



## Linking employees' justice perceptions to organizational commitment and intention to leave: The mediating role of perceived organizational support

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Building on the social exchange perspective and organizational support theory, this study examined the relationships among employees' justice perceptions, perceived organizational support (POS), organizational commitment and intention to leave. A hypothesized model was developed and tested using hierarchical regression analyses on a sample of 514 practising solicitors in Hong Kong. The results showed that both procedural and distributive justice contributed to the development of POS, and POS mediated their effects on organizational commitment and intention to leave. As expected, organizational commitment was negatively related to intention to leave. Additional analyses revealed that these relationships held for both partners and non-partners in law firms.

Employee turnover represents a practical problem to an organization in terms of loss of talent and additional recruitment and training cost. Existing literature suggests that employees' organizational commitment and intention to leave are two important predictors of employee turnover (Griffeth & Hom, 1995; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). In particular, intention to leave has been considered as a proximal antecedent since it captures employees' perceptions and evaluations of job alternatives (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979). A significant negative relationship was also found between organizational commitment and intention to leave (Lum, Kervin, Clark, Reid, & Sirola, 1998; Wong, Hui, & Law, 1995).

Despite their importance in affecting work attitudes and behaviours, the role of employees' justice perceptions in the turnover process has not been adequately addressed in the current literature (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). Past studies of organizational justice have identified two major types of justice perceptions: distributive justice, which refers to fairness perception of outcomes; and procedural justice, which refers to the fairness perception of procedures used to decide the outcome allocation. Although

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much research relates these two types of justice perceptions to organizational commitment (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), only a few studies have explored their effects on intention to leave (e.g. Dailey & Kirk, 1992). Hence, the underlying processes through which organizational justice leads to employee turnover remain largely unknown.

To fill the gap in research, this study develops a model to explain the concurrent effects of distributive justice and procedural justice on organizational commitment and intention to leave. Building on a social exchange perspective and organizational support theory, we propose that both types of justice perceptions generate employees' global beliefs of being valued and cared for by the organization, termed perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), which then enhances their organizational commitment and reduces their turnover intentions. In other words, we argue that POS mediates the effects of the two justice perceptions on organizational commitment and intention to leave.

The present study extends earlier research in several ways. First, by incorporating the construct of POS, we attempt to explain the link between employees' justice perceptions and their intentions to leave using the social exchange perspective. Our study contributes to the turnover literature by viewing both types of justice perceptions as significant resources in the employee-organization exchange and by highlighting POS as a salient mediator in the process of employee turnover. Second, we include distributive justice as a major antecedent of POS in our proposed model. This relationship has been largely neglected in previous studies that considered only the effect of procedural justice on POS. Third, we attempt to address the generalizability of a Western theoretical framework in a non-Western context. It has been found that Hong Kong employees focus on both types of organizational justice when evaluating their outcomes (Fields, Pang, & Chiu, 2000). By using a sample of practising solicitors in Hong Kong, we further explore the social exchange between employees and organizations in professional organizations.

### **Literature review**

#### *Social exchange between employee and organization*

A dominant approach in explaining the employee-organization relationship is social exchange perspective, rooted in the works of Gouldner (1960) and Blau (1964). Gouldner referred to social exchange as a pattern of mutually contingent exchanges of gratification between two parties with a belief in reciprocity under a generalized moral norm. With such a norm of reciprocity, the mutuality of gratification serves to maintain a stable social system. Blau further explained the notion of social exchange by differentiating it from economic exchange. Social exchange tends to be long term, whereas economic exchange is short term and on a *quid pro quo* basis. Unlike economic exchange, social exchange involves less tangible or even symbolic resources, and both the time frame and nature of the expected future returns are not specified. Since the returns are unspecified obligations in social exchange, the exchange parties conform to the norm of reciprocity to discharge their obligations in future.

Organizational support theory draws on the social exchange perspective to explain employee-organization relationships. Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) developed POS as a central construct in understanding such an exchange process. POS refers to employees' 'global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being' (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, p. 501). POS is fostered by two

important beliefs of employees: (1) the personification of organization, and (2) rewards based on the organization's discretion. Through personification of organization, employees assign human characteristics to the organization and view actions by agents in the organization (e.g. managers) as actions of the organization as a whole (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Favourable or unfavourable treatment received by employees indicates the organization's benevolent or malevolent orientation towards them. In addition, POS can only be generated as long as employees believe that the organizational rewards they receive are based on discretionary choice as opposed to external constraints beyond the organization's control (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). Voluntary aids from the organization are highly valued by the employees since they indicate the organization's genuine respect for the employees and recognition of the employees' contributions. In brief, the above two beliefs help to identify the organizational resources available in the employee-organization social exchange.

