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ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY CLIMATE (PSC) AS DETERMINANTS OF EFFECTIVENESS IN AGE-DIVERSE HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURES

Łucja WALIGÓRA

University of Economics in Katowice; lucja.waligora@uekat.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-1132-6060

Purpose: The study aims to identify the mechanisms mediating the relationship between age-rank correlation (ARC) and financial performance, considering the moderating role of organizational justice and the mediating role of psychosocial safety climate (PSC).
Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative study was conducted on a sample of N = 300 employees from large enterprises. Moderated mediation modeling (PROCESS Model 83) was employed to integrate demographic, psychosocial, and operational variables (flexibility and innovativeness) into a single analytical framework.
Findings: Results indicate that age-rank correlation stimulates PSC only under conditions of high organizational justice. The study confirms a serial mediation path where high PSC levels enhance flexibility and innovativeness, subsequently driving financial performance. Organizational justice emerges as a crucial stabilizer that legitimizes non-traditional hierarchical structures.
Research limitations/implications: The cross-sectional nature of the study limits causal inference. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs and include objective financial data or industry-specific analyses (e.g., the IT sector), where age-related norms are undergoing dynamic shifts.
Practical implications: The findings suggest to HR managers that deviating from seniority-based promotions (e.g., appointing young leaders) requires transparent appraisal systems. Investing in PSC is economically justified, as it serves as a direct stimulator of a firm's adaptive potential.
Social implications: The paper supports the fight against ageism and promotes inclusivity. Demonstrating the benefits of diverse age structures helps shift attitudes toward young leaders and older employees while promoting mental health standards in the workplace.
Originality/value: The unique contribution of this work is the integration of career timing theories with the PSC framework. The study fills a research gap by proving that organizational justice, rather than age structure alone, is the foundation of effective diversity management. The use of PROCESS Model 83 allows for a precise capture of multidimensional dependencies previously studied only in fragments.
Keywords: age-rank correlation, psychosocial safety climate (PSC), organizational justice, innovativeness, organizational outcomes, Model 83 PROCESS.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The theoretical framework for this analysis is based on the integration of career timetable theory and social exchange theory. The former assumes the existence of informal age norms regarding the pace of promotion; employees develop subjective expectations concerning the age at which specific hierarchical levels should be reached (Cleveland et al., 2017; Lawrence, 1984, 1988; Settersten, Mayer, 1997). Individuals who find themselves "off-time" may be perceived as violating the social order, which often results in decreased engagement and a heightened sense of discrimination (Kunda et al., 2003; Perry et al., 1999).

In turn, social exchange theory explains that organizational effectiveness depends on the quality of relationships and the principle of reciprocity (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano, Mitchell, 2005). Perceiving the organization's actions as fair and supportive, including a commitment to the psychosocial safety climate (PSC), motivates employees to engage in behaviors that go beyond their formal duties (Dollar & Bakker, 2010; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Gould-Williams, 2007; Organ, 1988).

Integrating these two theories allows for the demonstration that the correlation between age and position does not affect firm performance in a vacuum. It is the social exchange mechanism, moderated by the perception of justice, that determines whether the disruption of traditional career timetables is interpreted as a manifestation of modernization or as a breach of the psychological contract leading to organizational dysfunction (Rousseau, 1995; Tsui et al., 1997).

2. Research model and theoretical justification of hypotheses

This study proposes a complex theoretical model aimed at explaining the mediating mechanisms in the relationship between an organization's demographic-hierarchical structure and its financial performance. The starting point is Hypothesis 1, which concerns the moderating role of organizational justice. According to career timetable theory, organizations operate under deeply rooted social norms that define the appropriate age for specific hierarchical levels (Lawrence, 1984, 1988). A situation in which the age-rank correlation is weak, for instance, when young managers supervise senior employees, may be interpreted as a breach of the psychological contract and traditional social expectations (Cleveland Cleveland et al., 2017; Perry et al., 1999).

However, drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano, Mitchell, 2005), organizational justice across its three dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Colquitt, 2001; Niehoff, Moorman, 1993), allows for the legitimation of such deviations.

