



Meaningful work and fair treatment: Vital elements for street-level Bureaucrats' defence against emotional exhaustion and poor well-being

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how healthcare Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs) working in Italian public hospitals experience organisational justice and meaningful work, and how these perceptions shape their emotional exhaustion and overall well-being. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory, we explore how both organisational and personal resources influence resilience and strain in demanding public service environments.

Based on two-wave survey data from 1306 healthcare professionals, our findings show that when SLBs perceive fair processes and respectful treatment, they are less likely to feel emotionally drained. Feeling that their work is meaningful further enhances these positive effects, helping professionals remain engaged despite high demands. However, once emotional exhaustion takes hold, it has a particularly strong impact on well-being, suggesting that the cost of resource loss may outweigh the benefits of supportive work conditions if left unaddressed.

We contribute to public management literature by clarifying how perceptions of fairness and purpose at work shape well-being in frontline healthcare, and offer practical guidance for designing fairer, more supportive work environments to sustain SLB motivation and reduce burnout.

1. Introduction

Some employees (such as healthcare professionals or teachers), who deliver public services under conditions of demand exceeding supply, have discretion to make changes to their work routines as a way of coping with the stress and responsibility for rationing public goods. Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs) also have discretionary power because of their expertise. These employees are called SLBs and a significant body of research has developed within the scholarship of public administration about their work practices (Lipsky, 2010; author et al., 2024). However, reforms including the adoption of private sector management tools, contracting out and public-private partnerships (to name a few) across many Organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Lapiente & Van de Walle, 2020; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) suggest that understanding the behaviour of SLBs is an important management priority.

Additionally, SLBs work in Street-Level Organisations (SLOs) (such

as hospitals or schools) that are predominantly bureaucratic and hierarchical in structure and, consequently, SLBs are expected to manage implementing public and organisational policies/rules that are often contradictory, poorly targeted and/or underfunded (Brodin, 2012; Lapiente & Van de Walle, 2020). This affects how SLBs perceive their work, and the meaning of the work they do, because it affects their perception of power to deliver the quality of service they believe is required to best support the public, or at least the most deserving (Jilke & Tummers, 2018).

Originally, the term 'meaningfulness of work' was conceptualized as a personal characteristic driven by personal satisfaction and based on personal values (Rosso et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2013); however, for SLBs, the boundaries of the term have widened. One reason for the broadened definition is because SLBs often have high Public Service Motivation (PSM), which is conceptualized as a 'public sector behaviour' based on altruism in delivering public value to citizens (Ritz et al., 2016). Both are intrinsically driven. The difference is in the outcome -

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with PSM having an outwards focus (delivering value to the public), whereas the outcome from meaningful work refers to employees' personal satisfaction.

SLBs likely use PSM when implementing policies to ensure they deliver value to the public, and the process likely makes the work meaningful to them. Whereas policy meaningfulness is underpinned by collective or societal values (Tummers et al., 2015b), SLBs use their discretionary power, underpinned by their personal values, including PSM, coupled with organisational and professional drivers to transform policies/rules into services that deliver value to the public (Brunetto et al., 2024, 2025), especially those they perceive as most deserving (Gofen et al., 2021). SLBs are negatively affected when they perceive a policy/rule as meaningless, whereas "... frontline workers' perceived [powerfulness is when SLBs can exert] influence on decisions concerning the policy" (Thomann et al., 2018, p. 584). Thomann et al. (2018) argue that SLBs' perceive their work as meaningful only when they can use their discretion to modify ambiguous or contradictory policies (content and design) to improve outcomes for society and/or the individual in line with their values.

Numerous scholars identify that SLBs face a challenging dilemma in negotiating the clash between core public values of 'fairness and equity' and the traditional New Public Management (NPM) value of 'efficiency', which translates as "providing the best care/service possible for the lowest price", (Budd, 2014; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). One construct that reflects fairness and equity is organisational justice (Colquitt, 2001), which is embedded in social exchange theory and assumes effective, trustful interactions lead to mutual reciprocity between an organisation, employees and clients in terms of respect, resources and support (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Cropanzano et al. (2002) confirmed the validity of a three-dimensional model, including: (1) fairness of the outcomes received (distributive justice), (2) fairness of the decision-making process (procedural justice), and (3) fairness regarding the quality of interactions between individuals (interactional justice). Organisational justice is well established in management literature; however, there is limited evidence confirming the construct in the public sector (Enoksen, 2015).

We examine whether SLBs' perceptions of organisational justice and work meaningfulness impact their psychological exhaustion and subsequent wellbeing. The link is examined because in the absence of sufficient organisational resources, some SLOs coerce SLBs to use their own personal resources (e.g., time, energy, emotions, personal attributes such as resilience) to effectively deliver public social services (Lavee & Strier, 2019), which may seed perceptions of organisational injustice. Organisational injustice is likely to impact SLBs' perception of work meaningfulness and their subsequent perceived work stress (Dadau & Brunetto, 2023; Farr-Wharton et al., 2023), although the links between SLB perceptions of organisational justice, work meaningfulness, emotional exhaustion and well-being have yet to be examined empirically.

Emotional exhaustion is a key characteristic of burnout, and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory defines it as a state where employees perceive a lack of emotional and psychological resources to cope (Hobfoll, 2011). It is conceptualized by some scholars as existing on one side of a continuum with high employee wellbeing at the other end (Chen, & WestmanHobfoll, 2016). Similarly, Usman et al. (2021) conceptualized emotional exhaustion as a state of depleted resources – especially emotional and cognitive resources and often resulting from poor workplace experiences. It is also conceptualized as the main component of burnout. We build on approach Usman et al.'s (2021) study that examined and found significant links between client and societal policy meaningfulness and SLBs' psychological well-being. Usman and colleagues called for "future studies [that] can also theorize and reveal different outcomes of policy meaningfulness ... [particularly in terms of understanding how SLBs] ... develop feelings of burnout ..." (Usman et al., 2021, p. 37). Their study extended research by Tummers et al. (2015b) linking policy meaningfulness with SLBs'

outcomes. Our study is guided by COR theory, which explains employee motivation (Hobfoll, 2011), replicating Usman et al.'s (2021) approach, in providing a psychological lens for better understanding how SLBs operate under conditions of increasing personal psychological distress. The research questions (RQs) guiding the study are:

RQ1: What is the impact of SLBs' perceptions of organisational justice on their meaningfulness of work?

