

Center for Management Science Research

ISSN Online: 3006-5291

ISSN Print: 3006-5283

Vol.2 No.3 (2024)



Mediating Mechanism of Psychological Empowerment in Association of Inclusive Leadership and Affective Organizational Commitment

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ABSTRACT

Our study examined the association of inclusive leadership and affective organizational commitment of the employees with the mediating role of psychological empowerment. To test the hypothesized model, a sample of faculty members from different public sector universities of Azad Jammu and Kashmir was selected. Primary data were collected through survey questionnaire. The collected responses were analyzed through structural equation modelling by using AMOS version 24. The results of the study supported hypothesized relationships, which were based on social exchange theory. Based on research findings, it is concluded that affective organizational commitment is significantly impacted by inclusive leadership in the presence of psychological empowerment. The organizations should, therefore, prioritize fostering inclusive leadership practices as they significantly enhance employees' affective organizational commitment, particularly in the presence of psychological empowerment.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Commitment, Empowerment, Employees, Education sector

Introduction

The effective and smooth operation of an organization relies on the role and reputation of the leader (Koeswayo, Haryanto, & Handoyo, 2024). Leadership is frequently connected with those in positions of authority who employ a variety of techniques to persuade and motivate their subordinates to complete organizational goals. As discussed in the extant literature, affective organizational commitment is a precursor for the attainment of organizational goals and objectives (Llorente-Alonso, García-Ael, & Topa, 2024; Padave, Kanekar, Chande, 2023). Affective commitment connects the employees with the organization emotionally, which is of paramount importance (Stazyk, Pandey, & Wright, 2011). It occurs when employees perceive that their personal values and priorities are similar to that of the company's mission, nurturing an affinity and commitment within the company. The organizations are facing acute difficulty in retaining loyal and committed employees in the current economic circumstances and especially in developing countries.

Affective organizational commitment doesn't happen in the vacuum as it is the outcome of certain leadership behavior that is required to be effective. The leader's ability can yield a lasting impact on employees' commitment. In organizational context, effective leadership is defined as the capacity of a leader to manage and control the followers while accomplishing the vision and purpose of the organization (Barnes, Vione, & Kotera, 2024; Boseman, 2008; Budur, 2020). Effective leadership is an ingredient that is equally beneficial for employees' satisfaction and commitment and for the success and survival of organizations. The leaders need inclusive behavior so that every employee feels valuable in the organization to contribute and work effectively and efficiently. The perception about an employee as a valuable member of the organization is referred to as inclusion. Through information sharing, participation in making decisions, possessing an opinion, and opportunities for advancement, practices of inclusion strive to provide people from different backgrounds with a better degree of insider status and sense of ownership (Jha, Pal, & Sarkar, 2024; Torres & Orhan, 2023).

The concept of inclusive leadership was introduced by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006). This concept stated that inclusive leaders foster an environment of psychological safety where workers feel comfortable in speaking and realize that

their thoughts and opinions are respected. This promotes a higher degree of employees' affinity and respect for diversity within organizations and is distinguished by characteristics such as active listening, empathy, and openness (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2022). As leaders communicate with the followers, the leaders should make sure that they are approachable, accessible, and available (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Umrani, Bachkirov, Nawaz, Ahmed, & Pahi, 2024). Inclusive leadership promotes a bond between employees and leaders by being available, ensuring balance in individuals' consideration, and promoting beneficial decisions. These connections could be helpful when developing the social component of a person's resources. Inclusive leaders frequently show care, promotes employees' emotional wellbeing, and recognizes each employee's individuality (Ahmed, Zhao, Faraz, & Qin, 2021; Jha et al., 2024; Shafaei & Nejati, 2024; Wang et al., 2019).

It is obvious that encouraging inclusiveness is essential to create a pleasant atmosphere for people of different backgrounds working at one place with a common goal. Achieving an inclusive environment at the workplace, however, is a difficult task that calls for a thorough analysis of all aspects of the workplace as well as a genuine determination to provide the conditions necessary for various individuals to flourish (Brimhall et al., 2017; Igboanugo, Yang, & Bigelow, 2022). Studies have shown that inclusive leaders could be beneficial for organizations by developing a feeling of group identification at work and positive interaction with other group members while displaying commitment and satisfaction through psychological empowerment (Ahmed et al., 2021; Jha et al., 2024). Spreitzer (1995) defined psychological empowerment (PE) in four aspects: meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact. It is described as internal motivation and active commitment to individuals' job description and controlling one's own work behavior in prevailing circumstances. Van Buskirk (2020) explained it as the configuration between one's professional goals and core values, self-efficacy and competence. This implies that both self-efficacy and competence gives employees the ability to act with freedom and confidence naturally enjoying psychological empowerment. According to Ryan and Deci (2024), self-determination or autonomy is the capability and effective self-governance to take the initiative and monitor self- behavior.