Based on the norm of reciprocity, employees with high POS are obliged to respond favourably to the organization in the form of positive job attitudes or organizational behaviours. Existing research has found that POS is related to a variety of important outcomes such as organizational commitment (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002), job satisfaction (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1997; Stamper & Johlke, 2003), organizational citizenship behaviours (Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff, 1998) and job performance (Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann, & Birjulin, 1999). However, there has been limited investigation of the relationship between POS and intention to leave (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 2003; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997) and more empirical work has been called for (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000).

#### *Justice perceptions as resources in employee-organization exchange*

Distributive justice and procedural justice are considered to be distinct constructs (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). Early studies on organizational justice were primarily concerned with distributive justice, grounded in Adams' (1965) equity theory, which suggests that an individual calculates his/her perceived input-outcome ratio and then compares this ratio with that of a referent other. Unequal input-outcome ratios between the individual and the referent other (i.e. the presence of inequity) leads to a feeling of unfairness experienced by both parties. Motivated by this feeling of discomfort, both parties would rectify the unjust situation by reacting behaviourally (e.g. altering job performance) or psychologically (e.g. altering perception of outcomes; Greenberg, 1990). Distributive justice was found to be related to such work outcomes as pay satisfaction, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and trust in organization (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).

The focus of justice research later shifted to procedural justice (e.g. Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) when scholars noted that distributive justice could not address an individual's fair procedure pursuit (Greenberg, 1990). In the organizational context, procedural justice is considered an important resource in social exchange. It influences employees' judgment of the quality of exchange relationship with their organization (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Fasolo (1995) claimed that procedures may be evaluated by employees as discretionary actions on the part of the organization, and allowing employees' voice in decision-making procedures signifies the organization's concern and care for the employees. Shore and Shore (1995) further pointed out that repeated instances of procedural fairness in decisions have a cumulative effect on POS.

Nevertheless, the increasing attention paid to procedural justice tends to de-emphasize the role of distributive justice in the employee–organization exchange. Distributive justice is often considered to be more closely related to economic exchange than social exchange (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003). Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, and Schminke (2001) attributed such a de-emphasis of distributive justice to the practical considerations of researchers who are more apt to focus on the most promising constructs. They contested the view of treating economic and social exchange as two opposite ends of a continuum and recommended that scholars re-examine the role of distributive justice in the social exchange framework. Responding to this call, we include distributive justice in our hypothesized model and view it as a resource in the employee–organization exchange that affects employees' organizational commitment and intention to leave.

### **Hypotheses development**

#### *Justice perceptions and organizational commitment*

Organizational commitment is a multidimensional construct with various conceptualizations. Allen and Meyer (1990) identified three components of organizational commitment namely, affective, continuance and normative commitment, which were found to be correlated but distinct (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Affective commitment refers to 'an affective or emotional attachment to the organization such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in, the organization' (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 2). Past research has demonstrated that organizational justice correlated more strongly with affective commitment than the other two components of commitment (Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). In this study, organizational commitment refers to this affective commitment component.

Procedural justice has been found to have a significant positive relationship with organizational commitment (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). In their two-factor model, Sweeney and McFarlin (1993) suggested that procedural justice is a better predictor of organizational commitment when compared with distributive justice. Their explanation was that fair procedures let employees 'feel they will "get a fair shake" from the company and its representatives should they perform well in future, even if current rewards were unfair' (Sweeney & McFarlin, 1993, p. 37). Such a view resembles a social exchange orientation, although a more meaningful way to interpret this result is to draw on organizational support theory.

According to organizational support theory, POS is enhanced by the positive and discretionary treatment by the organization which leads to employees' perception of the organization's commitment to them (Shore & Wayne, 1993). Procedural justice can be seen as one aspect of such treatment that is indicative of the degree of organizational support (Moorman *et al.*, 1998). Fair procedures imply the organization's respect of employees' rights that contribute positively to POS (Moideenkutty, Blau, Kumar, & Nalakath, 2001). Under the norm of reciprocity, employees with high POS would then have a feeling of obligation to repay the organization in terms of organizational commitment. In fact, the positive relationship of organizational commitment with POS has been confirmed in studies conducted in the US (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Masterson *et al.*, 2000; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Wayne *et al.*, 2002), and the relationship is even stronger for studies conducted outside of the US (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). In view of the above, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 1a.* POS mediates the positive relationship between procedural justice and organizational commitment.