If promotion criteria are perceived as fair, meritocratic, and based on objective competencies, a non-traditional age structure does not foster a climate of threat or discrimination (Gilliland et al., 2000; Posthuma, Campion, 2009). Under these conditions, the organization facilitates the building of a psychosocial safety climate (PSC). Thus, justice acts as a moderator that determines whether the age-position correlation is positively integrated into the organization's safety culture.

H1. The relationship between the age-position correlation and the perceived psychosocial safety climate (PSC) in the organization is moderated by organizational justice.

The subsequent part of the model, outlined in Hypothesis 2, assumes that the Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) is a key resource determining non-financial outcomes. According to the framework by Dollard and Bakker (2010), PSC serves as the "cause of causes", defining management priorities regarding mental health protection, which precedes the development of specific working conditions (Dollar, Bakker, 2010; Loh et al., 2020). A high level of PSC reduces the fear of failure and supports psychological safety (Baer, Frese, 2003), which is essential for organizational innovativeness (H2a). Simultaneously, a climate that supports well-being enhances organizational flexibility (H2b), as employees in a safe environment adapt more quickly to change, exhibit higher psychological resilience, and show a greater readiness to redefine their professional roles (Schaufeli et al., 2020; Grawitch et al., 2006).

H2. The perceived psychosocial safety climate in the organization is positively correlated with non-financial outcomes: organizational innovativeness (H2a) and organizational flexibility (H2b).

The relationship between the process-oriented and economic spheres is described in Hypothesis 3. The literature consistently indicates that innovativeness is essential for operational optimization and the creation of unique market value, which directly translates into competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 1997; Hurley, Hult, 1998). In turn, flexibility allows for the minimization of losses resulting from organizational inertia and enables better alignment with a turbulent environment (Zahra et al., 2006). Theoretically, these non-financial indicators serve as direct links (H3a, H3b) leading to improved financial health through more efficient use of human capital and knowledge resources (Nonaka, 1994; Smith et al., 2005).

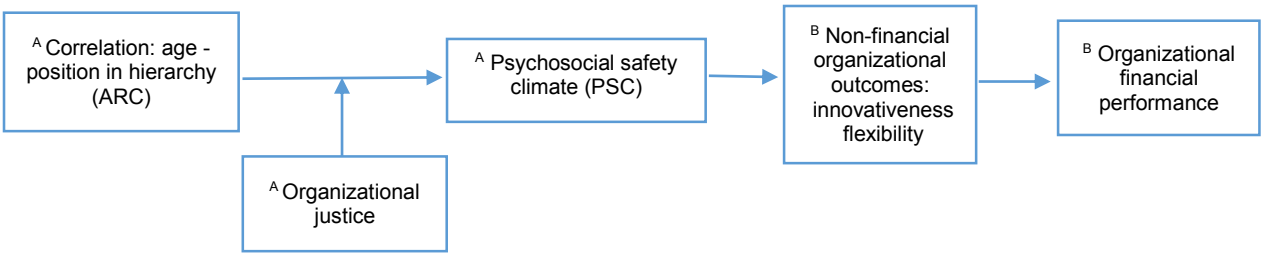
H3. Non-financial outcomes: organizational innovativeness (H3a) and organizational flexibility (H3b) are positively related to the organization's financial performance.

The entirety of these theoretical considerations is integrated into Hypothesis 4, which assumes the existence of a sequential moderated mediation mechanism. Social Exchange Theory suggests that an organization providing employees with a sense of justice (Gould-Williams, 2007) and safety (PSC) receives in return their intellectual capital, creativity, and readiness for change, which ultimately builds financial success (H4a1, H4b1, H4c1). A key assumption is that this entire process is conditioned by organizational justice (H4a2). Without fair foundations, the age-rank structure may generate a perceived climate of discrimination (Kunze et al., 2011), which blocks the path of innovation and flexibility,

preventing the achievement of optimal financial results. Serial mediation thus allows for the understanding that economic outcomes are the end result of a chain of psychological and organizational reactions, initiated by demographic structure and filtered through a sense of institutional integrity (Rousseau, 1995; Tsui et al., 1997).

