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# On the Relationship between Perceived Conflict and Interactional Justice Influenced by Job Satisfaction and Group Identity

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**Abstract:** The main aim of this research is to explore the relationships between perceived conflict and interactional justice. Specifically, we will try to shed light on how this relationship is mediated by a higher group identity and moderated by job satisfaction. The sample includes 308 workers from the teaching and research staff of a Spanish public university. We found that conflict has a significant direct impact on organizational justice. Group identification strongly influences organizational justice. The interaction of perceived conflict and job satisfaction over group identification is statistically significant. We discuss the main conclusions and limitations.

**Keywords:** perceived conflict; group identification; job satisfaction; interactional justice; sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a very interesting concept within organizational management. Recent research studies have stated that social sustainability is as important as financial independence [1]. Sustainability paradigms respond to the need to include future generations and produce long-term responses to recession procedures [2,3].

Overall, recent papers recognize three important dimensions of sustainability, namely economic, environmental, and social dimensions [4,5]. Several recent research studies have focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Under this framework, organizations make efforts to generate profit in a way that is socially and environmental responsible [1]. Sustainability is concerned with long-term actions that guarantee the health of both present-day and future generations [6].

Organizations are composed of multiple and complex groups, and conflicts may appear in numerous ways. Afzalur [7] states that correct management of organizational conflict must consider diagnosis and intervention in affective and substantive conflict at interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels. The author states that managers should reduce affective conflict at all levels and enable organizational members to use appropriate strategies to cope with conflicts.

As mentioned above, conflict can be seen as a constant influence on organizational dynamics that involves affective social variables. Because of this, organizations must pay attention to every single variable that may help in understanding and dealing with this phenomenon.

Brewer [8] states that ingroup identification is related to outgroup hostility and intergroup conflict. However, this is not a satisfying explanation by itself. As social identity theory states, conflict may lead to more salient and distinctive ingroup identification that may polarize and harm group dynamics.

As previous research studies state, social exchange is an important variable in managing conflict [9], and the idea of fairness is an important component of social exchange.

It is a fact that conflict is a key factor of social exchange [9,10] that may create relational stress, exacerbating ineffective exchange between coworkers. Conflict may harm trust as well, and may be seen as either affective conflict or task conflict [9]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that interactional conflict may elicit interpersonal and emotional responses, such as loss of focus, and may hinder decision-making processes [11,12]. However, we believe that conflict is a necessary growth path that can be tackled positively and constructively. Positive affective processes, such as those related to job satisfaction, may lead to positive group identification, which may help in problem resolution, for example, via perspective-taking approaches [13]. Lastly, group identification has been related to interactional justice in previous research studies [14].

In summary, this research proposes a comprehensive model that coordinates these variables and illustrates how our organizational dynamics work. The concepts and variables used in this research have been approached as outlined below.

### *1.1. Interactional Justice*

Organizational justice has been considered as a key variable of successful project delivery [15]. Adams proposed that individuals make cognitive evaluations about their contribution to an organization and the outcomes they receive. Usually, organizational justice is considered to be composed of three factors. Distributive justice refers to the fact that some outcomes, such as payment or work roles, are fairly distributed among employees. Procedural justice emphasizes the fairness of the methods and procedures used in the workplace, such as decision-making or process control [16]. Finally, interactional justice refers to the perception of how employees are treated during the decision-making process [16]. This kind of justice refers to the quality of interpersonal interaction between employees and employers. This kind of justice has been related to the establishment of healthy and positive professional and personal work relationships.

When workers perceive an environment to be just, they tend to exhibit positive organizational citizenship behavior, such as respecting others and collaborating to resolve problems. In sustainable organizations, interpersonal justice has been considered as a key component in enhancing performance, respect, and dignity. Other research studies have shown that organizational justice plays an important role in employees' affective and performance outcomes [17]. Additionally, recent research studies have strongly linked organizational justice with some health variables, such as psychological wellbeing. Specifically, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, life purpose, and self-acceptance have also been mentioned [16]. Further, other authors [18] have investigated the perception that supervisors have about the treatment they have received, and their relationship with their subordinates regarding the climate of organizational justice. The evidence says that this relationship is more important in more formal work teams. On the other hand, interactional justice has been related to some health variables, such as the risk of long and frequent absence due to sickness, independently of job insecurity and demographic variables [19].

