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Organizational Justice as a Contingent Factor in the Ethical Leadership–OCB Relationship in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research investigates how ethical leadership influences organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in higher education, with a focus on the potential role of organizational justice as a moderating factor. It also explores whether the effect of ethical leadership changes depending on how strongly organizational justice is embedded in an institution's culture. The study collected data from 254 faculty members at private universities in northern Jordan and employed structural equation modeling for analysis. Results show that ethical leadership positively affects OCB, but organizational justice does not significantly alter this relationship in the context studied. By examining these dynamics in a non-Western setting, the study adds new insights to the literature on leadership and workplace behavior. Implications for theory, practice, and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, Organizational citizenship behavior, Organizational justice, Higher education

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Introduction

In recent decades, the study of ethics in leadership has become an important area within organizational behavior research. Scholars have increasingly recognized how unethical practices in the workplace can undermine both leaders' credibility and an organization's reputation [1, 2]. Surveys conducted globally, such as Gallup polls, highlight administrative corruption as a major challenge in many countries [3]. Ethical leadership has emerged as a key factor in shaping positive employee attitudes, promoting productive behaviors, and enhancing organizational outcomes [4, 5].

One critical outcome influenced by leadership is organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which refers to voluntary, discretionary actions that go beyond formal job responsibilities. OCB contributes to both individual and institutional effectiveness and is particularly relevant in higher education, where faculty engagement can enhance institutional performance, adaptability, and competitiveness [6, 7]. These behaviors include acts of helpfulness, conscientiousness, civic engagement, courtesy, and sportsmanship, all of which support organizational functioning without requiring formal rewards [7, 8].

Effective leaders encourage OCB by providing guidance, support, and motivation, helping employees exceed baseline expectations [2, 4]. Ethical leadership involves modeling integrity, setting clear ethical standards, reinforcing positive behavior, and inspiring collective commitment to ethical norms [9-11].



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Organizational justice, which encompasses procedural, distributive, and interactional dimensions, is an important factor that may influence how employees respond to leadership. Employees who perceive fairness in decision-making, resource allocation, and interpersonal treatment are more likely to reciprocate with effort, creativity, and discretionary contributions, reflecting higher OCB [12]. Although research has established the positive effects of ethical leadership on trust, engagement, moral behavior, and overall organizational performance [13-15], the role of organizational justice as a moderating influence remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts.

In higher education, promoting OCB is essential for fostering faculty development, ensuring workplace flexibility, and enhancing teaching and research performance [16-18]. Faculty members are central to universities' mission of knowledge creation and service delivery, making their voluntary contributions critical to institutional success [9]. Research suggests that ethical leadership is particularly effective in encouraging such behaviors in academic settings [19].

Despite the growing interest in ethical leadership and organizational justice, gaps remain. Most studies focus on the direct effects of these constructs on employee behavior, while the moderating role of organizational justice is less studied [19]. Additionally, research examining ethical leadership and OCB in Jordanian universities is limited, with most studies concentrating on traditional leadership models such as transformational leadership [20].

This study addresses these gaps by investigating how ethical leadership influences OCB in Jordanian higher education institutions and examining whether organizational justice moderates this relationship. Specifically, the study aims to: (a) assess the prevalence of ethical leadership, OCB, and organizational justice in Jordanian universities; (b) evaluate the impact of ethical leadership on OCB; and (c) determine the moderating effect of organizational justice on the ethical leadership-OCB link.

Hypotheses development

The present study is grounded in social exchange theory, which provides a useful lens for understanding how ethical leadership can shape organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). According to this theory, individuals evaluate their interactions with others based on perceived costs and benefits, engaging in reciprocal behavior when the exchanges are deemed favorable. In organizational settings, ethical leadership fosters trust, encourages reciprocity, and nurtures positive work relationships, creating a climate that supports voluntary behaviors beyond formal job requirements. Employees tend to respond to ethical leaders by demonstrating greater commitment and discretionary effort, consistent with the principles of social exchange.

Previous research has examined ethical leadership from various perspectives. One of the foundational studies by Brown and colleagues emphasized fairness, clarity of roles, and shared decision-making as central aspects of ethical leadership. Subsequent investigations, such as those by Kalshoven *et al.* [4], have extended this framework by considering factors including the fair treatment of employees, inclusion in decision processes, clear communication of responsibilities, supportive interaction with subordinates, consistent integrity, moral guidance, and attention to sustainability. These dimensions highlight how leaders' ethical conduct can influence followers' attitudes and behaviors, encouraging them to go beyond minimum expectations.