RQ2: How does SLBs' perceptions of organisational justice and the meaningfulness of work impact their emotional exhaustion and wellbeing?

Our study makes one core contribution to the existing literature. We provide clarity about how SLOs actions (i.e., distribution of outcomes, decision-making procedures, and interactions in the workplace) affect SLBs perceptions of job meaningfulness, and how such perceptions influence SLBs' emotional exhaustion and their subsequent well-being.

2. Theoretical framework: Conservation of Resources theory

This study is guided by Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory as a framework for examining the role of workplace and personal resources on SLBs' sense of strain and well-being. Hobfoll (1989, p. 516) defines resources as "... objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies". A central tenet of COR theory is the conceptualization that people will work towards obtaining, retaining and protecting resources that employees value and perceive as necessary for managing stress and well-being (Hobfoll, 2001). There are also several COR principles and corollaries that are relevant to this research (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 106). First, Principle 1, "resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain". Second, Principle 2, "people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources". Third, Corollary 1, "Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain. Conversely, individuals and organisations who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain". This is because employees have finite resources, hence, constant overwork can deplete resources over time; in turn pre-disposing them to becoming stressed, and in the worst cases, this can lead to emotional exhaustion (burnout), with subsequent negative consequences for their well-being (Chen, & WestmanHobfoll, 2016). Finally, Corollary 3, "because resource gain is both of less magnitude and slower than resource loss, resource gain spirals tend to be weak and develop slowly".

When considering gain spirals, it is important to acknowledge that resources do not operate independently of one another, instead they travel in groups (known as resource caravans) for individuals and organisations. In particular, professional SLBs' work practices are informed by their professional values and the meaning of the work is so important to them that even when SLOs fail to provide adequate resources, SLBs will use their own resources (such as time) to continue delivering service, at least to those they deem most deserving (Lavee & Strier, 2019; Gofen et al., 2021) – hence, meaningful work forms part of resource caravans, as does management decision-making that is based on organisational justice. Both activities are likely to foster resource creation, which triggers a resource spiral gain (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In this study, we examine strain (i.e., emotional exhaustion) and resources available to employees, including personal psychological resources (i.e., employee well-being, meaningfulness of work) and job resources (i.e., organisational justice). We argue that when employees perceive they have enough resources to cope with their daily lives, they use these resources (e.g., organisational justice, meaningful work) to cope with workplace challenges and stressors to limit emotional exhaustion and maintain employee well-being. In addition, when employees perceive they have adequate resources, they can use these resources to invest in gaining resources (i.e., creating a gain spiral), such as linking organisational fairness, meaningful work and employee well-

being. This research model reflects existing models that have established that resources in the workplace and personal resources directly and indirectly relate with an employee's perception of their emotional exhaustion, and ultimately their sense of well-being.

2.1. Organisational justice

There remains no established agreement on the dimensionality of organisational justice dimensions (Enoksen, 2015), though researchers have tested one-factor to four-factor models (Colquitt, 2001). We conceptualize organisational justice as comprising three dimensions as validated by Cropanzano et al. (2002). As mentioned, the three-factor model comprises distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Such a conceptualization is like the common four-factor solution validated by Colquitt (2001), except informational and interpersonal justice are combined to form interactional justice.

As stated, numerous scholars argue that the work conditions of SLBs should be informed as much by the public values of fairness and equity (Budd, 2014) as service delivery (Dunlop et al., 2020) because it affects service delivery (Brodin, 2021). High performance and service delivery is associated with high employee wellbeing (Xerri et al., 2019); hence, if organisational justice impacts work meaningfulness and wellbeing, then, it is important to consider its impact, especially for example on perceive differences in the fairness of distribution priorities (e.g., equitable distribution of resources and outcomes that serve a public good), decision-making processes (e.g., expect higher levels of transparency and accountability in decision making processes) and the importance of consistent and fair treatment in the context of resource allocation and a public service.

2.2. Meaningfulness of work

'Meaningful work' is a Human Resource Management disciplinary concept that captures how employee's personal drivers inform work behaviour that is motivated by the joint triggers of personal satisfaction as well as directed broader societal impact (Rosso et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2013). For SLBs, work is meaningful when they can use their discretion as a psychological mechanism for transforming meaningless policy into impactful service delivery to those they deem deserving (Gofen et al., 2021; Thomann et al., 2018), which has the added benefit of increasing their engagement and wellbeing (Soane et al., 2013).

There is mixed extant evidence regarding the relationship between the dimensions of organisational justice and the meaningfulness of work. A study of Chinese nurses captured organisational fairness as one all-encompassing dimension and found an indirect and positive relationship with the perceived meaningfulness of work (Si et al., 2023). Other evidence within a healthcare context reflects a direct and positive relationship between distributive justice and perceived meaningfulness of work (Peng et al., 2024). However, other studies report procedural and collegial justice are positively related, and distributive justice is not a significant antecedent of the perceived meaningfulness of work (Correia & Almeida, 2020). The mixed extant evidence and the limited understanding of the organisational justice dimensions and perceived meaningfulness of work for SLBs reflects such research is important. Additionally, SLBs' ability to transform meaningless policies may depend on their perception of organisational justice, because in terms of COR theory (Hobfoll, 2011), if they have the discretionary power to modify policies to make them more meaningful, then they are likely to interpret such power as a reflection of their organisations' just decision-making. We hypothesize that each organisational justice dimension will be positively related with how meaningful SLBs perceive their work.

