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Article

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Integrating Fairness Evaluations into Social Comparison Processes: The Construct of Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS)

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Abstract

This study incorporates fairness evaluations into social comparison processes and proposes a new construct, namely Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS). FRPOS captures an employee's belief that it is fair to receive higher organizational support than his/her coworkers. The effects of FRPOS on intent to quit through Perceived Organizational Support (POS) are examined. Moreover, this study investigates whether Relative Perceived Organizational Support (RPOS) moderates the relationship between FRPOS and subsequent employee reactions. Based on a field study in which 289 employees took part, the findings indicate that FRPOS exerts a statistically significant positive effect on intent to quit, while POS can only partially explain such an effect. RPOS was found to moderate (weaken) the negative relationship between FRPOS and POS, thus affecting the ability of POS to mediate the FRPOS-intent to quit relationship (moderated mediation). These findings suggest that employees seek to understand whether they deserve relatively better treatment than their coworkers and react positively only when they actually receive it. Generally, this study has significant practical implications, proposing that organizations and HR managers should pay attention not only to "objective" fairness, but also to "subjective" aspects of fairness, as perceived by employees.

Keywords: social comparison, fairness, perceived organizational support, intent to quit

1. INTRODUCTION

The central question in Organizational Behaviour literature is the need to understand what motivates employees to remain loyal to their organization and express better attitudes and behaviors within organizational settings. Employees personify their organization and form an “interpersonal” relationship with it, which is important for their subsequent reactions (Eisenberger, Jones, Aselage, & Sucharski, 2004; Levinson, 1965). Within this relationship, employees do not evaluate the benefits and the treatment they receive in isolation, but they take into account the treatment of their coworkers in order to make fairness evaluations (Adams, 1965; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Le & Pan, 2021). Social comparisons are an integral aspect of fairness (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007) and have a motivational power, sparking employees’ reciprocity (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010).

According to Equity Theory, individuals feel distress when they perceive inequity between what they give and what they receive (Adams, 1965; Huseman, Hatfield & Miles, 1987). Research findings have strongly supported the rationale of Equity Theory indicating that employees who perceive fairness express positive attitudes and behaviours towards their organization, while those perceiving unfairness express negative reactions, thus restoring the balance in their relationship with their organization (Ambrose, Rice, & Mayer, 2021; Clercq, Kundi, Sardar, Shahid, 2021; Colquitt, Scott, Rodell, Long, Zapata, Conlon, & Wesson 2013; Khaola & Rambe, 2021; Khattak, Zollian, & Muhammad, 2021).

Perceptions of fairness seem to be more important than objective equality per se, given that employees evaluate fairness subjectively and seek symbolic and existential recognition within their collective (Morand & Merriman, 2012; Rea, Froehle, Masterson, Stettler, Fermann, & Pancioli, 2021). An important aspect of this symbolic recognition has to do with employees’ relative treatment. Recent research has confirmed such a view, indicating that employees evaluate their relative treatment and reciprocate their organization when they perceive relatively better standing within their workplace (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019). Doing so, they manifest their ubiquitous tendency to compare themselves with others in order to gain personal insights (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011).

This study argues that relative treatment is one of the factors that employees take into account in order to form their fairness perceptions. More specifically, integrating the rationale of Equity and Social Comparison Theory, this study suggests that employees evaluate whether they consider it fair to receive relatively better treatment than their coworkers.

Until now literature has focused on the fact that employees form perceptions of organizational support (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2004), as well as perceptions of relative organizational support (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019). This study extends the aforementioned stream of research and proposes that employees form perceptions of whether they consider it fair to receive high relative organizational support. To do so, this paper introduces a new construct, namely Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS). FRPOS builds on the rationale of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Relative Perceived Organizational Support (RPOS) and extends the literature by adding the dimension of fairness to RPOS.