H4. The indirect relationship between the age-position correlation in the organization's hierarchy and the organization's financial performance, which is serially mediated by the perceived psychosocial safety climate (H4a1) and non-financial outcomes: innovativeness (H4b1) and organizational flexibility (H4c1),is moderated by organizational justice (H4a2).

The above relationships have been integrated into the research model presented in Figure 1. The individual arrows in the model describe the interconnected relationships between the variables:



Data sources for variables: * A - employee surveys; B - senior management surveys. The study assumes that senior management members are best positioned to assess organizational outcomes (e.g., Lin et al., 2020; Lubatkin et al., 2006).

Figure 1. Research model concept.

Source: Own elaboration.

3. Research methodology

The study involved a purposive sample of N = 300 employees from large enterprises in Poland. Data were collected across 75 units, employing a parity-based respondent selection (4 individuals per organization) representing a full cross-section of the organizational hierarchy: from entry-level positions to senior management. This sample structure eliminated overrepresentation bias and ensured numerical equivalence among the comparative groups. The analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation between age and professional position ($r = 0.196$; $p < 0.001$), confirming the persistence of traditional age norms within organizational structures while maintaining measurement objectivity across all management levels.

Each variable was measured using validated instruments with established reliability. The primary independent variable, age-rank correlation, was calculated based on self-reported age and affiliation with one of five hierarchical categories. The methodology developed by

Pfeffer and Langton (1993) and Lazear (1981) was utilized, where coefficient values range from -1 to 1. Positive values indicate a traditional career model (older age associated with higher rank), whereas negative values point to a reversal of these norms (De Meulenaere et al., 2024).

Psychosocial safety climate (α = 0.98) (PSC) was assessed using the Psychosocial safety climate Survey (Dollard, Kang, 2007; Hall et al., 2010). This 26-item instrument analyzes four key dimensions: management support and commitment, management priority, organizational communication, and employee participation in the area of mental health protection. Organizational Justice (α = 0.87) was operationalized as a three-dimensional construct (procedural, distributive, and informational justice), measured using ten test items (Cho, Sai, 2013; Bright, 2007).

In the area of non-financial outcomes, two key aspects were measured. Organizational Innovativeness (α = 0.95) was evaluated using a nine-item scale of innovative job performance (Janssen, 2001), covering stages from idea generation to evaluation (Scott, Bruce, 1994). Organizational Flexibility (α = 0.86) was measured using an eight-item scale by Habibullah and Kamal (2024), examining the firm's adaptive capacity to market, legal, and social changes. Financial Performance (α = 0.78) was examined using a subjective composite scale (Yu et al., 2013; Sok et al., 2016). Respondents assessed the firm's financial health relative to competitors over the past three years, considering employment growth, net sales, market share, and net profit.

4. Research results

In order to examine the interdependence between employees' age and their position in the organizational hierarchy, a Pearson's r correlation analysis was conducted. The correlation analysis (N = 300) revealed a statistically significant, positive relationship between age and position in the organizational hierarchy ($r = 0.196$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that as the age of the respondents increases, so does their professional level on a scale of 1-4. Despite the weak effect size, the high significance of the result confirms that the promotion process in the surveyed enterprises is partially conditioned by chronological age, reflecting the importance of tenure and experience in shaping career paths.

The verification of complex structural dependencies was performed using moderated mediation modeling (PROCESS macro, Model 83), which allowed for a precise estimation of direct and indirect effects while accounting for variable interactions at specific stages of the model (Hayes, 2022).

First, the predictors of the Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) were examined. Regression results indicate that this model significantly explains the variance of the dependent variable ($R2 = 0{,}287$; $F(3, 296) = 39{,}72$; $p < 0{,}001$). A significant interaction effect between the age-

rank correlation and organizational justice on the formation of the safety climate was confirmed (β= 0,29; se = 0,06; p < 0,001). In accordance with the principles of conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2022), this interaction increases the explained variance by 6,5% (▲R2= 0,065; p < 0,001).

A detailed conditional effects analysis (Simple Slopes) revealed that the impact of the age-rank correlation on PSC is non-significant under conditions of low organizational justice (effect = 0,01; p = 0,736). However, in organizations with high levels of justice, this correlation becomes a strong, positive predictor of a safe climate (effect = 0,27; p < 0,001). These results provide full support for Hypothesis 1.