Hypothesis 1. Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is positively associated with the meaningfulness of work.

2.3. Emotional exhaustion

As stated, emotional exhaustion is generally characterized by employee feelings of being emotionally drained and overwhelmed by their work. Such feelings are often derived from limited job and personal resources for coping in a work environment fraught with excessive and prolonged stress, which leads to further depletion of such resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Hobfoll et al. (2018) argue that stress occurs when demands outstrip personal and organisational resources. Delivering healthcare is often fraught with high emotional demands coupled with long work hours, and, consequently, health professionals are at increased risk of burnout (author et al., 2022). Emotional labor refers to employees regulating and managing their feelings during service encounters to display emotions that align with organisational expectations (Hochschild, 1979). This often involves suppressing genuine emotions and displaying desired emotions as part of their work. For example, when nurses interact with patients, they may be required to hide their own feelings of distress and fatigue when delivering difficult news to patients or their family members.

Like Gaudet et al. (2014), we conceptualize organisational justice as a job resource that employees can draw on to cope with workplace demands and stressors. Organisational procedures inform employees about decision making (e.g., workload decisions) and contribute to employees' feeling supported and valued. From a resource perspective, fair procedures act as a resource that convert into more resources, such as feeling supported and valued, which is a reflection that, as prescribed by Hobfoll (2011), initial resource accumulation leads to further resource gains. For example, for public healthcare SLBs, a fair and transparent process for making workload decisions and mechanisms for voicing concerns likely reflect resource gains. Applying the notion of resource caravans, such resource gains are likely to spiral as professional SLBs are more likely to understand and accept workloads, which creates an environment where SLBs are better able to cope and thus will feel less overwhelmed (i.e., emotional exhaustion) by the pressures of work (e.g., high levels of emotional labor) and the amount of work expected. Similarly, when the distribution of benefits and rewards associated with employee performance is perceived as fair, SLBs are more likely to feel appreciated and motivated to continue with such effort. When employees are motivated to perform and are performing well, they are less likely to feel drained by work or overwhelmed by organisational work expectations.

Although we expect that organisational justice is a useful resource that can help SLBs manage the extent to which they feel emotionally exhausted, there is mixed evidence regarding each of the justice dimensions. A study of 375 Canadian healthcare workers found that procedural ($\beta = -.18, p < .01$) and interactional ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$) justice, but not distributive justice, significantly and negatively impacted emotional exhaustion (Gaudet et al., 2014). A study of 869 US junior military personnel and civil servants found that only distributive and interactional (interpersonal and informational) justice, and not procedural justice, were significantly related to emotional exhaustion (Cole et al., 2010). In comparison, a survey of 203 Chinese manufacturing workers found that only distributive justice was significantly related with emotional exhaustion (Frenkel et al., 2012). Although the existing evidence is mixed, there is supporting evidence that each organisational justice dimension has been found to negatively and significantly influence employee perceptions of emotional exhaustion. We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2. Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is negatively associated with employee perceptions of emotional exhaustion.

Personal resources refer to any tangible or intangible asset(s) or working conditions that is/are considered valuable by SLBs. Meng et al. (2024) proposed that meaningful work can be conceptualized as a personal resource that can be invested in helping employees cope with the

demands of their job by helping them realize the broader purpose of their daily work activities, which can reverse the impact of job demands and then prevent employees from feeling burned out from job stressors.

Considering the workloads of many SLBs, where the norm is for the supply of resources (time, resources) to consistently fall below the increasing demand for the services, the expectation is that whilst the meaningfulness of their work may support SLBs' psychological capacities from some high work intensity; the reprieve is likely temporary because as their personal reservoirs of energy are threatened, so too is their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and burnout and subsequent lower wellbeing (Chen, & WestmanHobfoll, 2016). In contrast, Tan et al. (2019) found from a study of social workers that meaningful work was only related to one aspect of job burnout, depersonalization (cynicism), and was not significantly related to emotional exhaustion or personal accomplishment. The inconsistencies in the findings between meaningful work and emotional exhaustion and the fact that much of the existing research is conducted within the private sector, suggests a need to further investigate to clarify the relationship. As such, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. Meaningfulness of work is negatively associated with emotional exhaustion for SLBs.

2.4. Employee well-being

Although there is limited agreement regarding the definition of employee well-being, there does appear to be some acceptance that employee well-being is a multi-dimensional construct (Grant et al., 2007). More specifically, one common conceptualization is that employee well-being encompasses the overall quality of an employee's experience in the domains of work and life, which can be viewed from two main conceptual dimensions: hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. The hedonic aspect focuses on pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, such as the presence of positive emotions and satisfaction, and the absence of negative emotions. The eudaimonic aspect emphasizes living in accordance with one's true self and realizing one's potential. As such, from a eudaimonic perspective, an employee is well if they perceive that overall, they are flourishing in work and life, which is evident by the perception of a deeper sense of purpose, personal growth, and fulfillment. We examine SLB perceptions of their well-being using a unidimensional construct that captures the hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions.

There is an established body of evidence linking the dimensions of organisational justice and employee well-being. While several recent studies examine the relationship between SLB perceptions of overall organisational justice and varying dimensions of well-being (Ali et al., 2023; Herrera et al., 2022), there is also evidence regarding how each organisational justice dimension influences employee well-being. For example, a study of 369 social workers in France found that distributive, procedural and interactional (informational and interpersonal) were positively related to social worker psychological well-being (Desrumaux et al., 2023). Similarly, a study of police officers in Australia found distributive, procedural and interactional (informational and interpersonal) were all positively related to work well-being (i.e., job satisfaction) but were not significantly related with a dimension of life well-being (i.e., psychological health) (Lawson et al., 2009). We propose to replicate the previous studies and hypothesize that the three dimensions of organisational justice will be positively related to employee well-being.