Although procedural justice is a better predictor of organizational commitment, previous research has revealed that distributive justice also has a significant effect on organizational commitment (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Randall & Mueller, 1995). However, only a few studies have examined how distributive justice affects organizational commitment through POS (e.g. Fasolo, 1995; Moideenkutty *et al.*, 2001). Whether distributive justice could be considered as discretionary treatment by the organization like procedural justice is debatable. Shore and Shore (1995) argued that employees' allocative outcomes (e.g. pay) are infrequent, whereas POS development relies on daily interactions such that procedural justice seems to be more relevant than distributive justice. Furthermore, the extent to which organizations can control these outcomes also makes a difference. In countries where unionism is strong with many legal regulations on labour affairs, the organization's discretion over employees' outcomes is much constrained. As pointed out by Moorman *et al.* (1998), employees are likely to believe that the organization has discretion over procedures even when the organization lacks discretion over outcomes.

Nevertheless, when distributive justice is operationalized more broadly to include other work outcomes such as promotions and job security (Mueller, Iverson, & Jo, 1999), employees should feel more strongly that outcome fairness is related to the organization's discretion. Cropanzano and Ambrose (2001) also made the point that pay should not be considered as the only outcome in the employee-organization relationship. Organizations also distribute benefits with less economic and more symbolic value, such as a prestigious office. If both economic and socio-emotional benefits are evaluated for outcome fairness, then it is reasonable to argue that distributive justice is under the organization's discretion and has a positive and unique impact on POS.

In Hong Kong, employers are powerful and often play a dominant role in the workplace (Ngo, Tang, & Au, 2002). Local employees are instrumental and sensitive to the organization's discretion over reward allocation. The cross-cultural study of Pillai, Williams, and Tan (2001) also found that distributive justice, but not procedural justice, was related to organizational trust of the Hong Kong sample. Hence, we propose that a fair outcome is probably perceived by employees as an organization's discretionary positive treatment to enhance POS and, in return, employees' POS secures their commitment to the organization. The following hypothesis is put forward:

*Hypothesis 1b.* POS mediates the positive relationship between distributive justice and organizational commitment.

#### *Justice perceptions and intention to leave*

Past research has demonstrated that intention to leave is one of the strongest predictors and an immediate precursor of employee turnover (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Porter & Steers, 1973). Mobley *et al.* (1979) conceptualized intentions as statements regarding the specific behaviours of interest. Employees' intentions to leave are consistently related to turnover behaviour and explain more variance in turnover than other affective or emotional responses such as job satisfaction.

The linkage between justice perceptions and intention to leave remains a topic with insufficient exploration and existing literature showed mixed results. Some studies suggested that in response to low distributive justice employees chose to quit their job

in order to end the inequity (Hendrix, Robbins, Miller, & Summers, 1998; Hom, Griffeth, & Sellaro, 1984). Others reported that procedural justice was negatively related to turnover beyond any specific outcomes since procedural justice reflected organizational norms of decision making (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Dailey & Kirk, 1992). The study of Fields *et al.* (2000) revealed that distributive justice had a significant effect on Hong Kong employees' intent to stay. It is logical to predict that when employees perceive that they are treated unfairly in terms of outcomes or procedures, they tend to leave their current organization to seek a fairer alternative. The social exchange model provides an explanatory analytical framework for this.

According to Eisenberger *et al.* (1986), POS enhances employees' effort-outcome expectancy (i.e. employees believe that greater effort towards meeting organizational goals will be rewarded later). In addition, POS meets the employees' socio-emotional needs including approval, affiliation and self-esteem (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990). It promotes employees' incorporation of organizational membership and role status into their self-identity. High POS employees tend to express stronger feelings of affiliation and loyalty to their organization and to interpret the organization's gains and losses as their own. It follows that the effort-outcome expectancy and the incorporation of organizational membership resulting from enhanced POS would reduce employees' intentions to leave the employing organization. Empirically, POS was found to be negatively related to intention to leave (Masterson *et al.*, 2000; Wayne *et al.*, 1997).

Based on our argument above that both procedural and distributive justice will be treated by employees as discretionary actions by the organization, it is logical to hypothesize that the two justice perceptions signify support from the organization and thus enhance employees' POS, which, in turn, reduces their intentions to leave the organization.

*Hypothesis 2a.* POS mediates the negative relationship between procedural justice and intention to leave.

*Hypothesis 2b.* POS mediates the negative relationship between distributive justice and intention to leave.