In this research, we have decided to focus on interactional justice, which refers to the employee perception of how they are treated during the decision-making processes [20,21]. Moreover, it refers to the quality of the interpersonal interactions between the employees and employers within an organization [21]. Greenberg proposed two main aspects of interactional justice: On the one hand there is interpersonal justice, which focuses on the concern for employees regarding the treatment they receive (i.e., whether they are treated with dignity and respect). On the other hand, informational justice is related to providing information about procedures that concern employees [20]. Furthermore, interactional justice has been related to some desirable variables, such as intrinsic motivation, growth, and autonomy. Recent research studies have shown that interpersonal relationships at work are a very important factor for the wellbeing of employees and the achievement of meaningful work [22].

These findings turn interactional justice into a very interesting variable to take into account when promoting sustainable organizations. Due to this, managers must be aware of the relational aspects within their organizations in order to arrange a positive social climate. This research attempts to shed light on this phenomenon and its relationship with other desirable constructs.

### *1.2. Job Satisfaction*

Job satisfaction is a very important construct in the study of organizational psychology and team management [23]. Job satisfaction can be understood as the positive affective response towards a job as a whole [24]. This variable has been shown to be critical in the prediction of organizational outcomes, such as absenteeism, turnover intentions, relationships with coworkers, and with customers [20]. Going deeper into the interpersonal pole, it has been found that relational styles of leaders showed a statistically significant impact on job satisfaction [20]. Additionally, this construct has demonstrated an impact on health desirable variables such as mental health, physical health, and the combination of both [25]. Assessing deeper the possible impact of this variable on the organizational field, recent researchers have found that job satisfaction is significantly correlated to self-evaluations, organizational commitment, job burnout [26], and job performance [27], and also on the modulating effect exerted by high job satisfaction in relation to the perception of a discriminatory job context and the negative impact on workers' health [28]. Finally, job satisfaction has been related to emotional intelligence, an important variable that has been widely researched in the organizational field showing relations with integrative conflict management styles [29]. Given the large amount of evidence that shows that job satisfaction is a critical variable in the organizational research, this paper tries to assess how it works as a moderator between perceived conflict and group identity. It is because of classical theories, which clearly show that affective variables impact and influence cognitive processes [30]. On the other hand, recent researches have shown that experiencing similar affective job events increases the likelihood of shared satisfaction by inducing shared affect, which is clearly a group influence phenomenon.

### *1.3. Group Identity and Interactional Conflict*

It is a fact that current organizations are composed by numerous workgroups that may generate different cultural patterns within the same organization [31]. Specifically, Yubero and Morales found that in a public university, administration and services staff showed huge differences with teaching and research staff, which might be considered even as a subcultural element inside the same organization.

Following social identity theory (SIT) postulates, people are motivated to achieve a positive social identity [32]. Part of a subject self-concept comes from belonging to positive rated social groups. Work conditions, like access to resources or status, are highly related to a positive social identity [33]. Social behavior varies between a two-pole continuum: In the intergroup pole, conduct will be influenced by belonging to specific social groups. On the other hand, in the interpersonal pole, conduct will be influenced by personal relationships with other individuals [34]. Besides, based on the Self Categorization Theory [35] a hierarchy self and a hetero categorization theory is proposed. When a certain situation generates a saliency of particular group characteristics, a depersonalization process appears [36]. Hence, workers will act based on conduct norms that have their basis on the prototypical member of the group.