The paper also examines the effects of FRPOS on subsequent employee reactions. It suggests that FRPOS will act as a wariness of fairness (fear of not receiving the relative organizational support employees consider fair to receive) and not as an actual manifestation of fairness. Acting as a wariness, FRPOS is expected to make employees conserve their positive attitudes and reactions until they receive the relative support they consider fair to receive.

This study contributes to the existing literature in two main ways. First of all, it adds to a better understanding of what is considered fair, despite not being equal. The debate about “equality” versus “equity” has featured in the equity literature (Morand & Merriman, 2012; Rea et al., 2021). This study aspires to contribute to the examination of the aforementioned issue, by investigating whether employees seek to evaluate whether it is fair to receive more support than their coworkers and whether they form their reactions based on this evaluation.

Second, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the reciprocation activated by differentiated treatment in organizational settings. Until now research has indicated that employees respond positively to relatively better standing (Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008; Hu & Liden, 2013; Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vardaman, Allen, Otondo, Hancock, Shore, & Rogers, 2016; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). However, research has also indicated that at the supervisor-subordinate level differentiated treatment provokes negative reactions if not accompanied by a justice climate (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010). This study further explores this stream of research by focusing on relative treatment at the organizational level and by examining a complementary aspect of the employees’ fairness perceptions. Instead of exploring the general evaluation of the justice climate, it directly examines employees’ fairness wariness about their relatively better treatment. Doing so, we gain a more

complete understanding of the conditions under which employees positively react to their relative standing.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. The concept of Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS)

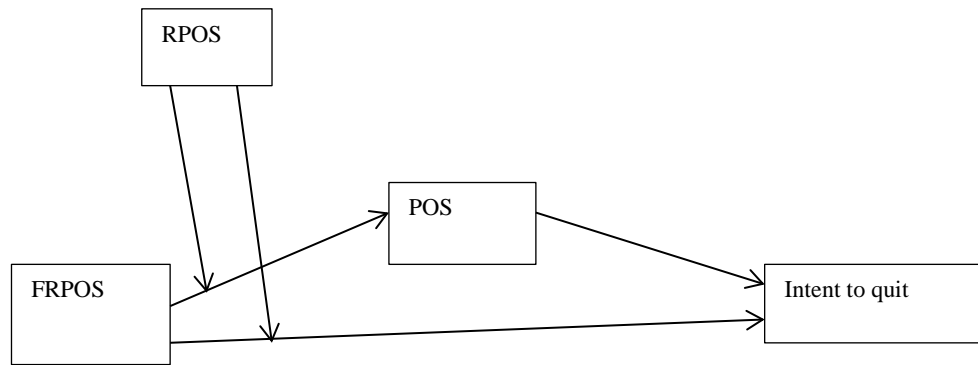
Organizational justice could be defined as perceived fairness within organizational settings and has been found to spark employees' reciprocity within organizational settings (Adamovic, 2021; Ambrose et al., 2021; Colquitt et al., 2013; Mehmood, Malik, Saood Akhtar, Faraz, & Memon, 2021). Given that perceptions of fairness lie in the eye of the beholder, it is important to understanding how employees form not only their evaluations of fairness, but also their wariness of fairness. Within the workplace employees inevitably obtain social information that enables them to compare themselves with others (Goodman & Haisley, 2007). Making social comparisons and positively evaluating relative better organizational treatment (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vidyarthi et al., 2010), employees are expected to be wary about the relative support they receive and its fairness. Based on this rationale, this study suggests the construct of Fairness of Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS), which captures employees' belief that they deserve to receive more organizational support relatively to their coworkers. In other words, FRPOS has to do with employees' perceptions of fairness regarding the relative treatment they deserve to receive within the workplace.

FRPOS draws on equity and social comparison theory. It is based on the assumption that individuals make social comparisons in order to gain insights into themselves and understand their value within the collective (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Corcoran et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2007). Moreover, it is based on the rationale of equity theory. Adams (1965) has proposed that in order to perceive equity between two parties, individuals should receive a normatively appropriate rate of return in their social exchange. "This is defined in terms of the ratio of benefits one receives (i.e., outcomes) relative to the contributions one has made (i.e., inputs) as compared to the corresponding ratio of some referent other" (Greenberg et al., 2007, p. 23). Social comparisons and fairness judgments seem to be intertwined (Austin, McGinn, & Susmilch, 1980).