Social exchange theory has also served as a cornerstone for OCB research. It suggests that when employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to adopt voluntary behaviors that benefit the organization. Empirical studies have repeatedly confirmed a positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCB, demonstrating that employees respond to fairness, guidance, and ethical role modeling with enhanced discretionary effort. Building on this rationale, the first hypothesis of this study posits that ethical leadership positively affects academic staff members' OCB in private universities in Jordan. Organizational justice, which reflects employees' perceptions of fairness in the treatment they receive from their organization, is another important factor in shaping workplace behavior. It encompasses perceptions of fairness in the allocation of rewards, the procedures used to make decisions, and the quality of interpersonal interactions. When employees perceive that resources are distributed equitably, processes are consistent and transparent, and they are treated with respect, they are more likely to engage in positive behaviors that exceed formal job expectations. Organizational justice has been linked to higher levels of satisfaction, motivation, and discretionary effort, making it a potential enhancer of the influence of ethical leadership. Accordingly, it is expected that ethical leadership will have a stronger effect on OCB when perceptions of organizational justice are high. This reasoning gives rise to the following hypotheses: distributive justice moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and academic employees' OCB in private universities in Jordan; procedural justice moderates this relationship; and interactional justice similarly serves as a moderating factor.

Methodology

Population and sample

This study focused on faculty members from private universities in northern Jordan, as they play a central role in achieving institutional objectives and fostering discretionary behaviors that support organizational effectiveness. Four universities were selected for inclusion, collectively employing 552 academic staff. Given the relatively small population size, a census

approach was adopted, distributing questionnaires to all faculty members. A total of 263 responses were returned, but after screening for completeness and data quality, nine responses were discarded, leaving 254 valid questionnaires for analysis.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from established studies. Items measuring ethical leadership drew on the work of Brown *et al.* [21], Yukl *et al.* [22], Kalshoven *et al.* [4] and Den Hartog and De Hoogh [23]. Measures of organizational citizenship behavior were sourced from Chiang and Hsieh [24] and Taamneh *et al.* [5, 11, 25-28], while organizational justice items were derived from Elovainio *et al.* [29]. The instrument was designed to ensure clarity and relevance to the academic context.

Data Analysis

Respondent characteristics

The majority of respondents were male (nearly 80%), with females representing just over 20% of participants. Age distribution ranged from 30 years to over 60, with the largest group between 50 and 59 years. Most respondents held doctoral degrees, while smaller proportions held master's or bachelor's qualifications. In terms of roles, over half were faculty members, followed by department heads, assistant deans, deputy deans, and deans. Academic ranks varied from tutors and lecturers to assistant, associate, and full professors. Work experience ranged from less than ten years to more than 25 years, with a notable portion of participants having over a decade of experience.

Measurement model evaluation

The relationships among study variables were assessed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) via PLS 4 software. Unlike covariance-based SEM, which focuses on reproducing covariance structures, PLS-SEM prioritizes the prediction of endogenous constructs and is less sensitive to sample size and data normality. This method is especially suitable for complex models involving second-order constructs. The analysis included evaluation of item loadings, path coefficients, and the explanatory power (R^2) of the model's endogenous variables. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, are summarized in **Table 1**, and the structural model's factor loadings and relationships are depicted in **Figure 1**.