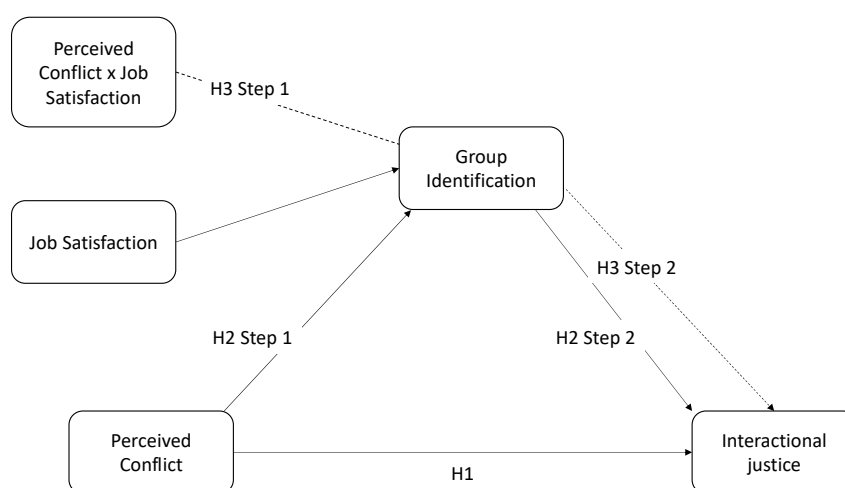
Following Tajfel's social identity theory, even arbitrary categories tend to create intergroup rivalry and intragroup favoritism. Conflict has a constant presence in any group context, and nowadays situational factors have a greater impact on conflict appearance [37]. Evert Van de Vliert defined conflict as the situation that appears when two individuals or groups, perceive that they are being obstructed or irritated by the other part [38]. Furthermore, frustration and conflict are not necessarily related to a specific conduct. Conflict may remain latent, which may be harmful in a long-term way. Summarizing, conflict requires interdependence, opposition between parts, and interaction, as Putnam and Poole state [39]. In addition, other researches have demonstrated that interpersonal

conflict at work is related to undesirable outcomes such as intrapsychic tension, reduced wellbeing, emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover intentions [40]. In order to pursue sustainability in current organizations, managers should be aware of the conflict phenomenon and be trying to foster healthy identities.

Identification with the workgroup instead of with the entire organization is related to higher levels of perceived conflict. Due to social identity processes, conflict makes desirable categories more salient, and self-identification with the work group is related to phenomena like out-group homogeneity. Social identity theory poses that when identity conflict is activated, subjects will tend to try to achieve a positive social identity. This may lead to some intergroup biases or competitive processes [20].

#### 1.4. Hypothesis

The main aim of this research is to explore the relationships between perceived conflict and interactional justice. Specifically, we will try to shed light on how this relationship is mediated by a higher group identity and moderated by job satisfaction. Precisely, we propose that perceived conflict will be statistically and significant negatively related to interactional justice (H1). Besides, this relationship will be mediated by group identification (H2). Finally, those relationships will be moderated by job satisfaction (H3). Figure 1 illustrates the hypotheses' schematic model. We strongly believe that current organizational relationships are characterized by complex interactions. In this research, we will try explore these interactions in order to achieve a deeper understanding of relational and health processes.



**Figure 1.** Hypothesis' graphical model in which the relationships between variables may be seen. Perceived Conflict will be statistically and significant negatively related to interactional justice (H1). This relationship will be mediated by group identification (H2). Those relationships will be moderated by job satisfaction (H3). \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Sample

Participants of the present study included 308 subjects (40.2% men and 43.3% women) 16.4% of the sample chose not to respond. In this sample, 0.3% were between 18 and 25 years of age, 20.4% were between 26 and 35, 25.7% were between 36 and 45, 27.9% were between 46 and 55 years of age, 17.3% of the sample were between 56 and 65 years of age, and 5.6% were over 65 years of age. 2.8% of respondents chose not to respond. Related to organizational factors analysis, time belonging to the organization and time belonging to the workgroup did not show any significant relationships with other variables. At an academic level, we found that 80.8% of the sample had a PhD, and 19.2% had a university degree. Academic training did not show any significant relationship with other variables either.