When employees are emotionally attached to the organization, they are less likely to intend to leave the organization. Considerable research has treated organizational commitment as a major antecedent of intention to leave and many studies have reported a significant negative relationship between the two (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Lum *et al.*, 1998; Wong *et al.*, 1995). Consistent with the current literature, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 3.* Organizational commitment is negatively related to intention to leave.

Our hypothesized model is depicted in Fig. 1.

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

Data for this study were collected in a professional career survey administered during the summer of 2002. The study population comprised practising solicitors working in law firms in Hong Kong. Law firm solicitors were selected for this study for several

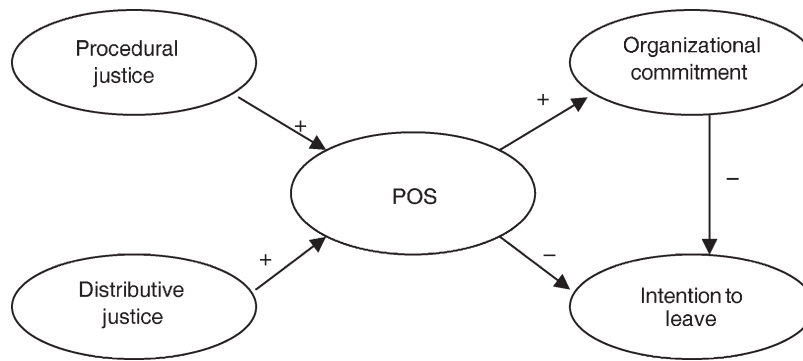


Figure 1. Hypothesized model.

reasons. First, the legal profession provides a natural setting for testing hypotheses related to justice concerns, especially procedural justice which is deeply ingrained in the legal system (Clay-Warner, 2001). Second, law firms have been widely accepted as classic professional organizations employing various strategies to induce commitment from their members (Wallace, 1995a). Third, since internal labour markets commonly exist in law firms and promotion from associate to partner represents a significant income and career advancement for lawyers (Nelson, 1988; Wallace, 1995b; Wholey, 1985), distributive justice is especially relevant to the study population.

A full list of solicitors was obtained from The Law Society of Hong Kong. A self-administered questionnaire in English, together with a cover letter stating the purpose of the survey, was mailed to each potential respondent. All respondents were asked to send the completed questionnaire back to the researchers in the return postage-paid envelope provided. We sent out 4,113 questionnaires in the initial mailing. A follow-up mailing with the same questionnaire attached took place 2 weeks after the initial mailing, reminding the respondents to complete the questionnaire. Finally, 514 completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 12.5%. Such a response rate can be considered acceptable given that it has been noted that the response rate of mailed surveys in Hong Kong was the lowest among various countries (Harzing, 2000). Among the respondents, 55.4% were male and 85.9% were Chinese. Their average organizational tenure was 6.1 years with 36.2% partners in their law firms.

A common criticism of mailed surveys is the possible non-response bias, which may affect the generalizability of our findings to the whole population (Fowler, 1993). We used two procedures to address this issue. First, we compared the sample data with the study population on two known values, gender and ethnicity. Within the study population, 64.4% were male and 83.6% were Chinese, which are comparable to our sample in the survey. Second, since late respondents are expected to be similar to non-respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977), we compared early and late respondents on major demographic variables. Early respondents (i.e. those who sent back the questionnaire to us within 2 weeks) consisted of 86% of our sample. Using *t* tests, we found no significant differences with respect to their gender, ethnicity, job position and organizational tenure, indicating that non-response bias should not pose a serious problem.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire used 6-point Likert-type scales (1 = 'strongly disagree', 6 = 'strongly agree') to measure the items of the following constructs.

#### *Procedural justice*

Moorman's (1991) 7-item measurement of procedural justice was adopted in this study. Items were modified to start with, 'In my organization'. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was .95.

#### *Distributive justice*

This construct was measured by a 5-item scale adopted from the distributive justice index of Price and Mueller (1986). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .97.

#### *Perceived organizational support*

The construct was measured by a shorter (6-item) version of the scale developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986). All items selected have high factor loadings in the original scale. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this short scale was .93.

#### *Organizational commitment*

The 8-item affective commitment scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) was used. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .85 for this scale.

#### *Intention to leave*

A 4-item scale used by Rosen and Korabik (1991) was adopted. This scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .88.