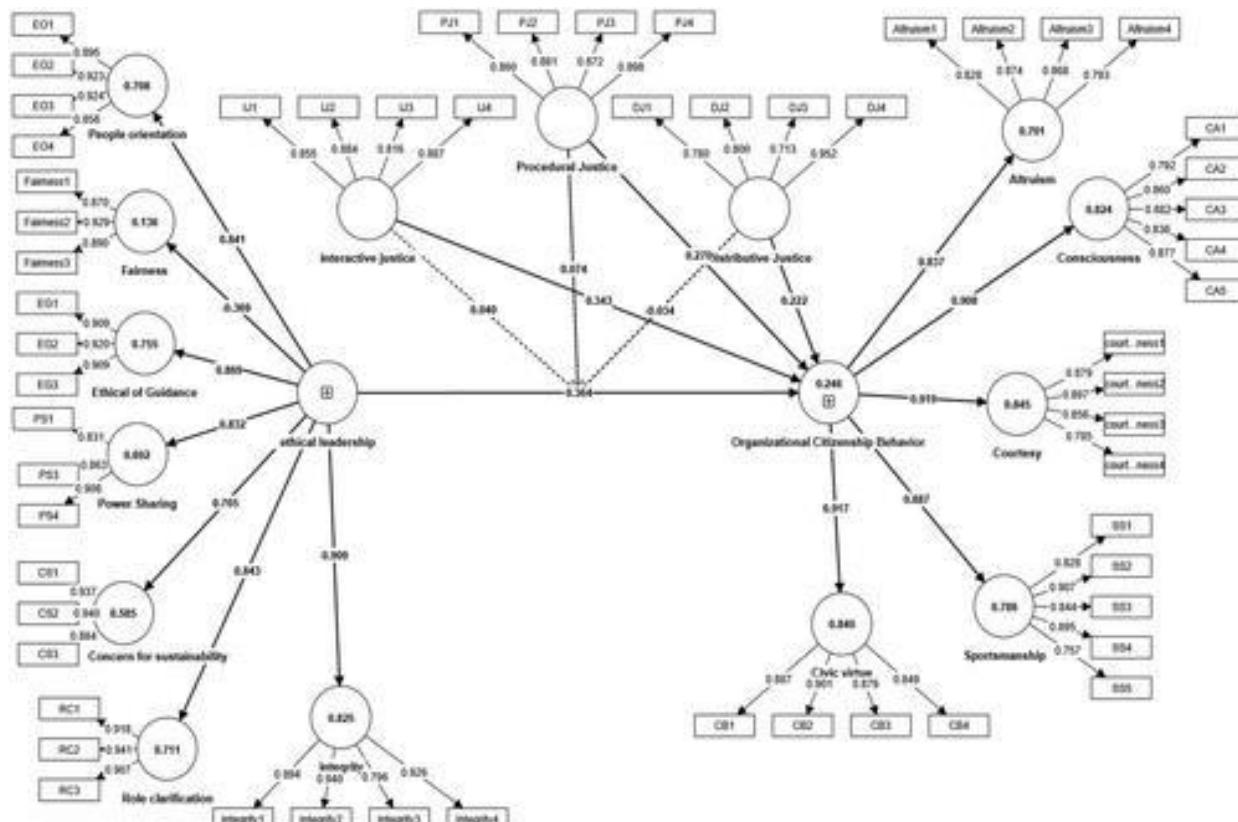


Figure 1. Measurement model and correlations.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation.

Measures	Mean	(SD)
Ethical Leadership	3.46	0.674
People orientation	3.55	0.996
Fairness	2.96	1.175
Power Sharing	3.21	0.742
Ethical of Guidance	3.7603	1.00834
Concern for Sustainability	3.4009	0.98998
Role clarification	3.7734	0.92453
Integrity	3.5915	1.08547
Organizational Citizenship Behavior	4.24	0.646
Altruism	4.1078	0.70697
Consciousness	4.3098	0.71006
Courtesy	4.3056	0.71877
Sportsmanship	4.1699	0.75106
Civic virtue	4.3121	0.73072
Organizational Justice	3.34	0.876
Distribution justice	3.0033	1.05170
Procedural justice	3.3905	0.99250
Interactional justice	3.6373	0.90273

The factor loadings in the outer measurement model, shown in **Figure 1**, were generally above the recommended threshold of 0.7, with their corresponding B-values demonstrating significance. Reliability and validity metrics also met established criteria, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.70, composite reliability above 0.70, and average variance extracted (AVE) greater than 0.50, as summarized in **Table 2**. Additionally, **Table 3** indicates that the Fornell–Larcker criterion was satisfied, as the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity.