The study was approved by a bioethical expert in May of 2019, who evaluated the adequacy of every aspect of the research. Procedure, instruments, informed consent, sample composition, results, and discussion were evaluated and approved. In conclusion, both ethical and legal aspects were appropriate. The participants replied to an ad hoc questionnaire, which was delivered by private letter with the instruction manuals and informed consents. Once questionnaires were voluntarily fulfilled, subjects deposited them in the designated letterboxes located on different campuses. Data was analyzed by SPSS v.24 through regression analysis with the PROCESS macro designed by Andrew Hayes [41]. Moreover, for factorial analysis, SmartPLS v. 3.2.8 (SmartPLS GmbH, Bönningstedt, Germany, 2019) was used.

## 2.2. Instruments

The questionnaire was composed of the instruments noted below.

**Intergroup conflict.** Intergroup Competition Scale [42] was used. We adapted this instrument according to previous research support in which the reliability value = 0.87 [30]. In our sample, the scale reliability was  $\alpha = 0.79$ . The questionnaire was composed of a five item Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Examples of these items were: "I think there are communication problems between administrative and services staff and teachers and researchers" or "Teachers and researchers are constantly remarking how good administration and services' working conditions are".

**Group identity.** This variable was measured by an adapted version of the scale designed by Mael and Ashforth [42], used in previous research. The scale provided  $\alpha = 0.94$ . We adapted the questionnaire according to Topa and Morales's [43] procedure, which showed an  $\alpha = 0.75$ . This value may be considered acceptable according to George and Mallery's suggestions [44]. The response format was Likert-type from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and it was composed of three items. Examples of these items were: "I feel identified with the teachers and research staff" or "I feel comfortable working as a teachers and research staff member".

**Interactional justice.** In order to assess this variable. Moliner, Martínez-Tur and Carbonell's organizational justice scale was used. The original instrument was composed of 12 items rated in a seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Those items were grouped in 4 factors such as distributive, procedural, and interpersonal (interpersonal and informational). There are several researches that posed that organizational justice may be seen as a three-factor construct [45–47]. Moreover, interactional justice may be seen as a two factor construct with two items per factor. In this research, both are included in our analysis. Factorial analysis confirmed the saturation in one factor. The original instrument showed a Cronbach reliability coefficient  $\alpha = 0.88$ , whereas our research showed a Cronbach reliability coefficient  $\alpha = 0.82$ . Examples of these items are: "Are interpersonal conflicts treated?" or "Authorities treat me with dignity and respect".

**Job Satisfaction.** This variable was assessed with a scale that was used in previous research in the organizational field [48]. It was composed of five items; the first of them referred to general job satisfaction and the rest referred to some aspects as income, job security, interpersonal relationships, and the treat received from managers. The scale of response was Likert-type from 0 to 4, and was composed of four items. The original reliability coefficient was  $\alpha = 0.74$ . In our research, the reliability coefficient was  $\alpha = 0.82$ . Examples of the items were to rate satisfaction with sentences like: "Your overall work" or "Relationships with partners".

## 3. Results

We purposed a moderated mediation model following Andrew Hayes's suggestions [41], the first step was to check the correlations between variables. After that we tested the requirements to apply a regression model. Once this had been done, the mediation model was tested. Finally, we tested the moderated mediation model. Process macro uses a bootstrapping procedure that consists of extracting

1000 random samples from the original data. Hypothesis were tested with a 95% confidence interval. The table below (Table 1) shows the variables' correlations.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations matrix. (N = 323).

| Variable                 | M     | SD   | $\alpha$ | 1     | 2       | 3        | 4       | 5       |
|--------------------------|-------|------|----------|-------|---------|----------|---------|---------|
| 1. Age <sup>1</sup>      | 46–55 | -    | -        | -     | -       | -        | -       | -       |
| 2. Sex                   | -     | -    | -        | -     | -       | -        | -       | -       |
| 3. Conflict              | 4.50  | 1.10 | 0.79     | 0.22  | -       | -        | -       | -       |
| 4. Job Satisfaction      | 5.35  | 1.05 | 0.77     | 0.07  | 0.03    | -        | -       | -       |
| 5. Group Identity        | 5.50  | 1.20 | 0.94     | 0.06  | 0.13 *  | 0.01     | -       | -       |
| 6. Interactional Justice | 4.29  | 1.45 | 0.82     | -0.09 | -0.13 * | -0.29 ** | 0.59 ** | 0.39 ** |

<sup>1</sup> As we use ranges for age, median value is noted. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

The data table shows significant and positive relationships between the following pairs of variables; age group identity, job satisfaction with interactional justice, and group identity with interactional justice. Further, there are significant and negative relationships between these pairs of variables; gender and interactional justice, and conflict and interactional justice.