#### *Control variables*

In our analysis, we controlled for firm size and several demographic characteristics of the respondents, including gender, organizational tenure and job position. Firm size may be associated with a law firm's internal labour markets, which indirectly affects employees' level of commitment (Wallace, 1995b). Firm size was measured by the natural logarithm of the total number of employees in the firm. Existing literature also suggested that gender and organizational tenure impact employees' justice perceptions and organizational commitment (Lee, Pillutla, & Law, 2000; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997). Furthermore, respondents' job position may influence their level of organizational commitment and intention to leave since the status difference of partner and non-partner is quite distinctive in law firms. In this study, gender was measured by a dummy variable, coded 0 if the respondent is a male and coded 1 if the respondent is a female. Organizational tenure was measured as the respondent's total number of years working in the current organization. Lastly, job position was measured by a dummy variable, coded 1 if the respondent is a partner and coded 0 if not.

#### **Analytical strategy**

Four conditions must be fulfilled to evidence a mediating effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986). First, the independent variable must predict the dependent variable. Second, the independent variable must affect the mediator. Third, the mediator must affect the



dependent variable. Finally, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable becomes less when the mediator is controlled.

To test whether our mediating hypotheses fulfilled the above conditions, we employed a series of hierarchical regression analyses under the following procedures. In Step 1, the mediator, POS, was regressed on the control variables and the two predictors (i.e. procedural justice and distributive justice), respectively. In Step 2, we regressed each criterion variable (i.e. organizational commitment and intention to leave) on each of the two predictors. In Step 3, we regressed the criterion variable on each predictor and the mediator together. POS is evidenced as a mediator when the effect of the predictor on the criterion variable becomes less, as shown by the change in regression coefficients. Full mediation exists when such an effect becomes non-significant (Holmbeck, 1997).

To test Hypothesis 3, we evaluated the effect of organizational commitment in the regression model for predicting intention to leave, while controlling procedural justice, distributive justice and POS.

## Results

Before testing the hypotheses, we performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to evaluate the distinctiveness of the measures used in this study. The model fit of a five-factor measurement model (i.e. procedural justice, distributive justice, POS, organizational commitment and intention to leave) was assessed using LISREL 8.53. As the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test is sensitive to sample size, overall model fit was also examined by various fit indices including root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), Tucker-Lewis non-normed index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973), incremental fit index (IFI; Bollen, 1989) and the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990). A good model fit is shown when RMSEA is below .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993) and TLI, IFI and CFI scores are above .90 (Byrne, 1998). In our analysis, chi-square of the five-factor model was 1,508.87 with 395 *df* ( $p < .001$ ), while the other fit indices were: RMSEA = .077, TLI = .97, IFI = .97, CFI = .97. All fit indices were within the recommended range, indicating an acceptable model fit. In the next step, we linked all the measures of the five constructs to one single factor to perform the Harman's one-factor test. Results of this one-factor model were  $\chi^2(405) = 6,693.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .22, TLI = .85, IFI = .86 and CFI = .86, which displayed a poor model fit. We compared this one-factor model with the five-factor model. The significant chi-square change ( $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 5,184.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that the respondents of this study could distinguish the five constructs well.<sup>1</sup>

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among variables are reported in Table 1. Among the several control variables, organizational tenure and job position had moderate correlations with the key variables under study, where partners were more committed to the organization ( $r = .36$ ) and had less intention to leave ( $r = -.30$ ). The five key variables were also significantly correlated with each other. Procedural and distributive justice were positively related to organizational commitment ( $r = .48$  and  $.42$ ) and POS ( $r = .68$  and  $.55$ ), but negatively related to intention to leave ( $r = -.40$

<sup>1</sup> We also performed Harman's one-factor test by entering all scale items into a principal components analysis and examined the unrotated factor solution. Six factors possessing an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 emerged, which accounted for 75.1% of variance. The first factor accounted for 44.9% of variance, which showed that the items did not load on a general single factor.

and  $-.36$ ). It should also be noted that POS was more strongly related to organizational commitment ( $r = .67$ ) and intention to leave ( $r = -.57$ ) than the two justice perceptions. Finally, organizational commitment had a strong and negative correlation with intention to leave ( $r = -.66$ ).