Hypothesis 4. Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is positively associated with employee perceptions of well-being.

There is evidence that the meaningfulness (positively) or meaningfulness (negatively) of work significantly influences employee well-being. For example, Arnold et al. (2007) conducted a study of

healthcare and service workers and found that the meaningfulness of work was positively related to psychological well-being for the healthcare and service workers. In addition, a broader study of adults in Latin America and Spain, aged between 18 and 70, found that meaningfulness was positively related with positive well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect) and negatively related with negative well-being (e.g., poor mental health, psychological symptoms, negative affect). In contrast to the benefits of meaningful work, Usman et al. (2021, p. 279) argued that "the experience of meaningfulness linked with the meaningless government policy can harm public professionals' psychological wellbeing." This scenario is consistent with the first COR principle that argues that when SLBs perceive they can't modify a policy in line with clients' needs, they likely experience work meaningfulness, which is likely interpreted as a disproportionate loss of psychological resources. As such, we hypothesize that when healthcare SLBs perceive their work to be meaningful, this will be correlated with higher well-being.

Hypothesis 5. Meaningfulness of work is positively associated with employee well-being.

As previously mentioned, healthcare SLBs operate in work environments plagued with austerity driven policies (i.e., doing more with less) coupled with expectations of high emotional labor (e.g., emotional work), and past research shows an association between emotional work and employee well-being (Mehta & Sharma, 2021). Job burnout – in particular emotional exhaustion – is often applied as a proxy of negative employee well-being (Borst & Knies, 2023; Potipiroon, 2024). We argue that, as defined, emotional exhaustion is the feeling of being overwhelmed and drained by work. Emotional exhaustion captures a sense of negativity in the workplace and therefore does not capture the eudaimonic aspect of flourishing (life giving) (Seligman, 2018). We conceptualize that while emotional exhaustion is an important workplace factor that is likely to influence employee well-being, emotional exhaustion alone does not completely represent employee well-being. Using COR theory, we argue that when SLBs feel overwhelmed and drained by work, it likely reflects that their reservoir of available resources is being depleted (Hobfoll, 2011), which then reduces their perceptions of overall positivity and pleasure (i.e., the hedonic dimension) (Chen, & WestmanHobfoll, 2016), and their ability to be able to flourish and exhibit personal growth (i.e., the eudaimonic aspect).

Hypothesis 6. Emotional exhaustion is negatively associated with employee well-being.

2.5. How meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion mediate the relationship between organisational justice and employee well-being

We have identified organisational justice as an important personal resource that will contribute to an employee's sense of their overall wellbeing. From a resource perspective, if work is perceived as meaningful, it contributes a job resource that employees can combine with perceptions of fairness to create a resource caravan and resource gain spirals, which can be invested to cope with work challenges (COR Principle 2) and stressors that result in employees feeling overwhelmed and drained by work (COR Corollary 1). However, if employees perceive organisational injustice and limited meaningfulness of work (or meaningless work), this creates a work environment where employees are likely to lack the resources to cope with workplace challenges and stressors, which is likely to be particularly problematic for professional SLB wellbeing, as they are continuously expected to operate with a public service gap and exhibit high levels of emotional labor (author et al., 2025). In addition, when employees lack the required resources to cope in the workplace, it also shows that they lack the resources to invest in protecting against resource loss or acquiring new resources (COR Principle 2). We, therefore, argue that the meaningfulness of work is an important mediator that can be applied with organisational justice to

help SLBs cope with emotional exhaustion and to maintain and manage their overall wellbeing. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 7. Meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion will mediate the relationship between organisational justice (a) interactional, b) distributive, and c) procedural and employee well-being

3. Method

3.1. Procedure

The process involved meeting with the human resources and risk managers in 16 healthcare organisations of nine healthcare authorities located in Sicily, Italy, with a total work population of approximately 10,000 employees (including doctors, nurses, allied health such as dieticians, administrators, cleaners). Using the survey platform Qualtrics, employees were invited to complete the survey. Wave one involved surveying 3,471, of which 2459 returned completed surveys from all 16 locations. Wave two involved surveying the previous responders ($n = 2459$), which came from only 12 of the locations, of which 1012 began the survey and 1067 completed it (a response of 50 percent).

A Confidentiality Statement was signed by the researchers and submitted to the general management of the participating healthcare organisations. Furthermore, to proceed with the questionnaire, each participant was required to review and accept the informed consent notice, in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

3.2. Participants

The sample included 352 (49.9 %) doctors, 295 (41.8 %) registered nurses, and 58 (8.2 %) nurse managers. From the survey participants, 366 (51.9 %) were female and 339 (48.1 %) were male. The age profile of the cohort suggests an aging employee group, with 5 (.7 %) younger than 25 years old, 99 (14 %) aged between 26 and 35 years, 151 (21.4 %) between 36 and 45 years old, 255 (36.2 %) between 45 and 55 years old, and 195 (27.7 %) aged more than 55 years old. The education profile was typical of healthcare professionals comprising 119 (16.9 %) who had completed middle or high school, 297 (42.1 %) who had completed a bachelor's degree, and 289 (41 %) who had completed a postgraduate degree.

3.3. Timing

We used pre-validated original measures, along with their respective scales, to examine each of the study variables. To avoid common method bias, we examine 705 public healthcare employees employed in one Italian region using a split administration survey with an eight-week time lag (Wave 1 was collected on May 3, 2021, and Wave 2 was collected on July 15, 2021).

