized theoretical factor structures of the study measures were supported by the collected data, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Jamovi statistical analysis software. The factor loadings and model fit information were analyzed to assess the compatibility between the observed data and the expected factor structures. By conducting CFA, insights into the validity of the measurement model were obtained, and the degree of alignment between the collected data and the hypothesized factor structure was evaluated. The standardized loadings of the items in the final model ranged between .55 and .70 and were all statistically significant (all $p \leq .01$).

The model fit of the study was assessed using Hu and Bentler's (1999) criteria, which suggest that a model is considered to have an acceptable fit if two or more of the following fit indices are "close to" specific thresholds: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) close to .90, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) close to .06, and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) close to .05. As shown in Table 1, the reliability and model fit statistics of the overall measurement models demonstrated acceptable levels of fit to the collected data.

Table 1. Alpha Reliabilities and CFA Model Fit Statistics of Study Variables

| Variable | α | χ^2 | df | χ^2/df | CFI | RMSEA | SRMR |
|------------------------|----------|----------|----|-------------|-----|-------|------|
| HR Attributions | .64 | 15.2 | 5 | 3.04 | .91 | .12 | .07 |
| Organizational Justice | .87 | 29.1 | 14 | 2.08 | .96 | .09 | .04 |
| Affective Commitment | .86 | 12.9 | 2 | 6.45 | .96 | .21 | .03 |

3.2 Descriptives and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between study variables are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. Service Quality Attribution | 4.29 | .82 | — | | | | | |
| 2. Cost-cutting Attribution | 3.18 | 1.06 | -.08 | — | | | | |
| 3. Employee Well-being Attribution | 4.19 | .80 | .67** | -.11 | — | | | |
| 4. Employee Exploitation Attribution | 2.16 | 1.13 | -.33** | .16 | -.41** | — | | |
| 5. Union Attribution | 2.57 | 1.19 | -.26** | .32** | -.26** | .28** | — | |
| 6. Organizational Justice | 3.89 | .69 | .58** | -.16 | .67** | -.42** | -.23* | — |
| 7. Affective Commitment | 4.25 | .66 | .69** | -.15 | .62** | -.43** | -.37** | .71** |

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

3.3 Hypothesis Testing

The study hypotheses were tested using moderated multiple regression analyses conducted with SPSS Process macro (Hayes, 2012). Five models were tested for each of the different HR attribution types. Results are presented in Table 3. Organizational justice was found to be significant and positively related to the affective organizational commitment in all models. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Service and well-being HR attributions were found to be significant and positively related to affective organizational commitment ($\beta_{\text{Service}} = .31$, $\beta_{\text{Wellbeing}} = .24$, $p < .01$). The main effect of external union HR attribution was also significant and positive ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). On the other hand, cost-cutting and exploitation HR attributions were not significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported for the service, well-being, and external HR attributions.

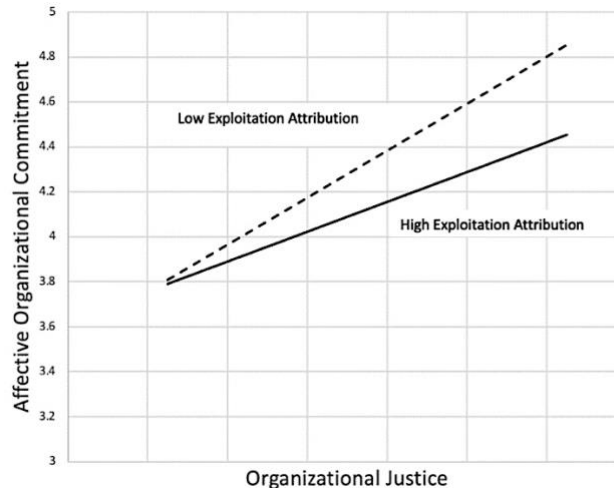
Only one of the five justice×HR attribution interactions, —i.e., employee exploitation— was significant ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). The nature of the interaction was investigated by plotting the justice-commitment relationship at values one standard deviation above and below the mean exploitation attribution. As seen in Figure 2 and in line with our expectations, the slope of the relationship was weaker when exploitation attribution was high compared to low. Hence, hypothesis 3 was partially supported only for employee exploitation attribution.