Despite the fact that the evaluation of fairness is comparative in nature (Greenberg et al., 2007), as well as the fact that social comparison and fairness seem to predict employee attitudes and behaviours (Arnéguy, Ohana, & Stinglhamber, 2020; DeConinck, 2010; Hooper & Martin, 2008; Hu & Liden, 2013; Sen, Mert, & Abubakar, 2021; Panicker & Sharma, 2020; Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vidyarthi et al., 2010; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002), until now there has been no direct integration of the dimension of fairness into comparative evaluations. Research has focused on the role of the justice climate in differentiated treatment at the supervisor-subordinate dyad (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010). However, it has paid no attention to fairness evaluations regarding the social comparisons per se.

The concept of FRPOS addresses this limitation by incorporating fairness perceptions into relative organizational support and proposes that employees compare themselves with their coworkers, building expectations regarding their relative standing. FRPOS extends previous literature suggesting that employees evaluate not only the organizational support they receive (POS) (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and their relative organizational support (RPOS) (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019), but also examine whether they deserve it.

This study suggests that FRPOS, making employees wary about their relatively better treatment increases their "threshold" of fairness. More specifically, it proposes that FRPOS will lead to decreased perceptions of organizational support (POS) and as such to higher intent to quit. This study also suggests that perceptions of relative organizational support (RPOS) will weaken the negative effects of FRPOS, indicating that employees' fairness expectations have been successfully met. Figure 1 depicts the research model proposed.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

2.2. Hypotheses

2.2.1. FRPOS, POS and intent to quit

Combining the social comparison and fairness literature, this study expects that employees who believe that it is fair for them to receive better treatment than their coworkers will have high wariness about their relative treatment. Employees conserve their positive attitudes and behaviours until receiving the fairness they think they deserve. Based on this rationale, we expect that employees with high FRPOS will perceive the organizational treatment as lower given their fairness expectations and the strong association between perceptions of fairness and perceptions of support (Baran, Shanock, & Miller, 2012; DeConinck, 2010; Sen et al., 2021; Wayne et al., 2002). This wariness about relatively better treatment may harm employees' self-evaluation, self-enhancement and self-improvement associated with social comparisons (Wood, 1989) and may make them feel reserved regarding organizational treatment. Based on the above we expect that:

Hypothesis 1: FRPOS is negatively related to POS

Moreover, this study suggests that FRPOS will make employees more willing to leave the organization. Having a higher "threshold" of fairness, employees with high FRPOS realize a discrepancy between what they expect and what they receive (until their expectations are finally met) and as such they may feel that their exchange relationship with their organization is of low quality. According to social exchange theory, employees who perceive an exchange relationship of low quality tend to express worse attitudes and behaviours towards their organization, trying to return the unfavourable organizational treatment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 2004). Based on this rationale, we expect that high FRPOS will increase employees' intent to quit.

This study suggests that the positive effects of FRPOS on employees' intent to quit will be explained by POS. Given a) the negative effects of FRPOS on employees' POS, b) the positive effects of FRPOS on employees' intent to quit, as well as c) the negative effects of POS on employees' intent to quit (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Karagonlar, Eisenberger, & Aselage, 2015; Mignonac & Richebé, 2013; Muse & Wadsworth, 2012), this study proposes that POS will mediate the effects of FRPOS on intent to quit. Based on the above we expect that:

Hypothesis 2: FRPOS is positively related to intent to quit

Hypothesis 3: POS mediates the effects of FRPOS on intent to quit

2.2.2. RPOS as moderator of the effects of FRPOS on intent to quit

It is suggested that RPOS moderates the effects of FRPOS on employee reactions. RPOS captures a focal employee's perception that he/she receives more support than his/her coworkers (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019). This means that high RPOS indicates that employees' expectations regarding their relatively better treatment are fulfilled. This can transform employees' reactions to FRPOS. According to social exchange theory employees who believe that the organization provides economic and socio-emotional benefits and treats them in a fair way express better attitudes and behaviours trying to reciprocate the favourable treatment (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Colquitt et al., 2013; Lemmon & Wayne, 2015; Mignonac & Richebé, 2013; Tran, Hien, & Baker, 2021; Wayne et al., 2002).