Further verification of the model showed that the Psychosocial safety climate is a significant positive predictor of organizational flexibility (β = 0,09; se = 0,03; p = 0,001), confirming Hypothesis 2b. The flexibility model exhibits high goodness-of-fit to the data (R2= 0,328; p < 0,001). In the case of innovativeness (R2 = 0,105), a significant effect of the age-rank correlation was observed (β = 0,05; p < 0,001); however, the path leading directly from PSC to innovativeness did not reach the significance threshold in this variable configuration (β = 0,03; p = 0,214).

The analysis of financial performance revealed no direct relationship with the variables studied in the regression model (R2= 0,005; p = 0,838). Using the bootstrapping inference method (5,000 resamples), indirect effects were estimated (Hayes, 2022). The index of moderated mediation for the serial path leading to financial performance proved to be non-significant (the BootLLCI and BootULCI confidence intervals included zero).

This implies that although justice and the safety climate are crucial for the internal efficiency and flexibility of a large organization, their translation into ultimate financial indicators is more complex and likely requires a longer time horizon than that captured in this cross-sectional study. A summary of the regression analysis results for Model 83 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Regression analysis results for the specific dependent variables in the model.

Outcome (DV)	Predictor (IV)	Coeff (β)	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
PSC (R2=0,287)	Constant	3,5776	0,0148	241,2374	0,0000	3,5484	3,6068
	ARC (X)	0,1404	0,0221	6,3464	0,0000	0,0969	0,1840
	JUSTICE (W)	0,1471	0,0370	3,9788	0,0001	0,0743	0,2198
	ARC × JUSTICE (Int_1)	0,2883	0,0554	5,2076	0,0000	0,1793	0,3972
FLEX (R2=0,327)	Constant	4,0508	0,0945	42,8443	0,0000	3,8647	4,2368
	ARC	0,0996	0,0109	9,1137	0,0000	0,0781	0,1211
	PSC	0,0864	0,0261	3,3035	0,0011	0,0349	0,1378
INNOV (R2=0,105)	Constant	4,3834	0,2207	19,8633	0,0000	3,9491	4,8177
	ARC	0,0458	0,0108	4,2513	0,0000	0,0246	0,0670
	PSC	0,0289	0,0232	1,2455	0,2139	-0,0168	0,0745
	FLEX	-0,0094	0,0505	-0,1855	0,8530	-0,1088	0,0901

Cont. table1.

FINANCE (R2=0,005)	Constant	6,7769	3,4080	1,9885	0,0477	0,0697	13,4840
	ARC	-0,0303	0,1122	-0,2704	0,7870	-0,2511	0,1904
	PSC	0,1912	0,2351	0,8131	0,4168	-0,2715	0,6539
	FLEX	-0,2276	0,5111	-0,4453	0,6564	-1,2334	0,7782
	INNOV	-0,4204	0,5877	-0,7154	0,4749	-1,5770	0,7362

(Note on abbreviations: PSC - psychosocial safety climate; JUSTICE - organizational justice; INNOV - organizational innovativeness; FLEX - organizational flexibility; ARC - age-rank correlation; FINANCE: organizational financial performance; LLCI / ULCI: lower/upper level of 95% confidence interval).

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical research results (N=300) using the PROCESS macro v5.0 (Hayes, 2022).

5. Summary

The table below (Table 2) presents a summary of all formulated hypotheses along with the decision regarding their acceptance or rejection based on the conducted statistical analyses (PROCESS Model 83).

Table 2.
Summary of research hypotheses verification results.