Instruments	α	CR	rho	AVE	R^2
Organizational Justice	0.942	0.947	0.944	0.589	
Altruism	0.862	0.864	0.906	0.708	
Authority sharing	0.835	0.836	0.901	0.753	
Civilized behavior	0.902	0.903	0.932	0.773	
Clarify the role	0.912	0.912	0.944	0.850	
Distributive Justice	0.905	0.778	0.887	0.666	
pepole orientation	0.921	0.921	0.944	0.810	
Ethical of guidance	0.900	0.902	0.937	0.833	
Organizational Citizenship Behavior	0.966	0.967	0.968	0.584	0.246
Procedural Justice	0.910	0.990	0.931	0.771	
Sportsmanship	0.901	0.912	0.927	0.719	
Sustainability concern	0.910	0.914	0.943	0.847	
conscience awareness	0.904	0.907	0.929	0.723	
Courteousness	0.877	0.879	0.916	0.732	
ethical leadership	0.934	0.963	0.948	0.520	
Integrity	0.912	0.922	0.939	0.793	
interactive justice	0.884	0.900	0.920	0.741	
Justice	0.879	0.891	0.925	0.804	

Table 3. divergent validity based on the Fornell–Larcker approach.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Altruism	0.841																
Civic virtue	0.682	0.879															
Concern for sustainability	0.301	0.223	0.921														
Consciousness	0.704	0.798	0.15	0.850													

Courtesy	0.7 18	0.8 21	0.2 40	0.8 24	0.8 55				
Distributive Justice	0.2 63	0.1 81	0.3 79	0.1 25	0.1 85	0.8 16			
Ethical Guidance	0.3 38	0.3 44	0.6 33	0.3 07	0.3 14	0.2 67	0.9 13		
Fairness	0.0 14	0.1 20	0.0 77	0.1 98	0.1 88	0.0 51	0.2 56	0.2 97	0.8
OCB	0.8 37	0.9 17	0.2 68	0.9 08	0.9 19	0.2 22	0.3 66	0.1 35	0.7 64
People orientation	0.2 20	0.1 65	0.5 83	0.1 66	0.2 39	0.3 46	0.6 37	0.3 05	0.2 17
Power Sharing	0.3 09	0.2 67	0.6 35	0.2 01	0.4 84	0.4 15	0.6 77	0.1 58	0.2 90
Procedural Justice	0.2 69	0.2 48	0.3 68	0.1 92	0.2 44	0.6 92	0.4 11	0.2 68	0.4 70
Role clarificatio n	0.3 65	0.3 81	0.5 31	0.3 15	0.3 56	0.3 68	0.7 45	0.3 44	0.5 93
Sportsman ship	0.6 92	0.7 89	0.2 32	0.7 06	0.7 52	0.2 53	0.3 34	0.0 86	0.8 87
ethical leadership	0.3 44	0.3 21	0.7 65	0.3 02	0.3 52	0.4 12	0.8 69	0.3 69	0.8 64
integrity	0.2 93	0.2 71	0.6 42	0.2 94	0.3 29	0.4 00	0.7 52	0.3 35	0.6 23
interactive justice	0.3 28	0.2 97	0.4 93	0.2 57	0.2 94	0.7 12	0.4 04	0.1 23	0.3 43
								0.4 39	0.4 94
								0.2 62	0.2 62
								0.5 25	0.5 25
								0.3 59	0.3 60
								0.5 27	0.5 61

The preceding analyses confirmed the reliability and validity of the measurement models. The structural model estimates are presented in **Table 4**. Ethical leadership exhibited a positive and significant direct effect on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) ($\beta = 0.397$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, the direct effects of interactional justice ($\beta = 0.311$, $p = 0.057$), distributive justice ($\beta = -0.137$, $p = 0.409$), and procedural justice ($\beta = -0.017$, $p = 0.903$) on OCB were not statistically significant. Regarding moderating effects, interactional justice ($\beta = 0.010$, $p = 0.926$), distributive justice ($\beta = -0.229$, $p = 0.139$), and procedural justice ($\beta = 0.369$, $p = 0.063$) did not significantly influence the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB. **Table 4** also reflects the interaction effects among the second-order constructs. The model explained 26.4% of the variance in OCB ($R^2 = 0.264$), which is above the minimum threshold of 0.10 suggested by Falk and Miller [30], indicating a substantial explanatory power.

Table 4. Direct effects results.