Based on the rationale of equity and social exchange theory, this study suggests that RPOS will weaken the negative effects of FRPOS on employees' reactions. High wariness associated with FRPOS

can make employees feel unfairness and perceive their exchange relationship with the organization as lower quality, thus decreasing their POS and increasing their intent to quit. However, RPOS indicates that employees finally receive the relatively better treatment they consider fair to receive. As such, in the case of high RPOS employees' exchange with the organization is successful and they do not have any reason to express negative reactions as a response to FRPOS. Based on the above we expect that:

Hypothesis 4: RPOS moderates (weakens) the negative relationship between FRPOS and POS

Hypothesis 5: RPOS moderates (weakens) the positive relationship between FRPOS and intent to quit

Taking into account a) the proposed mediating effect of POS on the FRPOS-intent to quit relationship, as well as b) the proposed moderating effect of RPOS on the FRPOS-POS relationship, we expect that RPOS moderates the indirect FRPOS-intent to quit relationship. When employees perceive high RPOS, they do not translate FRPOS into low POS, because they believe that their organization provides the relatively better treatment they deserve. On the other hand, employees who perceive low RPOS translate FRPOS into low POS and high intent to quit. The mediating role of POS seems to be dependent on RPOS, which renders it a weaker or a stronger mediator. This means that the "path" linking FRPOS to intent to quit through POS is dependent on RPOS. Under high RPOS this path is weaker, while under low RPOS this path is stronger. Based on the above we expect that:

Hypothesis 6: The mediating power of POS regarding the FRPOS-intent to quit relationship is moderated by RPOS (it is weaker under high RPOS).

3. METHOD

3.1. Sample and data collection

To test the hypotheses a field study was conducted, in which 289 employees working in various organizations of Greece took part. Eighty-eight undergraduate students provided 396 names and contact details of employees to participate in the survey. Of these 396 employees 294 agreed to participate in the survey and returned the questionnaires (a participation rate of about 74%). Out of the 294 returned questionnaires, 289 were usable and were included in the analyses. Of those 289 employees, 116 were male (40.1%), 169 were female (58.5%) and 4 (1.4%) did not specify their gender. Respondents had an average age of 38.9 years (SD= 11.35), an average total work experience of 15.49 years (SD= 9.79) and an average tenure in the current organization of 10.34 years (SD= 8.70). Among the respondents, 37 (12.8%) reported an upper management position, 89 (30.8%) reported a middle management position, 38 (13.1%) reported a lower management position, 120 (41.5%) reported a non-managerial position and 5 (1.7%) did not report their position.

3.2. Measures

Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS): FRPOS was measured with six items developed for the purposes of the current study. The items were written to capture the extent to which employees believe that it would be fair to receive more support than their coworkers. The items were written to parallel the scale of RPOS (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019) and POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

The items were: "I believe that it is fair of my company to consider more strongly my own goals and values, because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers", "I believe that it is fair of my company to help me more than my coworkers when I have a problem and I need help, because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers", "I believe that it is fair of my company to care more about me than about my coworkers, because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers", "I believe that it is fair of my company to help me more than my coworkers when I need a special favour, because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers", "I believe that it is fair of my company to care about my opinions more than about my coworkers", because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers" and "I believe that it is fair of my organization to care about my well-being more than about my coworkers", because I contribute to the workplace more than my coworkers". A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed (Cronbach α = 0.96).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS): POS was measured with 6 items of the scale of Eisenberger et al. (1986). Sample items included: "My organization really cares about my well-being" and "My organization strongly considers my goals and values". Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Cronbach α = 0.90).