Hypothesis	Hypothesis content	Verification result	Statistical comment
H1	The relationship between the age-position correlation and the perceived psychosocial safety climate (PSC) in the organization is moderated by organizational justice	Supported	Significant interaction (β =0,29; p<0,001). The effect of ARC on PSC increases with higher justice.
H2a	The perceived psychosocial safety climate in the organization is positively correlated with organizational innovativeness.	Not supported	Lack of statistical significance in the model (β =0,03; p=0,214).
H2b	H2. The perceived psychosocial safety climate in the organization is positively correlated with organizational flexibility.	Supported	Significant positive impact (β =0,09; p=0,001).
H3a	Organizational innovativeness are positively related to the organization's financial performance.	Not supported	No significant relationship in the studied model (β =-0,42; p=0,475).
H3b	Organizational flexibility are positively related to the organization's financial performance.	Not supported	No significant relationship in the studied model (β =-0,23; p=0,656).
H4	The indirect relationship between the age-position correlation in the organization's hierarchy and the organization's financial performance, which is serially mediated by the perceived psychosocial safety climate (H4a1) and non-financial outcomes: innovativeness (H4b1) and organizational flexibility (H4c1), is moderated by organizational justice (H4a2).	Not supported	Indices of moderated mediation are non-significant (confidence intervals include zero).

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical research results (N = 300) using the PROCESS macro v5.0 (Hayes, 2022).

The most significant conclusion drawn from the analysis is the confirmation that an organization's demographic-hierarchical structure (age-rank correlation) does not influence the work climate in isolation. Its impact is inextricably linked to the perception of organizational justice.

The results demonstrate that in organizations characterized by a high level of justice, a traditional correlation between age and rank facilitates the building of a strong Psychosocial safety climate (PSC). This phenomenon can be explained through the lens of Career Timetable Theory (Lawrence, 1984), where the predictability of promotion paths aligned with age is recognized as a social norm. However, the key contribution of this work is demonstrating that procedural and distributive justice serve as a critical buffer. This allows employees to accept even non-traditional hierarchical arrangements (e.g., a younger supervisor), provided that the criteria for success are transparent and merit-based (Gilliland et al., 2000; Posthuma, Campion, 2009). This aligns with the framework of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017), in which fair treatment constitutes the foundation of trust in management.

The study confirmed the role of PSC as a significant precursor of organizational flexibility. Consistent with the assumptions of Dollard and Bakker (2010), organizations that prioritize the mental health and psychosocial safety of their members create an environment conducive to adaptation. In such a climate, employees exhibit less resistance to change and a greater readiness to redefine their professional roles (Schaufeli et al., 2020). Interestingly, in the surveyed sample, this climate did not translate directly into innovativeness, suggesting that in large units, creative processes may be determined by other structural or technological factors (Jansen et al., 2006).

Despite confirming internal psychosocial dependencies, the model did not show a direct translation of these mechanisms into subjective financial performance within a short time horizon. The lack of significance for the full serial mediation path points to the existence of a so-called time-lag effect. Investments in safety climate and flexibility are long-term processes whose economic return may not be captured in cross-sectional studies (Hitt et al., 1997; Zahra et al., 2006).

6. Discussion

This study contributes to social exchange theory (Blau, 2017) and the Dynamic capabilities framework (Zahra et al., 2006) by identifying organizational justice as a key moderator. It demonstrates that justice enables the legitimation of non-traditional promotion paths, transforming them from potential sources of conflict into strategic resources that build a psychosocial safety climate (PSC) (Dollar, Bakker, 2010). By doing so, the research explains the psychological mechanism through which fairness perceptions allow employees to accept age-diverse hierarchical structures as a predictable social norm.

Despite a rigorous methodological procedure, this study has certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design precludes definitive conclusions regarding the directions of causality, which underscores the validity of conducting longitudinal studies in the future (Maxwell, Cole, 2007). Second, the focus on large enterprises limits the generalizability of the findings to the SME sector, which is characterized by flatter organizational structures (Jansen et al., 2006).

Future studies should use longitudinal designs to confirm cause-and-effect relationships and include objective financial data to verify managers' opinions (Sok et al., 2016). It is also recommended to compare different industries, such as IT and manufacturing, to see how professional norms influence the link between age structure and organizational performance (Jansen et al., 2006).

The results of this study provide significant guidance for HR managers, demonstrating that flexible age-structure management (e.g., promoting young talents) requires a solid foundation of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001). Only transparent, meritocratic criteria allow age diversity to be transformed into a resource rather than a source of conflict. Investing in a psychosocial safety climate (PSC) emerges as an economically justified strategy that, by stimulating flexibility and innovativeness, builds a firm's long-term competitive advantage (Dollard et al., 2012).

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