Table 3: Results of the Regression Analysis for Affective Organizational Commitment

| Variables | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | |
|---------------------------|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|
| | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE |
| Justice of HR System | .40** | .06 | .46** | .07 | .63** | .06 | .59** | .06 | .57** | .06 |
| Attributions | | | | | | | | | | |
| Service (AttService) | .31** | .05 | | | | | | | | |
| Well Being (AttWell) | | | .24** | .07 | | | | | | |
| Cost Cutting (AttCost) | | | | | -.02 | .04 | | | | |
| Exploitation (AttExploit) | | | | | | | -.09 | .04 | | |
| External (AttExt) | | | | | | | | | -.11* | .03 |
| Interactions | | | | | | | | | | |
| Justice x AttService | -.09 | .07 | | | | | | | | |
| Justice x AttWell | | | .04 | .06 | | | | | | |
| Justice x AttCost | | | | | -.01 | .05 | | | | |
| Justice x AttExploit | | | | | | | -.11* | .05 | | |
| Justice x AttExt | | | | | | | | | .09 | .05 |
| Controls | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age | -.00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | -.00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | -.00 | .00 |
| Gender | -.08 | .07 | -.07 | .08 | -.03 | .08 | -.08 | .08 | -.05 | .09 |
| Tenure | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| R ² | .6585 | | .5846 | | .5436 | | .5823 | | .5803 | |

Note. $N = 116$. Unstandardized regression coefficients are provided. All variables were grand mean centered. * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

Figure 2: Plot of Significant Moderating Effect



4. DISCUSSION

In this paper, organizational justice and HR attribution theories were used to investigate the role of employees’ perceptions of the employment context on their affective organizational commitment. The results provided support for the premises of process-based HR theory (Nishii and Wright, 2008), which suggests that employees’ idiosyncratic perceptions regarding HR practices influence their work attitudes. Specifically, the data demonstrated that employees’ perceptions of justice as well as their causal attributions regarding why

certain practices are adopted (i.e., for improving service, employee well-being, exploitation, or union compliance) impact their level of affective commitment to their organizations. The findings confirm that employees who attribute the adoption of HR practices to the aim of enhancing service quality and/or increasing employees' well-being generally experience higher levels of commitment. In contrast to the expectations, attributions of cost-cutting were not found to have a significant influence on commitment. This could be because the cost-cutting intentions of the organization may be perceived by the employees as not being harmful to themselves. Employees may think that it would be acceptable or legitimate for an organization to consider cost-cutting as a way to increase profits as well as contribute to the growth and development of the organization.

Even though exploitation HR attribution was not found to have a significant main effect on commitment, examining the interactive relationships uncovers a more finely nuanced relationship. Exploitation HR attribution had a buffering effect on the relationship between organizational justice and commitment. In other words, organizations' attempts to establish fairness and justice during employment (i.e., distributing rewards equitably, establishing transparency, allowing for employee voice during decision-making, etc.) are interpreted less favorably by employees who have a generally cynical view of the employment relationship.

The findings contribute to the growing literature on HR attributions and provide empirical support for their role in shaping employees' work attitudes. Building on the prior work that highlights the vital role of employees' attributions of HR play in shaping work attitudes (e.g. Chen and Wang, 2014; Fontinha et al., 2012; Shantz et al., 2016), this study contributes to the growing literature by empirically demonstrating how these effects are interrelated to more general perceptions of employment practices, such as justice during employment decisions.