Intent to quit: Intent to quit was measured with the 3-item scale of Michaels and Spector (1982) measuring how often somebody thinks about quitting, how much somebody would like to quit and how likely it is that they will quit within the next year. A 5-point Likert scale was used with Cronbach $\alpha = 0.82$.

Relative Perceived Organizational Support (RPOS): RPOS was measured with five items of the scale of Tsachouridi and Nikandrou (2019). Sample items included: “Compared to my coworkers I consider that my organization shows more concern for me” and “Compared to my coworkers I consider that my organization helps me more when I have a problem and I need help”. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.88$).

3.3. Validation of the measurement model

Before testing the Hypotheses, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using LISREL and maximum likelihood estimation was conducted. CFA included all the constructs (FRPOS, POS, intent to quit, RPOS) in order to examine the validity of the whole measurement model. Fit indices indicated an acceptable fit of the measurement model (Chi-square= 428.95, $df = 164$, NFI= 0.94, NNFI= 0.95, CFI= 0.96, IFI= 0.96, RMSEA= 0.075, SRMR= 0.054). Each construct had convergent and discriminant validity as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct surpassed 0.50 and was greater than the squared correlation between this construct and any other. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlations among constructs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Pearson Correlations among the constructs

		Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5
1	FRPOS	2.51	0.89	(0.96)	----	----	---	---
2	POS	3.59	0.74	-0.18**	(0.90)	---	---	---
3	Intent to quit	1.91	0.86	0.15*	-0.37**	(0.82)	---	---
4	RPOS	2.64	0.67	0.47**	0.08	0.03	(0.88)	---
5	Age	38.9	11.35	0.12	-0.19**	-0.21**	-0.01	---
6	Hierarchy (1= upper management, 2= middle management, 3= lower management, 4= non-management)	---	---	-0.01	-0.04	0.04	-0.03	-0.08
Numbers in parentheses represent the reliabilities of the constructs								
** $p < 0.01$								
* $p < 0.05$								

To reduce common method variance respondents' anonymity was protected and verbal labels for each point of the scales were provided (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The single-factor measurement model indicated an unacceptable fit and could not converge (Chi-square= 4226.59, $df = 170$, NFI= 0.63, NNFI= 0.60, CFI= 0.64, IFI= 0.64, RMSEA= 0.29, SRMR= 0.45), thus alleviating concerns regarding the existence of common method variance.

4. RESULTS

To test the Hypotheses the bootstrapping technique proposed by Hayes (2013) was employed (PROCESS macro, model 4 for mediation and model 8 for moderated mediation). FRPOS was the independent variable, POS was the mediator, intent to quit was the dependent variable and RPOS was the moderator. The items of each construct were averaged and their composite scores in the analyses were used. Initially gender, age, hierarchical position, total tenure (in years) and tenure in the current organization (in years) were used as control variables. As only age and hierarchical position exerted a statistically significant effect on the variables of interest, only these variables were used as controlled variables in the subsequent analyses.