3.4. Measures

3.4.1. Time 1 measures

3.4.1.1. Organisational justice. We measured organisational justice with three latent variables; each being measured on Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The dimensions comprise: (1) procedural justice (7 items), (2) distributive justice (4 items), and (3) interactional justice (4 items). Specifically, we used 15 items from Colquitt's (2001) organisational justice scale, including seven procedural justice items, four distributive justice items and four interactional justice items. The Average Variance Extracted AVE (which refers to the extent to which the variance is explained by the construct) for procedural justice (.63), interactional justice (.82), and distributive justice (.69) all exceeded .50. There was also evidence of composite reliability, procedural justice (.91), interactional justice (.95), and distributive

justice (.90).

3.4.1.2. Meaningful work. Meaning of work is the value of a work goal or purpose to an individual's own principles or values, which we refer to as meaningful work. We measure the extent employees perceive their work to be meaningful at Time 1 using a 3-item measure that was derived from Spreitzer's (1995) 12-item measure of empowerment. The observed items were measured on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The AVE was .68 and composite reliability .90.

3.4.1.3. Emotional exhaustion. We measured emotional exhaustion with 5-items on a Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always), as developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). The AVE was .68 and composite reliability .92.

3.4.2. Time 2 measures

3.4.2.1. Employee well-being. We measured employee well-being with 8-items on a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 3 (always) developed by Berkman (1971). The AVE was .52 and composite reliability .74.

3.5. Demographic measures

3.5.1. Control variables

As healthcare roles are predominantly undertaken by female employees, we controlled for gender (male = 0, female = 1) (Iverson & Pullman, 2000). As well, age and education are two factors that have been found to be related to employee wellbeing. We, therefore, controlled for participant education level and age.

3.6. Data analysis

Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM), which allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple dependent relationships and mediation effects. SEM was selected for its capacity to model latent constructs, thereby accounting for measurement error and providing a more accurate reflection of the underlying theoretical variables (Hair et al., 2019). Model fit was assessed using standard global fit indices to evaluate the overall model's adequacy.

Specifically, we used a two-step approach to latent variable structural equation modelling, examining a measurement and then a structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). To complete the two-step approach, we used Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) v.27 and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v.27. To examine the model fit of the measurement and structural models, we followed prescriptions by Hu and Bentler (1999), including normed chi-square between 1 and 3, RMSEA close to .06, SRMR close to .08, and greater than .90 for other indices. To test the mediation hypothesis, bootstrapping with 1000 samples and a 95 percent bias-corrected confidence interval within AMOS was used by examining the significance of direct and indirect effects of predictor, mediator and criterion variables (MacKinnon et al., 2002).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The mean results depicted in Table 1 outline that most SLBs neither agree nor disagree that work procedures, results of work, and interactions at work are fair. In addition, the average participant reported sometimes feeling emotionally exhausted, yet they perceived high levels of meaningful work and well-being. The mean results reflect that there is room for improving employee perceptions of fairness at work and general levels of emotional exhaustion. We also found that the level of

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all variables and controls.

	$\bar{x}$	Σ	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Education	3.28	.79	1								
2. Gender	1.52	.50	.01	1							
3. Age	3.76	1.03	-.05	-.20**	1						
4. Well-being T2	2.41	.43	-.01	-.04	-.03	1					
5. Emotional exhaustion T1	3.35	1.84	.04	.09*	-.08*	-.65**	1				
6. Meaningfulness of work T1	6.40	.83	.02	.03	-.04	.23**	-.21**	1			
7. Procedural justice T1	3.13	.91	-.03	-.02	.05	.32**	-.34**	.18**	1		
8. Distributive justice T1	3.55	.97	-.08*	-.04	.01	.34**	-.33**	.24**	.48**	1	
9. Interactional justice T1	3.93	1.01	-.01	.00	-.03	.34**	-.32**	.21**	.52**	.51**	1

Note. **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

$\bar{x}$ = mean; Σ = standard deviation.

education was significantly associated with the meaningfulness of work, $r = .06$, $p < .05$, gender was associated with emotional exhaustion, $r = .06$, $p < .05$, and age was negatively associated with employee well-being, $r = -.09$, $p < .05$. As a result, we included education level, gender, and age as control variables in the following analyses.

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

As depicted in Table 2, the hypothesized 6-factor measurement model – including all study variables was mostly a good fitting model, except the chi-square test was significant and exceeded the cut-off value of 3: $\chi^2(419) = 1232.167$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .94 and SRMR = .05. Although the chi-square test is sensitive to sample size, several observed items from the well-being scale were below the minimum factor loading of .50, indicating some concerns with convergent validity (Hu & Bentler, 1999). As such, we removed well-being items 3 “how often do you feel bored?”, 6 “how often do you feel vaguely uneasy about something without knowing why?”, 7 “particularly excited or interested in something”, and 8 “how often do you feel on top of the world”. The remaining 4-item well-being scale was used to measure employee well-being.

There were two further indicators of significant misfit, including standardized residual covariances (SRC) and modification indices (MI). First, in sufficiently large samples (e.g., >200), an SRC exceeding (plus or minus) 2 indicates misfit as there is a discrepancy between the observed and model implied covariances. The distributive justice item 4 (i.e., the following items refer to an outcome – results of your work – is your outcome justified, given your performance?) resulted in SRCs above 2 when examining the covariance with most other observed items, ranging from - 4.07 to 6.31. Due to the significant misfit, we removed distributive justice item 4. Second, a large modification index (MI = 285.599, $p\Delta = .292$) between procedural justice item 2 “how much in your hospital can you influence decisions arrived by procedures at your work?” and item 6 “how much in your hospital are you able to appeal decisions arrived at by procedures at your work?”, indicating a significant cross-loading between the two items. We removed procedural justice item 2 as it cross-loaded with several other observed items from the organisational justice scales. The 6-factor modified measurement model (i.e., employee well-being, meaningfulness, emotional exhaustion, and three organisational justice variables) was a good fitting

model, $\chi^2(260) = 515.345$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .98 and SRMR = .03. In this case, removing the observed items from their respective latent variables improves the parsimony of the measurement model. In addition, we opted to remove the observed items (indicators) in question to maintain the key assumption in a confirmatory factor analysis that observed items are conditionally independent given the latent variable (Brown, 2015). The modified measurement model was significantly better fitting when compared with the hypothesized model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 716.822$, $\Delta df = 159$, $p < .001$).