Although, a significant number of empirical research examined the intervening role of psychological empowerment (Choi, Tran, & Kang, 2017; Van Buskirk, 2020; Younas, Wang, Javed, & Haque, 2023), there is dearth of empirical research in this domain in Pakistan and especially Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K). The study at hand undertook to explore the prevailing phenomenon in terms of PE and its intervening role in the higher education sector of AJ&K thereby addressing the existing gap. The study is grounded on social exchange theory (SET), which suggests that individuals participate in social interactions with the expectation of achieving favorable outcomes (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan, & Ashraf, 2023; Alwali, 2024; Blau, 1964). According to this theory, leaders who foster an inclusive workplace environment and empower their staff are more likely to receive increased commitment, loyalty, satisfaction, and productivity in return. SET is widely applied in understanding workplace dynamics, leadership, interpersonal relationships, and organizational behavior, offering insights into how trust, commitment, and satisfaction develop over time (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

We have used SET to elaborate our hypothetical model in which we have examined the impact of IL on AOC of employees with the mediating role of psychological empowerment. We base our argument on the tenet of SET as a sociological and psychological framework that examines how individuals participate in social exchanges by evaluating the costs and benefits of their relationships. By examining the phenomenon, we expect that our study will contribute to existing body of research and will be helpful for decision making. The results of this study are expected to be valuable for organizations in enhancing employee commitment, promoting inclusive leadership, and creating a positive work environment. The leaders can use the study's findings to improve their leadership styles, which could raise employee dedication and produce favorable results for the organization.

Literature Review

Inclusive Leadership and Affective Organizational Commitment

The leadership research caught scholarly attention sine ages. However, a relatively new leadership concept 'inclusive leadership' was first used by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006). Subsequently, Carmeli et al. (2010) further elaborated this as a leadership style in which accessibility, availability and interactions are the key

components of leader's behavior. In this context, it could be termed as a caring leadership style. Leader inclusiveness reflects the leader's efforts to involve others in negotiations and key decisions, particularly in situations where their concerns and thought-provoking inputs might be overlooked (Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon, & Tayyeb, 2019; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). When the decision-making process involves employees at all levels, they would prefer to openly share, promote, and exhibit creative work involvement and feel psychologically empowered (Alwali, 2024; Javed, Abdullah, Zaffar, Haque, & Rubab, 2019). The involvement of employees in decision making is regarded as the tenet of relational leadership style. The relational leadership approach emphasizes a leader's effectiveness in fostering positive relationships within an organization which is somewhat similar to inclusive leadership, as both leadership styles promote inclusiveness. It focuses on collaboration and the joint efforts of individuals working in groups or teams to achieve the greater good or drive positive change in the workplace with shared norms and values.

Development of values, norms, ethics, attitudes and work behaviors are the outcomes of relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This leadership style tends to influence the coordinated efforts of employees through a social influence process and societal framework thereby developing transformative outcomes, which is a component of inclusive leadership. Carmeli et al. (2010) stated that inclusive leadership is a key component of relational leadership. An inclusive leader shows sincerity, admittance, and availability in their relationships with the followers (Alwali, 2024; Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria, & Brown, 2016). By emphasizing the significance of such actions and ensuring staff that there won't be any negative consequences for speaking out, inclusive leaders are always accessible for workers to express their thoughts and take part in the decisions, hence feel psychologically empowered (Carmeli et al., 2010; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024). Leaders with inclusiveness foster a culture in which staff members feel appreciated or psychologically empowered for their original ideas and viewpoints. These exemplary leadership traits let staff members know that the company values and cares about them (Ahmed et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2017; Igboanugo et al., 2022). Sharing values enable the staff to develop a connection with the company (Jha et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that IL fosters two-way communication between managers and staff, in contrast to many leadership theories that emphasize top-down, hierarchical interactions between managers and subordinates influencing organizational commitment (Javed, Abdullah et al., 2019; Jha et al., 2024; Siyal et al., 2023). Organizational commitment (OC) had been extensively discussed in past studies in three distinctive paradigms of emotional, continuance, and normative commitment (Mercurio, 2015). Employees who have an affective organizational commitment feel emotionally attached to the organization and wish to continue working there. In empirical research, it has been widely debated that affective organizational commitment (AOC) and organizational commitment (OC) can be used interchangeably as the objective of each is to measure employee commitment with their organizations and the constructs share the similar antecedents and outcomes (Mercurio, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020). AOC is the most trustworthy and strappingly proven of all other OC components (Brown, Paz-Aparicio, & Revilla, 2019). Excellent work performance, organizational citizenship, and attendance amongst many others are the outcomes of AOC. Generally, a favorable association between leader's actions and organizational commitment has been reported. For instance, Yiing and Ahmad (2009) investigated the connection between affective organizational commitment and leaders. The authors found that the employees display participative and supportive behavior subject to the leader's role in getting every individual involved and felt responsible.