Table 2 presents the regression results from testing the mediating hypotheses for the full sample. In Step 1, each predictor was entered with the control variables in separate regression models. In line with our expectation, procedural justice ( $\beta = 0.66, p < .001$ ) and distributive justice ( $\beta = 0.53, p < .001$ ) were positively related to POS. Moreover, in Step 2, they were found to be positively related to organizational commitment ( $\beta = 0.41$  and  $0.37, p < .001$ ) and negatively related to intention to leave ( $\beta = -0.35$  and  $-0.33, p < .001$ ). The above results fulfil the first two conditions of testing mediation. In Step 3, POS was added into each regression model. It was found to have a significant effect on organizational commitment ( $\beta = 0.61, p < .001$ ), and the formerly significant relationships between procedural justice and organizational commitment became non-significant ( $\beta = 0.01, ns$ ). The result thus supported Hypothesis 1a. When distributive justice and POS were included in the regression model, a similar result was obtained with a significant effect of POS ( $\beta = 0.57, p < .001$ ) and a non-significant effect of distributive justice ( $\beta = 0.07, ns$ ) on organizational commitment. This also provided support for Hypothesis 1b.

In this same step (i.e. Step 3), when intention to leave was regressed on both procedural justice and POS, the effect of POS was found to be significant ( $\beta = -0.55, p < .001$ ). However, the formerly significant relationship between procedural justice and intention to leave became non-significant ( $\beta = 0.01, ns$ ). This supported Hypothesis 2a. A similar pattern was also noted when both distributive justice and POS were included in the regression model to predict intention to leave. POS was found to be significantly related to intention to leave ( $\beta = -0.51, p < .001$ ), whereas the relationship between distributive justice and intention to leave became non-significant ( $\beta = -0.06, ns$ ). This implies that POS fully mediated the relationship between distributive justice and intention to leave, which supported Hypothesis 2b.

Additionally, we regressed intention to leave on organizational commitment with the two justice perceptions and POS being controlled. As revealed in Table 3, organizational commitment was negatively related to intention to leave ( $\beta = -0.48, p < .001$ ), and thus Hypothesis 3 gained empirical support. Our result also showed that organizational commitment acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between POS and turnover intention. Although the beta coefficient of POS was statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.24, p < .001$ ) in the model, it was much smaller than those reported in Table 2 ( $\beta = -0.55$  and  $-0.51, p < .001$ ), implying the mediating role of organizational commitment linking POS to intention to leave.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Additional analyses on partner and non-partner groups**

Partners are generally considered as employers or co-owners in law firms since they share the profits and liabilities of the firm. Because of their role and status in the organization, one may expect the factors that determine partners' job attitudes would be different from non-partners. In the regression analyses shown in Table 2, the

<sup>2</sup> We also conducted another set of regression analyses without entering the control variables. The same pattern of results was found and all our hypotheses were supported.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Firm size	3.81	1.32								
2. Gender (female = 1)	0.45	0.50	.17***							
3. Organizational tenure	6.09	6.29	.06	-.24***						
4. Job position (partner = 1)	0.36	0.48	-.02	-.30***	.45***					
5. Procedural justice	3.47	1.15	-.03	-.18***	.24***	.23***				
6. Distributive justice	3.89	1.29	.12**	-.03	.14**	.18***	.42***			
7. POS	4.02	1.05	-.03	-.14**	.21***	.29***	.68***	.55***		
8. Organizational commitment	3.74	0.90	-.06	-.14**	.33***	.36***	.48***	.42***	.67***	
9. Intention to leave	2.77	1.26	.04	.11*	-.19***	-.30***	-.40***	-.36***	-.57***	-.66***

Notes. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , all two-tailed tests ( $N$  ranges from 446 to 514).

**Table 2.** Results for hierarchical regression testing mediating hypotheses (full sample)

Predictors	Criterion variables		
	POS	POS	POS
<b>Step 1</b>			
Firm size	–0.01	–0.09*	
Gender (female = 1)	0.04	–0.04	
Organizational tenure	–0.01	0.08	
Job position (partner = 1)	0.16***	0.15**	
Procedural justice	0.66***	0.53***	
Distributive justice	.48	.36	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	84.06***	50.80***	
F statistic			
	Organizational commitment	Organizational commitment	Intention to leave
<b>Step 2</b>			
Firm size	–0.06	–0.12**	0.04
Gender (female = 1)	0.05	0.00	–0.04
Organizational tenure	0.15**	0.20***	–0.02
Job position (partner = 1)	0.21***	0.20***	–0.20***
Procedural justice	0.41***	0.35***	–0.35***
Distributive justice	.31	.37***	–0.33***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	40.66***	.29	.18
F statistic		37.75***	20.54***
	Organizational commitment	Organizational commitment	Intention to leave
<b>Step 3</b>			
Firm size	–0.06	–0.07*	0.04
Gender (female = 1)	0.03	0.03	–0.01
Organizational tenure	0.16***	0.16***	–0.03
Job position (partner = 1)	0.11**	0.12**	–0.11*
Procedural justice	0.01	0.01	0.01
Distributive justice	0.61***	0.07	–0.06
POS	.50	0.57***	–0.51***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	74.24***	.50	.34
F statistic		74.08***	39.49***

Notes. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (standardized regression coefficients are reported);  $N = 443$ .