The current study sheds light on the attributional processes as an individual-level regulatory lens through which employees' inclinations are strengthened or weakened. The findings reveal that high exploitation weakens and low exploitation HR attribution strengthens the organizational justice-commitment relationship. This is an important mechanism that provides a more comprehensive understanding of work attitudes and the attitudinal consequences of HR in organizations. In essence, the findings suggest that it is not sufficient for organizations to solely adopt and implement certain practices (such as fair and equitable employment), but they also need to be attuned to the long-established implicit assumptions among their employees regarding why those practices are adopted in the first place. Existing theories on causal HR attributions stress that such perceptions are rooted in the comprehensive messages engendered by the entire employment system and practices through the cues, signals, and stimuli emitted by the employers throughout the employment relationship, rather than its isolated components (Wang et al., 2020). Accordingly, employees as sensemakers, interpret the underlying meaning behind numerous events (which they selectively pay attention to) and respond in idiosyncratically different ways, even to the same practices. Furthermore, these perceptual processes are socially constructed, meaning that sensemaking takes place in a collective manner, as indicated by the social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Hence, organizations have to pay attention to the social context they create by building effective systems that send strong, consistent signals that guide employees' individual and collective interpretation of organizational context (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004).

4.1 Limitations and Recommendations For Future Research

The current research is limited in its scope as it only focuses on justice perceptions and their impact on commitment. More research is needed to uncover how HR attributions interact with other organizational characteristics to shape employee attitudes and behaviors. Future research may also benefit from more longitudinal and multilevel research designs to test causal relationships that reflect the embeddedness of individuals within teams and organizations. These would provide a complex and comprehensive understanding of how employees' causal attributions influence individual and collective outcomes.

The current research was conducted using data from various sectors rather than focusing on a particular industry in order to test a broader perspective on the influence of the employment context across a wide range of organizations. This contributes to the generalizability and ecological validity of the findings, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how perceptions and commitment operate across different organizational contexts. However, it is important to note that each industry may also have unique characteristics, practices, and norms, which may benefit from more contextualized and in-depth analysis. For

example, the service industry may prioritize customer satisfaction, while the manufacturing industry may focus on efficiency and productivity. Factors such as regulatory environments, market conditions, and competitive landscapes can also influence the relationship between employment context and employees' work attitudes. Hence, future research is encouraged to study more industry-specific effects to uncover sector-specific challenges, opportunities, and best practices related to affective organizational commitment.

4.2 Implications for Practice

The study emphasizes the significance of organizational justice and HR attributions in shaping affective organizational commitment. Practitioners can focus on establishing fair and transparent employment practices and fostering a positive perception among employees regarding the adoption of HR practices. By addressing employees' perceptions of justice and attributions, organizations can enhance commitment levels and create a more positive work environment.

Organizations should pay special attention to employees' perceptions of the employment context. This includes understanding how employees attribute the adoption of HR practices and addressing any misconceptions or negative attributions. By proactively managing employee perceptions and addressing concerns, organizations can mitigate potential negative effects on commitment and foster a more positive perception of the employment context. This is only possible through clear and open communication regarding HR practices and decision-making processes. If the rationale behind HR practices is communicated, this can ensure that employees can identify with the intentions behind these practices. Increasing transparency and sharing information liberally can help build trust and reduce cynicism, positively influencing affective commitment. For example, to ensure employee buy-in and minimize potential negative effects on commitment, organizations can communicate the rationale behind their cost-cutting actions.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study validates the premises of Nishii et al.'s (2008) HR attributions theory and highlights the importance of organizational justice and HR attributions in shaping employees' commitment. The findings have practical implications for organizations, emphasizing the need for fair and transparent HR practices and effective communication. By addressing employees' perceptions and attributions, organizations can foster a positive work environment and enhance commitment levels, leading to a more committed workforce.

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Appendix A: Measures of Organizational Justice, HR Attributions, and Affective Organizational Commitment

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|-------------------------------------|---|
| Organizational Justice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The duties and responsibilities are distributed fairly across employees. • The privileges and rewards given to employees are commensurate with the effort shown. • Rewards are given to people who really deserve them. • When decisions about employees are made they are given the right to object. • The management does not show favoritism toward anyone. • When decisions about employees are made they are adequately informed. • Employees are always treated with dignity and respect. |
| HR Attributions | <p>The main aim of HR practices in this organization is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing a good quality service to the customers. • Showing employees that they are valued and promoting their well-being. • Cutting the costs. • Exploiting employees by making them work more. • Meeting the requirements of unions. |
| Affective Organizational Commitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this company. • This company has a great deal of personal meaning for me. • I feel strong sense of belonging to my organization. • I feel like ‘part of the family’ at my organization. |