Many empirical studies have reported a correlation between leadership and AOC in positive direction (Benevene et al., 2018; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Yasin, Jan, Huseynova, & Atif, 2023; Younas et al., 2023). More recently, Umrani et al. (2024), opined that leaders inspire team members to think creatively about their work, look for fresh approaches to address the issues, and develop a sense of self-assurance and belonging. Similarly, Walumbwa and Lawler (2003) described that encouragement and assurance cause employees to establish an emotional connection with their companies in reciprocity. The reciprocal interaction between individuals or groups is social exchange, where resources and benefits are exchanged, guided by principles of reciprocity, fairness, and mutual benefit, explaining behavior in social and organizational contexts (Ahmad et al., 2023). The abundance of

past research concluded that leadership is a key predictor of AOC in any type of entity (Bhawna, Sharma & Gautam, 2024; Dunger, 2023; Mercurio, 2015). The supportive environment fostered by inclusive leadership encourages employees to enjoy freedom of thought, responsibility and attachment to remain in the company for the upkeep of positive and constructive exchange (Chen & Tang, 2018; Cropanzano, & Mitchell, 2005). Based on past research and social exchange theory, this study proposed to further explore the connection between IL and AOC for which it is hypothesized:

H1: Inclusive leadership is positively related to affective organizational commitment.

Psychological Empowerment as a Mediator

The extant literature described psychological empowerment (PE) as the active involvement of employees in organizational task without any greed of reward or fear of punishment, which is the tenet of affective organizational commitment (AOC). Four aspects of PE have been widely discussed in extant literature: meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). PE reaches its highest level when all four dimensions are strongly present. Seibert, Wang, and Courtright (2011) discovered that as predictors of organizational commitment, the four components of PE considerably vary among one another. Inclusive leadership (IL) is thought to enhance PE by nurturing an environment where employees feel encouraged to take initiative, express their ideas, and voice concerns in a supportive and autonomous setting. Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between PE and AOC (Javed, Abdullah et al., 2019; Llorente-Alonso et al., 2024; Younas et al., 2023).

Employees relationship with the organization is strengthened by competence, self-determination and purpose, while the employees who feel psychologically empowered are likely to show resilience, emotional attachment and sense of ownership (Ryan & Deci, 2024). The capacity to successfully carry out job activities is referred to as competence, or self-efficacy while self-determination is the personal capability to take the initiative and effectively govern self-behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Specifically, these dimensions are found to elevate employees' affective organizational commitment.

Studying the potential mediating role of PE was also reported in quite a significant number of studies in the past. For example, Younas et al. (2023)

documented that PE was a powerful mediator between IL and voice behavior. Psychological empowerment stems from the notion that employees observe their leaders inclusive and show commitment to the organization for attainment of goals and objectives. In the presence of PE, leaders can cultivate an environment where employees can enjoy job satisfaction and increased commitment. Drawing our conclusion on the onset of SET, we argue that PE serves as significant mediator in our theoretical framework. Building on these insights, our study's core objective is to empirically test the effect of IL on AOC through PE within the context of the higher education sector in AJ&K, hypothesizing that:

H2. Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and affective organizational commitment of employees.

Research Model

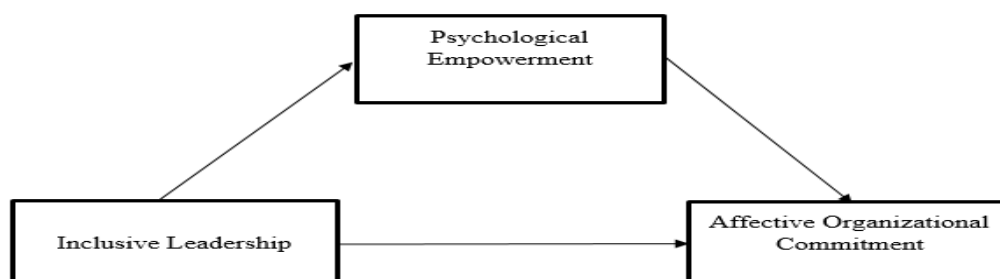


Fig 1: Research Model

Methodology

The hypotheses were tested using a sample of faculty members working in various departments of public sector universities across AJ&K. The study included all full-time faculty members as the target population. The survey materials were distributed following the permission from concerned Heads of the departments or the Deans of the faculties for faculty opinion survey. In some departments, the Heads of the departments were requested to distribute the survey material among the faculty members for researchers' convenience. Each questionnaire contained a statement regarding the confidentiality of the data and no sensitive personal information was requested i.e. contact numbers, date of birth or ID numbers. The respondents were requested to hand over the complete questionnaires to the Head of the department concerned or send by post on mailing address, whichever was convenient for them.