We compared three distinct measurement models - 6-factor modified measurement model (model 1), 5-factors (model 2 - combined procedural and distributive justice), and 4 factors (model 3 - combined procedural, distributive, and interactional justice). As depicted in Table 2, the 6-factor model (model 1) provided a significantly better fit when compared to the 5-factor (model 2) and 4-factor (model 3) models. Specifically, while Model 1 fit the data well, exceeding the minimum model fit cut-off values proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), Models 2 and 3 did not meet the minimum model fit cut-off values; thus, the proposed structural models did not adequately fit the data. These results provide some support for discriminant validity.

4.3. Structural model testing

First, when examining the structural models, we found that the control variables — education level, gender, and age — were not significantly related to any of the endogenous variables. As such, we removed the control variables when comparing and testing the structural models. Next, we compared a saturated (hypothesized) structural model and a fully mediated structural model. The fully mediated model differed from the hypothesized model as the direct parameters from the organisational justice variables to employee well-being were removed. First, we estimated the saturated structural model, which fit the data well, $\chi^2(260) = 515.345$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .03, CFI = .98. Finally, we estimated the fully mediated model, which also fit the data well, $\chi^2(263) = 532.560$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .04, CFI = .98. However, a chi-square difference test revealed the saturated structural model resulted in a significantly better fit when compared with the fully mediated structural model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 17.215$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p < .001$). As a result, we opted to test the study variables using the saturated model (see Fig. 1).

Table 2

Comparison of alternate measurement and structural models.

Model		χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Base	Hypothesized measurement model (6 factors)	1232.167	419				.94	.05	.05
1	Modified measurement model (6 factors)	515.345	260	716.822	159	<.001	.98	.03	.04
2	5-factor model (combined procedural and distributive justice)	1704.586	265	1189.241	5	<.001	.88	.07	.09
3	4-factor model (combined procedural, interactional, and distributive justice)	3453.013	269	2937.668	9	<.001	.74	.11	.13
Base	Hypothesized (saturated) structural model	515.345	260				.98	.03	.04
1	Fully mediated structural model	532.560	263	17.215	3	<.001	.98	.04	.04

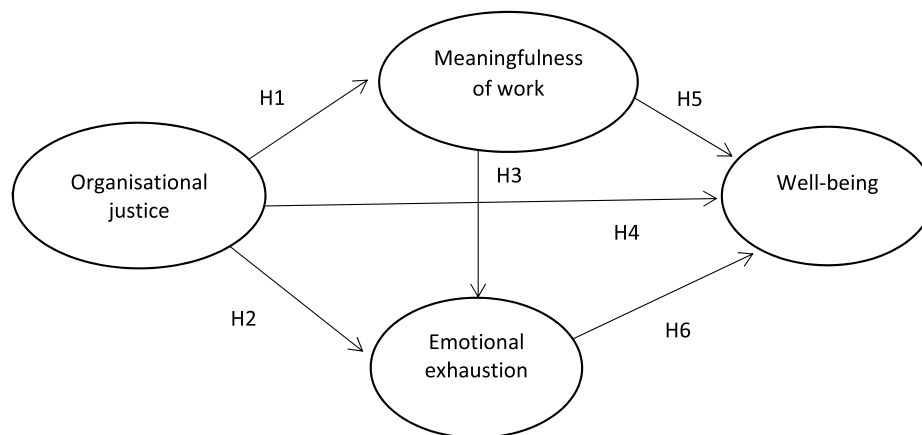


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

4.4. Hypothesis testing

The results from the structural equation model provide full support for hypotheses 2, 3 and 6, and partial support for hypothesis 1 (see Fig. 2 and Table 3). Hypothesis 1 was partially supported with T1 distributive justice ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) and T1 interactional justice ($\beta = .12, p < .05$) positively linked with T1 meaningfulness of work. Organisational justice explained 8.1 percent of the variance in meaningfulness of work.

Hypothesis 2 was supported with T1 interactional justice ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$), T1 distributive justice ($\beta = -.12, p < .01$), and T1 procedural justice ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$) positively linked with T1 emotional exhaustion. Hypothesis 3 was supported as T1 meaningfulness of work was negatively and significantly associated with T1 emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$). Together, organisational justice and meaningfulness of work explained 20.4 percent of the variance in emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 4 was not supported as T1 interactional justice ($\beta = .07, p > .05$), T1 distributive justice ($\beta = .08, p > .05$), and T1 procedural justice ($\beta = .04, p > .05$) were not significantly associated with T2 employee well-being. Hypothesis 5 was not supported as T1 meaningfulness of work was not significantly associated with employee well-being ($\beta = .06, p > .05$). Hypothesis 6 was supported as T1 emotional exhaustion was negatively associated with T2 employee well-being ($\beta = -.73, p < .001$). Interestingly, the findings from hypotheses 5 and 6 provide some support for COR Principle 1, which suggests that resource loss (in this case, emotional exhaustion) is disproportionately more

salient than resource gain (in this case, meaningful work) in terms of protecting, maintaining, and developing employee well-being (Hobfoll, 2011). Together, organisational justice, meaningfulness of work, and emotional exhaustion explained 67.9 percent of the variance in employee well-being.