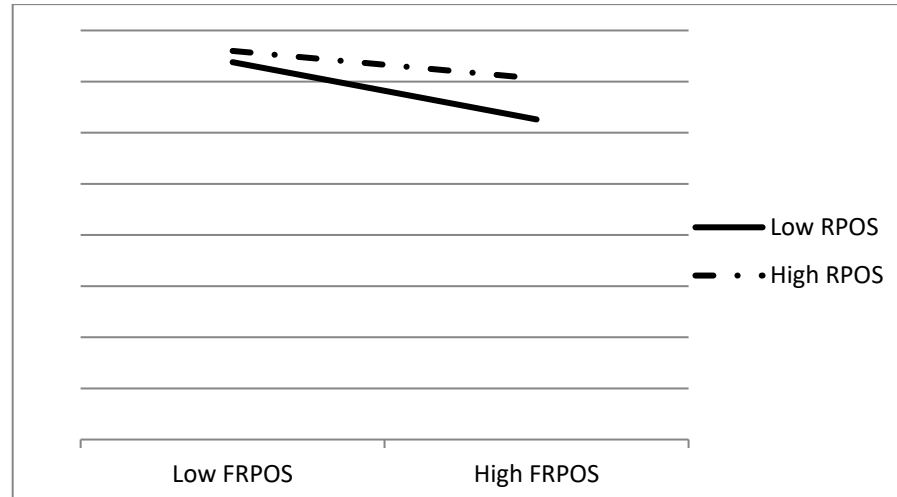
The results of bootstrapping (model 4 of PROCESS macro) (Table 2) indicate that FRPOS is positively related to intent to quit ($b = 0.18$, $t = 3.28$, $p < 0.01$) (Hypothesis 2 supported). Moreover, FRPOS has a statistically significant negative relationship with POS ($b = -0.16$, $t = -3.33$, $p < 0.01$) (Hypothesis 1 supported). Additionally, the analysis indicates that the mediator (POS) has a statistically significant negative relationship with intent to quit ($b = -0.49$, $t = -7.41$, $p < 0.001$). After controlling for POS, the effect of FRPOS on intent to quit decreases but remains statistically significant ($b = 0.11$, $t = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect of FRPOS on intent to quit through POS is statistically significant, as the confidence intervals of this indirect effect do not include zero (Hypothesis 3 supported).

Table 2. Mediation and Moderated Mediation for the FRPOS-intent to quit relationship through POS (RPOS as moderator)

Model 4 (mediation)			
	Beta	t-test	R ²
			0.08***
FRPOS on intent to quit	0.18**	3.28	
			0.13***
FRPOS on POS	-0.16**	-3.33	
			0.24***
POS on intent to quit controlling for FRPOS	-0.49***	-7.41	
FRPOS on intent to quit controlling for POS	0.11*	2.06	
Unconditional Indirect effect of FRPOS on intent to quit through POS = 0.08 , 95% bias corrected confidence intervals [0.03, 0.13]			
Model 8 (moderated mediation)			
			0.17***
FRPOS on POS controlling for RPOS and the interaction (FRPOSxRPOS)	-0.23***	-4.40	
RPOS on POS controlling for FRPOS and the interaction (FRPOSxRPOS)	0.19**	2.73	
Interaction (FRPOSxRPOS) on POS controlling for FRPOS and RPOS	0.12*	2.10	
			0.24***
POS on intent to quit controlling for FRPOS, RPOS and the interaction (FRPOSxRPOS)	-0.49***	-7.30	
FRPOS on intent to quit controlling for POS, RPOS and the interaction (FRPOSxRPOS)	0.10	1.73	
RPOS on intent to quit controlling for FRPOS, RPOS and the interaction (FRPOSxRPOS)	0.00	0.01	
Interaction (FRPOSxRPOS) on intent to quit controlling for FRPOS, POS and RPOS	0.03	0.53	
Conditional Indirect effect of FRPOS on intent to quit through POS			
a) at low RPOS (-1SD of RPOS) = 0.15, 95% CI [0.07, 0.26]			
b) at high RPOS (+1SD of RPOS) = 0.07, 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]			
-Number of bootstrap samples: 1000, 95% Confidence Intervals (CI) were bias corrected			
-Control variables used in the model: age and hierarchical position			
-Unstandardized coefficients (beta) are shown			
-FRPOS and RPOS were mean centered prior to the analysis regarding moderation (Model 8)			
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$			

The results (based on model 8, PROCESS macro) (Table 2) indicate a statistically significant interaction between RPOS and FRPOS regarding the prediction of POS ($b = 0.12$, $t = 2.10$, $p < 0.05$) (Hypothesis 4). The sign as well as the graphical representation of interaction indicate that RPOS moderates (weakens) the negative relationship between FRPOS and POS (Figure 2).