### 3.1. Mediation Model

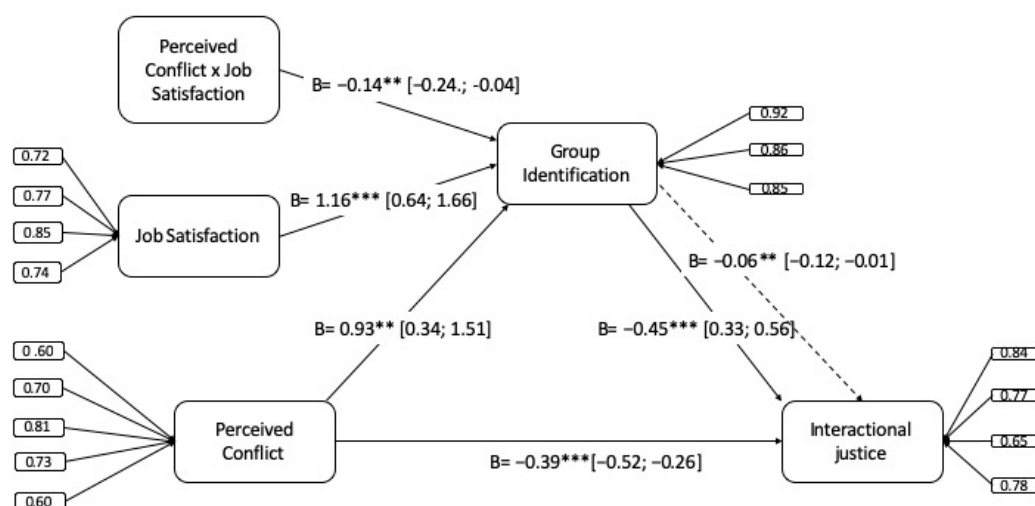
In the first term, we evaluated the direct effect of perceived conflict over interactional justice. There was a strongly significant negative relation between those variables ( $B = -0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.52; -0.26]$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).  $B$  refers to standardised regression coefficients.  $SE$  refers to Standard Error index and  $CI$  refers to the Confidence Interval. Moreover, perceived conflict was also related to group identification in the regression model ( $B = 0.93$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ , 95% CI  $[0.35; 1.51]$ ). Hence, the only presence of conflict hindered the perception of organizational justice. The simple mediation model is not supported in our sample ( $B = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI  $[-0.05; 0.06]$ ).

### 3.2. Moderation Analysis

The second part of our model tests if group identification ( $M$ ) is moderated by job satisfaction ( $W$ ) when conflict is perceived ( $X$ ). This affirmation was supported by data, being the sign of the interaction negative ( $B = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95% CI  $[-0.24; -0.03]$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Specifically, at lower values of job satisfaction, group identification is higher. Under the 50th percentile job satisfaction levels, the conditional effects are significant ( $p > 0.01$ , 95% CI  $[0.17; 0.52]$ ), above the 84th job satisfaction percentile levels, the conditional effects are not significant ( $p = 0.12$ , 95% CI  $[-0.03; 0.23]$ ).

### 3.3. Moderated Mediation Analysis

Lastly, we can affirm that the moderated mediation analysis is significant too. Conflict ( $X$ ) shows an effect on interactional justice ( $Y$ ) through group identification ( $M$ ), this relationship being moderated by job satisfaction ( $W$ ) ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI  $[-0.12; -0.01]$ ). Just taking into account group identification, this variable is statistically significant related to organizational justice ( $B = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.59$ , 95% CI  $[0.33; 0.56]$ ). Therefore, job satisfaction and group identification minimize the impact of perceived conflict over organizational justice. Concretely, when there are higher values of job satisfaction, the relationship between perceived conflict and interactional justice is not significant. At values above the 84th percentile, the coefficients are  $B = 0.05$ ;  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI  $[-0.01; 0.11]$ . The complete statistical model is reflected in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Statistical model where coefficients and effect sizes may be seen. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The main aim of this research was to explore the relationships between perceived conflict and interactional justice. Specifically, we have tried to shed light on how this relationship is mediated by a higher group identity and moderated by job satisfaction.