There was support for Hypothesis 7. The indirect relationship between T1 interactional justice ($\beta = .122, p < .01$), T1 distributive justice ($\beta = .117, p < .01$) and T1 procedural justice ($\beta = .164, p < .001$) and T2 employee well-being was significant. As standardized direct effects from T1 organisational justice to T2 employee well-being were not significant, we can conclude a full mediation between interactional/procedural/distributive justice and employee well-being. These findings depict that the relationship between organisational justice and employee well-being is fully explained by the dual mediators (i.e., meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion). That is, perceptions of justice appear to influence well-being only to the extent that SLBs shape how meaningful employees find their work and how emotionally drained they feel.

5. Discussion

This paper explores the impact of organisational justice on the meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion among healthcare SLBs, drawing on COR theories. The contribution of the study is that it provides greater clarity about the impact of SLBs' perceptions of organisational justice or their work and wellbeing. One of the strongest

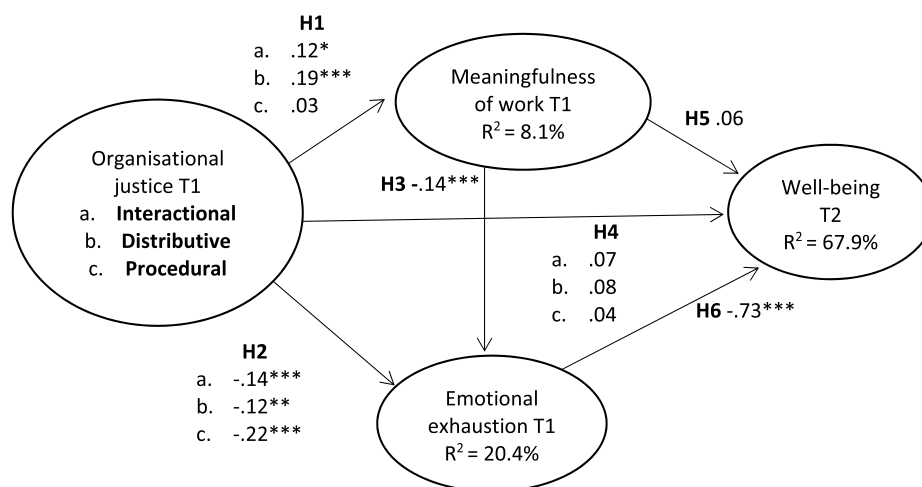


Fig. 2. Hypothesized saturated structural model - parameter estimates (standardized) ***Correlation is significant at the .001 level. *Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

Table 3
Structural model standardized parameter estimates and hypotheses outcomes.

Hypothesis	Result	Outcome
H1: Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is positively correlated with the meaningfulness of work.	a. $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$ b. $\beta = .19$, $p < .001$ c. $\beta = .03$, $p > .05$	H1 Partially supported a. Accept b. Accept c. Reject
H2: Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is negatively correlated with employee perceptions of emotional exhaustion.	a. $\beta = -.14$, $p < .001$ b. $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$ c. $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$	H2 Supported a. Accept b. Accept c. Accept
H3: Meaningfulness of work is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion for SLBs.	$\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$	H3 Supported
H4: Organisational justice (a. interactional, b. distributive, and c. procedural) is positively correlated with employee perceptions of well-being.	a. $\beta = -.14$, $p < .001$ b. $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$ c. $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$	H4 Not supported a. Reject b. Reject c. Reject
H5: Meaningfulness of work is positively correlated with employee well-being.	$\beta = .06$, $p > .05$	H5 Not supported
H6: Emotional exhaustion is negatively correlated with employee well-being.	$\beta = -.73$, $p < .001$	H6 Supported
H7: Meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion will mediate the relationship between organisational justice (a) interactional, (b) distributive, and (c) procedural and employee well-being.	Indirect effects: a. $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$ b. $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$ c. $\beta = .16$, $p < .001$	H7 Supported a. Accept b. Accept c. Accept

influences of SLBs' perception of organisational justice is the SLOs' management and resourcing strategies, which has come under increased scrutiny, especially during the Covid-19 crisis, which exposed their weaknesses in adequately managing SLBs' resources to deliver (Brodtkin, 2021; Dunlop et al., 2020) and resources to personally cope (Farr-Wharton et al., 2023; Brunetto et al., 2022). Whilst there is increasing attention examining how working conditions may negatively impact SLBs wellbeing (Farr-Wharton et al., 2023; Usman et al., 2021), the contribution of this study is that it shows the significant direct and indirect link between organisational justice and SLBs' wellbeing.

Additionally, we contribute to the existing literature by providing evidence that supports a three-dimensional model of organisational justice, as proposed by Cropanzano et al. (2002) and identify the significant role of interactional, procedural and distributive justice in mitigating emotional exhaustion, aligning with findings from Gaudet et al. (2014). Furthermore, the study extends our understanding of how meaningful work acts as a personal resource that can buffer against the negative effects of job demands, consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

Further, our findings provide partial support for Peng et al. (2024), who found distributive justice (the perceived fairness of outcomes) was positively associated with the meaningfulness of work, which contrasts with Correia and Almeida (2020), who found distributive justice was not significantly related to meaningfulness of work. In further contrast to Correia and Almeida (2020), we found that interactional justice was positively associated with the meaningfulness of work, where procedural justice (the perceived fairness of processes) was not positively associated with the meaningfulness of work. One reason for the different results regarding distributive and procedural justice may be due to the sample examined. Peng et al.'s (2024) sample comprised young people in the United States who were standing trial. Our sample was healthcare professionals, which is somewhat like Correia and Almeida (2020)'s sample; however, their sample included more physicians. More specifically, physicians may place less emphasis on distributive fairness due to

their additional discretionary power and control because of their expertise, positional power associated with their roles, including decision making related to patient care. Additionally, physicians may draw more job meaningfulness from their ability to diagnose, treat, and improve patient outcomes. Our research suggests that when healthcare professionals, in particular nurses, perceive that outcomes and processes are fair, they are more likely to find their work meaningful.