Figure 2. RPOS as moderator of the FRPOS-POS relationship



Due to the fact that the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator is moderated by a third variable, there is moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). 95% confidence intervals (Table 2) indicate that POS becomes a weaker mediator of the relationship between the FRPOS and intent to quit relationship as RPOS receives higher values (indirect effect through POS under low levels of RPOS = 0.15, indirect effect through POS under high levels of RPOS = 0.07) (Hypothesis 6 supported). It is noteworthy that RPOS does not moderate the direct relationship between FRPOS and intent to quit ($b = 0.03$, $p > 0.10$) (Hypothesis 5 failed to receive support).

5. DISCUSSION

Integrating the rationale of Equity and Social Comparison theory, this study suggests that employees do not care only about the relative support they perceive (RPOS) (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019), but they also seek to understand whether it is fair to receive relatively better treatment. More specifically, this study proposes the concept of Fairness of Relative Perceived Organizational Support (FRPOS), capturing employees' belief that it is fair to receive more organizational support than their coworkers. FRPOS, indicating that employees consider it fair to receive relatively better treatment, can act as a wariness of fairness and can make employees withhold positive employee attitudes and behaviours until they receive it.

Acting as a wariness of fairness, FRPOS differs from employees' evaluations of organizational justice. Organizational justice focuses on employees' evaluations of fairness and has been found to spark employees' positive reciprocity (Baran et al., 2012; Colquitt et al., 2013; Sen et al., 2021). By contrast, FRPOS acting as a wariness of fairness seems to withhold employees' positive reciprocity. Until now, research has focused only on individual attributes affecting employees' fairness considerations and wariness (Eisenberger, Shoss, Karagonlar, Gonzalez-Morales, Wickham, & Buffardi, 2014; Huseman et al., 1987; Lynch, Armeli, & Eisenberger, 1999). This study extends this stream of research and suggests that employees are also wary about whether they deserve relatively better treatment.

More specifically, the study findings support the claim that FRPOS has a negative relationship with employees' perceptions of organizational support and a positive relationship with intent to quit. Employees who believe that they deserve relatively better treatment do not feel supported by the organization and these decreased levels of organizational support partially explain their intention to quit. Of course, based on the study findings, these negative reactions to FRPOS are alleviated when employees perceive relatively better treatment (RPOS), given that in this case the expectation of fairness is met. These findings further extend previous research results regarding the importance of relative organizational support for employee reactions (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019).

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

Existing literature has paid extensive attention to employees' fairness evaluations and has indicated that employees take them seriously into account in order to form their subsequent reactions (Ambrose et al., 2021; Colquitt et al., 2013; Clercq et al., 2021; Khaola & Rambe, 2021; Kayaalp, Page, & Gumus, 2021; Khattak et al., 2021; Panicker & Sharma, 2020; Rea et al., 2021). Further extending the existing stream of research, this study suggests that employees form fairness evaluations regarding their relative organizational support and they form their subsequent reactions based on these evaluations. This work contributes to the "equality" versus "equity" debate by indicating that employees probably care more about perceived equity than about perceived equality (Morand & Merriman, 2012; Rea et al., 2021).

Organizations should be aware that employees subjectively define fairness and fear that they will not receive the relative treatment they consider fair to receive. Instead of trying to define justice objectively, they should seek to understand how employees conceptualize fairness. Supervisors and HR managers should also try to explain each managerial decision to employees with clarity and open channels of communication. Doing so, they will help employees justify managerial choices and voice their own views and arguments concerning the treatment they consider fair.