Relationships	β	<i>T</i>	ρ
Ethical leadership \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	0.397	3.852	0.000
Distributive Justice \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	-0.137	0.825	0.409
Procedural Justice \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	-0.017	0.122	0.903
interactive justice \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	0.311	1.902	0.057
Procedural Justice \times ethical leadership \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	0.369	1.859	0.063
interactive justice \times ethical leadership \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	0.010	0.047	0.962
Distributive Justice \times ethical leadership \rightarrow Organizational Citizenship	-0.229	1.480	0.139

β : beta value; ρ : *p*-value; *T*: *T*-value.

Discussion

This study examined how ethical leadership influences organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) among academic staff in private universities in northern Jordan, while also exploring the potential moderating role of organizational justice. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) via PLS 4 software. Findings indicate a moderate level of ethical leadership among the respondents, with an overall mean of 3.46 on a five-point scale. Notably, participants reported lower levels of fairness and power-sharing, two key dimensions of ethical leadership, with mean scores of 2.96 and 3.21, respectively. Other dimensions, including people orientation, ethical guidance, concern for sustainability, role clarity, and integrity, were rated at moderate levels, ranging from 3.40 to 3.77. These results align partially with prior studies, such as Taamneh *et al.* [5, 11, 25-28], which reported similar patterns for the integrity dimension, although the current study observed a slightly higher adherence to integrity standards.

Respondents generally exhibited high levels of OCB across its various dimensions. Regarding organizational justice, perceptions were moderate overall, but distributive justice was reported as insufficiently practiced. The results underscore the importance of ethically committed leaders in maintaining university reputations and attracting students at both national and international levels.

Analysis of the primary model revealed a positive and significant relationship between ethical leadership and OCB, consistent with prior research in nearby contexts [31]. This supports the idea that ethical leadership fosters a climate of trust, which encourages employees to engage in citizenship behaviors [19, 32]. However, the moderating effects of organizational justice were not significant. Contrary to expectations and previous studies emphasizing the positive link between organizational justice and OCB [33, 34], in this context, fairness perceptions did not strengthen the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB. This discrepancy may be due to structural and cultural factors in Jordanian private universities, such as nepotism, favoritism, and family-run management practices, which can limit the practical application of organizational justice [26, 27, 35].

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the influence of ethical leadership on OCB in higher education within a non-Western context. First, by identifying the specific behaviors of ethical leaders, it clarifies how these actions translate into positive employee outcomes. Second, it expands the research focus beyond transformational leadership, addressing the impact of ethical leadership on academic staff's extra-role behaviors within a unified theoretical framework. Third, by conducting the study in Jordan, the findings provide insight into ethical leadership and OCB in an Arab cultural context, which differs from Western organizational environments. Finally, evaluating the moderating role of organizational justice offers a nuanced understanding of contextual factors that may affect the leadership-OCB link.

Practically, the findings suggest that universities should prioritize ethical leadership to enhance faculty engagement in discretionary behaviors that benefit institutions. Developing training programs to cultivate ethical leadership competencies could strengthen organizational outcomes. Leaders should also promote fairness and inclusivity in workplace practices, offering mechanisms to prevent discrimination and encourage collaboration. Although organizational justice did not moderate the EL-OCB relationship in this study, fostering fair processes, transparent decision-making, and equitable reward distribution may further reinforce the positive impact of ethical leadership on OCB.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study focused on private universities in northern Jordan, limiting the generalizability of the findings; future research could include institutions from other regions with different cultural contexts. Second, only academic staff were included, excluding administrative personnel; subsequent studies could expand the sample to include a broader range of university employees. Third, the cross-sectional design does not capture potential temporal changes in leadership practices or organizational dynamics. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the evolution of ethical leadership and OCB over time. Fourth, this research relied solely on quantitative data; integrating qualitative methods could provide richer contextual understanding. Finally, future studies may explore the role of information technologies, internal social capital, or organizational performance as additional variables in understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the relationship between ethical leadership, organizational justice, and OCB in Jordanian higher education. Ethical leadership was found to positively influence faculty members' engagement in OCB, suggesting that leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and concern for others encourage discretionary behaviors that support institutional goals. Organizational justice, however, did not significantly moderate this relationship, indicating that ethical leadership alone has a direct effect on OCB regardless of perceived fairness within the organization. These findings highlight the importance of promoting ethical leadership practices to foster a culture of engagement and responsibility among academic staff, while also suggesting that further research is needed to examine additional contextual factors that may influence these dynamics.

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