Our research provides evidence that supports findings by Gaudet et al. (2014) that procedural justice and interactional justice are negatively associated with emotional exhaustion, indicating that fair processes and respectful treatment can reduce feelings of being emotionally drained and overwhelmed by work. Distributive justice did not show a significant direct effect on emotional exhaustion. We also provide supporting evidence, which aligns with the work of Fairlie (2011), that the meaningfulness of work is significantly and negatively associated with emotional exhaustion. This implies that when healthcare professionals find their work meaningful, they are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion.

Although the existing literature reports that all three dimensions of organisational justice are directly related to employee well-being (Desrumaux et al., 2023; Lawson et al., 2009), we found that only distributive justice is significantly associated with employee well-being. We argue that by examining the role of meaningfulness of work and emotional exhaustion it provides additional explanation as to the link between perceptions of fairness and employee well-being. This highlights the importance of fair outcomes in promoting overall well-being among healthcare professionals, and the importance of maximising the meaningfulness of work and mitigating the experience of emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion fully mediated the relationship between procedural/interactional/distributive justice and well-being, in turn, underscoring the critical role of emotional exhaustion in understanding how organisational justice directly and indirectly affects employees.

As stated, all hypotheses were supported except H4 and H5. In terms of explaining the findings of H4, it is important to note that the four studies (Ali et al., 2023; Desrumaux et al., 2023; Herrera et al., 2022; Lawson et al., 2009) used to justify the expected direct relationship between organisational justice and wellbeing were different in some ways. Whilst all four studies compared the relationship between organisational justice and well-being for different cohorts in different countries, in each case wellbeing was conceptualized somewhat differently, and each used a different mediator. The findings from this study differ from the Desrumaux et al. (2023) study examining social workers in France in that, whereas they found a significant relationship between organisational justice and well-being, the findings from this study (H4) are like those of Herrera et al. (2022) that found no direct relationship between organisational justice and wellbeing for teachers in Chile. However, in both cases, different mediators fully mediated the concepts. Potential reasons for the different outcomes include the different conceptualizations of wellbeing, and the use of different cohorts across different countries.

In terms of explaining the findings of H5, two studies were used. The Arnold et al. (2007) examined whether the meaning of work mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and wellbeing for healthcare workers and service workers in Canada. The findings were that healthcare workers had both a partially and fully mediated relationship whereas for service workers the relationship was fully mediated through the meaning of work, suggesting that occupation is a critical factor. In the Usman et al. (2023) study, the meaning of work was the antecedent on wellbeing of Latin Americans and Spaniards generally. In contrast, the findings from this study show no direct relationship suggesting that country-specific differences may influence the relationship. Further studies using the same occupation and measures of wellbeing across different countries may provide further clarity about which mediators impact the relationship.

5.1. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable implications for enhancing the meaningfulness of work and psychological well-being among SLBs in public healthcare organisations. Managerial training is a priority so that leaders understand how organisational justice, especially procedural and interactional, acts as a psychological resource to reduce emotional exhaustion and sustain well-being. Such training should emphasize transparent communication, respectful workplace interactions, and inclusive decision-making that actively involves SLBs in shaping decisions relevant to their daily tasks.

Additionally, effective leaders facilitate and support SLBs using discretion to continuously transform meaningless policies into impactful service delivery, and this requires training in using reflective tools to support them negotiating ethically ambiguous or bureaucratically constrained settings. Leaders can also develop recognition systems that reward not only performance metrics, but also ethical commitment, relational skills, and acts of discretion aligned with public service values.

At the policy level, these findings suggest the need for more participatory and human-centered policy design in public healthcare that develops structures that engage SLBs in co-designing operational procedures and implementation protocols that reduce policy alienation and strengthen alignment with professional identities. Examples include interdisciplinary policy advisory groups that make strategic service delivery reform decisions and provide real-time feedback channels to all SLBs about unintended consequences or incoherences in applied procedures. Such groups could ensure policies remain responsive and contextually grounded. Such initiatives align with international benchmarks like ISO 45003, the global standard for psychological health and safety at work, offering concrete guidance for creating safer and more purposeful organisational environments.

Finally, this study reinforces the responsibility of SLOs, such as hospitals employing doctors, nurses, and allied health workers, to create work environments that actively promote Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). By ensuring just procedures, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful professional engagement, SLOs safeguard impactful service quality, which likely positively enhances staff retention, and systemic resilience in public healthcare.

5.2. Limitations and future research

There are several limitations within our study that should be acknowledged and considered when reviewing the study results. The use of one study sample limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Future research should include multiple studies, with multiple samples, and longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships between variables. In addition, the study was conducted within the public healthcare sector in one region of Italy. Future studies should examine these relationships in other sectors and geographic locations to enhance generalizability. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research could incorporate objective measures and multi-source data to validate findings.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we underscore the importance of organisational justice in shaping the experiences of SLBs working in bureaucracies. By ensuring fair processes and outcomes, and fostering a sense of meaningful work, SLOs can help reduce emotional exhaustion and enhance the overall well-being of their employees. These findings offer valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners aiming to improve work conditions and outcomes in the public sector.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elisabetta Trincherio: Project administration, Investigation,

Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Matthew Xerri:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Yvonne Brunetto:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Alberto Firenze:** Funding acquisition.

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Declarations of interest

None.

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