**Table 3.** Results for hierarchical regression testing Hypothesis 3

Predictors	Intention to leave		
	Full sample	Partner subsample	Non-partner subsample
Firm size	0.01	0.02	0.00
Gender (female = 1)	0.00	0.03	-0.02
Organizational tenure	0.04	0.09	0.01
Job position (partner = 1)	-0.06		
Procedural justice	0.01	-0.07	0.05
Distributive justice	-0.02	-0.06	0.01
POS	-0.24***	-0.16	-0.29***
Organizational commitment	-0.48***	-0.48***	-0.47***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.46	.39	.42
F statistic	47.74***	16.50***	28.39***
N	443	172	271

Notes. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (standardized regression coefficients are reported).

respondents' job position was found to be a significant predictor of organizational commitment and intention to leave. Moreover, as compared with non-partners, partners perceived more distributive justice ( $t = 4.04$ ;  $p < .001$ ), procedural justice ( $t = 5.27$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and POS ( $t = 6.95$ ;  $p < .001$ ). They were also more committed to their organizations ( $t = 8.82$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and had less intention to leave ( $t = -7.06$ ;  $p < .001$ ). One may expect that the two groups are different in the mechanism of employee-organization social exchange. To explore this issue further, we split our sample into partner and non-partner groups and then conducted regression analyses for each group, respectively, using the same procedures as above.

Tables 4 and 5 present the regression results for partner and non-partner subsamples. The pattern of relationships among variables for the two groups resembles that for the full sample. In other words, POS acts as a full mediator between justice perceptions and organizational commitment, and between justice perceptions and intention to leave, regardless of respondents' job position. As shown in Table 3, the only difference noted was the mediating effect of organizational commitment in the relationship between POS and intention to leave. For the partner group, such a relationship was fully mediated by organizational commitment. In contrast, for the non-partner group, only a partial mediation was evidenced, as the coefficient of POS remained significant ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the model.

## Discussion and conclusion

Despite the considerable research on employee turnover, employees' justice perceptions have not been adequately examined in existing turnover models. This limits our understanding of the possible sources of employee turnover and distracts the organization's effort to implement appropriate measures to cope with staff turnover. In the present study, we attempted to address this issue by evaluating the effects of justice perceptions on employees' intention to leave. Employing the social exchange perspective, a conceptual model was developed and tested with data collected from a sample of practising solicitors in Hong Kong.

**Table 4.** Results for hierarchical regression (partner subsample)

Predictors	Criterion variables		
	POS	POS	POS
<b>Step 1</b>			
Firm size	–0.04	–0.18*	
Gender (female = 1)	0.01	–0.03	
Organizational tenure	–0.04	0.12	
Procedural justice	0.67***		
Distributive justice	.43	0.40***	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	33.3   ***	.17	
F statistic		9.83***	
<b>Step 2</b>			
Firm size	–0.11	–0.20**	0.07
Gender (female = 1)	–0.06	–0.08	0.06
Organizational tenure	0.14	0.22**	0.04
Procedural justice	0.36***		–0.37***
Distributive justice	.19	0.26***	–0.27***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	11.03***	.13	.08
F statistic		7.53***	4.62***
<b>Step 3</b>			
Firm size	–0.09	–0.09	0.05
Gender (female = 1)	–0.07	–0.06	0.07
Organizational tenure	0.16**	0.15*	0.01
Procedural justice	–0.07		–0.04
Distributive justice	0.65***	0.02	–0.08
POS	.43	0.60***	–0.48***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	26.88***	.42	.27
F statistic		26.71***	13.44***

Notes. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (standardized regression coefficients are reported);  $N = 172$ .