Moreover, this study contributes to the stream of research on employees' relatively better treatment. Until now research has indicated that employees react positively when they receive relatively better treatment on the part of the organization or the supervisor (Henderson et al., 2008; Hu & Liden, 2013; Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vardaman et al., 2016; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Relatively better treatment has a symbolic value and makes employees feel recognized members of their collective, thus sparking their reciprocity (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). However, other research findings have indicated that differentiated treatment does not always spark positive employee reactions due to the antagonism among coworkers (Hooper & Martin, 2008). Perceptions of justice seem to be able to weaken these negative employee reactions to differentiated treatment provided by their leader (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010).

The present study further extends the above stream of research at the organizational level. Far from responding negatively to perceived differentiated organizational treatment, employees seem to positively evaluate relatively better treatment. The findings suggest that this relatively better treatment is a boundary condition of employees' reactions when they believe that they deserve this better treatment. Without these perceptions of relative support, employees believe that their fairness expectations remain unfulfilled and they are wary. As such they conserve their positive reactions. These findings propose that we should add the dimension of employees' expectations about relative support.

Employees' reciprocity seems to be the result not only of their organizational treatment per se but also of their expectations regarding this treatment. Until now, literature has paid attention to employees' reciprocation of favourable or unfavourable organizational treatment (Baran et al., 2012; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Kayaalp et al., 2021; Panicker et al., 2020). The findings of this study add the dimension of expectations about relative treatment to the existing literature and underline their importance for employees' reciprocation.

On the practical level, based on the study findings, organizational systems should be designed to provide the standards of comparison through which employees understand their uniqueness within the workplace. Employees evaluate the treatment they receive in a multifaceted way (economic, developmental, socioemotional) (Bal, Jansen, van der Velde, de Lange, & Rousseau, 2010). This means that HR managers and supervisors could have an individualized approach and find ways to enable each employee to feel relatively supported at some level.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has some limitations which provide fertile ground for future research. First, FRPOS is a newly created measure. Future research could further validate this measurement instrument. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to claim causality. Future research could include longitudinal designs in order to provide a stronger test of causality.

Moreover, this research indicated that POS partially mediates the relationship between FRPOS and employees' intent to quit. Despite the fact that POS has been found to be a strong predictor of turnover intention and behaviour (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Avanzi, Fraccaroli, Sarchielli, Ullrich, & van Dick, 2014; Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 2008; Karagonlar et al., 2015; Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009; Shen, Jackson, Ding, Yuan, Zhao, Dou, & Zhang, 2014), the relationship between FRPOS and intent to quit needs additional mechanisms to be fully explained. Future research should further investigate such issues to broaden our understanding of this newly suggested norm of fairness.

Future research should also focus on the role of individual attributes (e.g. reciprocation wariness, equity sensitivity, social comparison orientation) in employee responses to FRPOS. Individual attributes can alter employee responses to their organizational treatment (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch,

& Rhoades, 2001; Eisenberger et al., 2014; Karagonlar et al., 2015). Employees with high reciprocation wariness fear exploitation and believe that the norm of reciprocity is a trap (Eisenberger et al, 2014). As such, they may react more negatively to FRPOS if it is not accompanied by high RPOS. Similarly, employees with high equity sensitivity (Huseman et al., 1987) may react especially negatively if they believe that their organization does not offer them the relatively better treatment they deserve. Additionally, employees with high social comparison orientation frequently enter social comparison processes (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007) and as such they may pay special attention to whether they receive the relative treatment they deserve.

This study could also motivate future research to further explore the “equality” versus “equity” debate. Employees seem to define fairness subjectively and include relative support in their “equation of fairness”. We need to better understand what they need in order to perceive high relative support, as well as how they react when they perceive a climate of equality within their group, while at the same time they believe that they personally deserve better relative treatment.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper extends the study of social comparison processes in organizational settings by highlighting the point that social comparisons and perceptions of fairness should not be studied in isolation. Employees form perceptions regarding the fairness of their relative treatment and they base their behaviour on whether they believe they are receiving the relative treatment they deserve. The new concept of FRPOS deserves further academic research and should be systematically integrated into the literature of equity, social exchange and social comparison.

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