Following the recent papers recognitions of three sustainability factors [4], we have chosen to focus on the social perspective. It is very important to invest in socially responsible organizations, as Moldavanova proposes [1]. We have focused on interpersonal variables, specifically on perceived conflict, based on DiFabio researches that posed the relational factor as very important for organizational wellbeing [49].

Interpersonal conflict has shown a very important impact on organizational stress, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intentions [50]. On the other hand, lower levels of interactional justice can lead to higher levels of absenteeism [19] and worse interpersonal relationships [16]. When conflict is perceived, social identity process may be activated and lead the group to an identity conflict. In our study, conflict was negatively related to perceived interactional justice, but was directly related to group identification. This last variable is strongly related to perceived justice. This may be because conflict is not specifically related to leaders or organizational governing boards. When conflict and group identifications are simultaneously given, organizational justice measures tend to be low until a negative result is obtained.

Job satisfaction is a very important factor in the prediction of desirable variables such as mental health, physical health, self-evaluations, and job burnout [25,26]. Introducing it into our research has shown interesting interactions. In our sample, job satisfaction was directly related to group identification, but when combined with perceived conflict it leads to a negative relation with the construct. This finding is congruent with previous researches, which related job satisfaction with emotional intelligence and integrative conflict management [29]. Specifically, in our sample, it seems that, just taking into account job satisfaction may lead to a positive and not conflictive group identification. However, when combined with a conflictive situation, integrative problem-solving processes appear to harm group identification. It would be interesting to test the results if higher superordinate identification appears, such as organizational identification as a whole.

In our research, job satisfaction acted prototypically as a protection factor against insane group identification. This is congruent with previous researchers that found that a strong in-group identification did not predict wellbeing as strongly as superordinate identifications did [51]. On the other hand, this is in keeping with previous research that related group identification with perceived

conflict [40]. Job satisfaction tends to buffer the harming effects of group identification, but it would be interesting to develop models where organizational identification is included as well.

Future studies should investigate the relationships between emotional intelligence and group identification. Moreover, it would be interesting to test if the relationships between job satisfaction and group identifications are mediated by emotional intelligence. It is essential to discover the complex mechanisms that are behind the conflict management of organizations.

Our research has some limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, our sample was not representative. It was composed of workers from only one university instead of by using a random selection process. Future investigations must examine if these processes occur in different status groups. In our research, teachers and researchers is a high-status group, and social identity processes have demonstrated it to be different depending on group status.

Furthermore, our research consists of a correlational transversal model. This limitation must be addressed because organizational climate may change over time, and we must be prudent in our affirmations. Additionally, the sample is composed mostly of senior teachers. Younger employees may show other peculiarities.

Another limitation consists of the measurement instrument. The perceived conflict is a mix of relational, resources, and status assessment. Future investigations should try to finesse the measurement and try to establish concrete conflict and prototypical relations. Group identification should be refined too. This limitation may explain the absence of direct relationships between perceived conflict and prototypically.

Managers should be aware of the fact that promoting job satisfaction may act as a buffer to some negative outcomes within organizations. As mentioned above, current sustainable organizations should pay more attention to these social variables in order to achieve health, not only in the present, but in the future as well [52,53].

#### *Contribution of this Work to the Scientific Field*

This study describes some relevant variables in the scientific literature of recent years, but the most interesting contribution of this paper is to analyze in detail those variables that can improve working. Analyzing the importance of the variables that moderate (job satisfaction) and mediate (higher group identity) the health of the workers environment, and as a consequence the performance of the workers, can contribute to improving the management of Human Resources, and the development of healthier and more sustainable organizations

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