**Table 5.** Results for hierarchical regression (non-partner subsample)

Predictors	Criterion variables		
	POS	POS	POS
<i>Step 1</i>			
Firm size	0.01	-0.04	
Gender (female = 1)	0.06	-0.06	
Organizational tenure	0.03	0.06	
Procedural justice	0.67***	0.63***	
Distributive justice	.44	.38	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	53.05***	43.25***	
F statistic			
<i>Step 2</i>			
Firm size	-0.03	-0.07	0.05
Gender (female = 1)	0.11*	0.03	-0.02
Organizational tenure	0.18***	0.20***	-0.09
Procedural justice	0.45***	0.46***	-0.35***
Distributive justice	.23	.24	-0.36***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	21.27***	22.66***	.13
F statistic			11.10***
<i>Step 3</i>			
Firm size	-0.04	-0.05	0.03
Gender (female = 1)	0.08	0.07	-0.05
Organizational tenure	0.16***	0.17***	-0.06
Procedural justice	0.05	0.11	0.03
Distributive justice	0.59***	0.55***	-0.04
POS	.43	.43	-0.52***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	41.19***	41.16***	.29
F statistic			23.40***

Notes. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (standardized regression coefficients are reported); N = 271.

The results largely support our hypotheses that both procedural and distributive justice have significant impacts on organizational commitment and intention to leave, mediated through POS. These findings are consistent with Meyer *et al.*'s (2002) argument that organizational support was a possible mechanism through which other work experience variables (e.g. organizational justice) influence affective commitment.

Furthermore, as shown in our study, turnover can be viewed as the result of a social exchange process in which employees perceive the organization's care and respect as a consequence of fair procedures and outcomes. To reciprocate such organizational support, employees will develop a stronger attachment to the organization and have less intention to quit their jobs. Thus, to avoid staff turnover, organizations must ensure their policies and practices reinforce employees' justice perceptions. Given the salient role of POS in the process of employee-organization exchange, organizations also need to implement measures to enhance POS. Moreover, managers should convey clear messages to employees that the organization feels responsible for, and values, its employees. Open and regular communication with employees may affirm their perception of the organization's discretion and readiness to provide any possible assistance needed.

Western POS literature generally views procedural justice as the prominent resource in the employee-organization exchange. Our findings reflected that, in addition to procedural justice, Hong Kong lawyers also place strong emphasis on distributive justice when evaluating support from their employers. It has been contended that local employees are instrumental (Ngo *et al.*, 2002) and they tend to focus on the implications of reward allocation in their organizations (Pillai *et al.*, 2001). For that reason, distributive justice seems to play a salient role for them in evaluating their employing organizations. The present study lends support to this argument and extends existing POS literature by confirming distributive justice as a significant resource in social exchange between employees and their organizations. Practically, our findings suggest that local firms should take appropriate action to ensure provision of sufficient distributive justice when managing their employees. In addition to ensuring procedural justice, managers should also provide employees with comparison standards in order to avoid perceptions of distributive injustice.

Our additional analyses on partners and non-partners demonstrated that the mechanism of employee-organization exchange is similar for both groups. Justice concerns and POS are crucial factors affecting partners' organizational commitment and intention to leave, which is the same as for non-partners. This adds to the literature on partners' turnover in the legal profession (Nelson, 1988; Wallace, 1995a).

Previous research has noted that POS was a weak determinant of turnover and it affected turnover intention through organizational commitment (Allen *et al.*, 2003). However, we found that, for non-partners, POS was a proximal antecedent of intention to leave with a direct effect on it. In other words, if employees do not perceive sufficient care and support from their organization, then a search for alternative employment would be a direct attitudinal reaction from them. This result further highlights the importance of securing high POS among professional workers.

### **Limitations**

Despite the above implications, several limitations of this study should be recognized. First, our research design was cross-sectional, which precludes making inferences of



causality among the variables. For example, the causal sequence from organizational justice to POS cannot be unambiguously determined, and it is possible that POS affects organizational justice, rather than the other way around. Second, although the confirmatory factor analyses supported that idea that the constructs under study were empirically separable, our self-reported data are still susceptible to common method variance. Third, we investigated turnover intention but not actual turnover of employees. Future research using a longitudinal design could address the above limitations. Fourth, similar to other prior studies on POS, we did not measure the norm of reciprocity, which is considered a starting mechanism for the social exchange relationship (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Future research may include this construct so as to provide a full understanding of the employee-organization exchange. Fifth, our study focused on distributive and procedural justice and did not explore the effects of interpersonal and informational justice. In addition, we did not include continuance and normative organizational commitment in our model. Future research efforts evaluating the possible roles of continuance and normative organizational commitment in the social exchange process would contribute to the existing literature. Lastly, the respondents of this study are practising solicitors in Hong Kong. The background and practices of the local legal profession may limit the generalizability of our findings to other cultural or occupational settings. Further studies should test our model in different countries with samples from different professions or occupations.

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