The data were collected on 5 points 'Likert Scale' ranging from 'strongly disagree' denoting 1 to 'strongly agree' denoting 5. The measurement scale was adapted from previous studies and the questionnaire was designed in English language. To collect data on independent variable of inclusive leadership, 9 items scale developed and validated by Carmeli et al (2010) was used. Mediating variable, psychological empowerment, was measured by using 12 items scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). Further, dependent variable of the study, AOC was measured using 6 items scale of Meyer and Allen (1991). A total of 362 full-time faculty members were surveyed across five public sector universities of AJ&K. 234 completed surveys received back yielding the response rate of 64.64%. However, 9 survey questionnaires were excluded due to missing or incomplete data, reducing the effective response rate to 62.15%. Since the current study intended to analyze the role of inclusive leadership on affective organizational commitment through psychological empowerment, analyses were limited to the faculty members with minimum of one-year experience in the current department. Due to this criterion, the responses included in analyses were further reduced to 207.

The data collected through surveys were analyzed by using SPSS and AMOS version 24 as these were easily accessible and met our data requirements. The reliability of the measures was checked with the help of Cronbach's Alpha. All three scales showed excellent reliability, with values above the widely accepted threshold of 0.70 (IL: Items 9, Cronbach's Alpha 0.89; PE: Items 12, Cronbach's Alpha 0.88; AOC: Items 6, Cronbach's Alpha 0.78). These results indicate that the scales are reliable and suitable for further analysis. The study then checked the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to examine the basic properties of the data. Prior to hypotheses testing, it is recommended to check for the model fitness, hence, we utilized confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess model fit, followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate directional relationships. Finally, mediation analysis was carried out using Hayes' process model.

Results

Before application of SEM in AMOS, the study examined the descriptive statistics, and its results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
IL	1.00	5.00	3.53	0.99
PE	1.00	5.00	3.54	0.97
AOC	1.00	5.00	3.37	0.85

(N=207)

The dataset comprises 207 participants as depicted in table 1. The majority of participants (M = 3.53, SD = .99) on 5-points Likert Scale indicated moderate level of IL, that their leaders were approachable, open, and available. The responses show fairly high levels of participants' PE (M = 3.54, SD = .97). The survey respondents also expressed a moderate level of AOC (M =3.37, SD =.85), indicating that they had a sense of attachment and were actively involved in their organizations. Next, the study conducted correlation analysis to check the association of study variables, and its results are in table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

Variables	IL	PE	AOC
IL	1.00		
PE	0.55**	1.00	
AOC	0.45 **	0.38**	1.00

(** $p < .01$)

The analysis reveals a significant positive correlation between IL and PE ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), IL and AOC ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$), PE and AOC ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) as portrayed in table 2. These correlations provide a foundation for subsequent regression analysis. CFA was conducted to assess model fitness and validate the structure of observed variables, ensuring robust measurement models for further analysis. AMOS 24 was employed for this purpose and table 3 presents its results.

Table 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	χ^2/df	RMSEA	IFI	TLI	CFI
Baseline Three factors model	2.08	0.07	0.88	0.86	0.88
Two factors model	6.13	0.12	0.58	0.54.	0.58
One factor model	7.33	0.18	0.37	0.35	0.37

Table 3 presents the baseline three-factor model, which exhibited a good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.08$, RMSEA = 0.07, IFI = .88, TLI = .86, CFI = .88), outperforming the alternative models. These CFA results confirmed acceptable goodness-of-fit indices, enabling further analysis. The preliminary findings provided a foundation for hypothesis testing. The study subsequently analyzed directional relationships, with the results detailed in table 4.

Table 4: Path Coefficients

Structural Path	Path Coefficient
IL → AOC	0.34**
IL → PE	0.56***
PE → AOC	0.18**

(** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$)

The study proposed the first hypothetical relationship related to positive association of IL and AOC of employees. The path coefficient ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$) confirms this relationship, hence H1 is supported. This suggests that higher levels of inclusive leadership are associated with increased affective organizational commitment among employees. The findings of the current study are supported by the previous studies (Choi et al., 2017; Javed, Abdullah et al., 2019; Younas et al., 2023). The results further show a positive and significant association of IL and PE ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$) as well as of PE and AOC ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). The study proposed a second hypothesis related to mediation of psychological empowerment. This analysis was conducted by applying PROCESS macro and results are in table 5.

Table 5: Indirect Effect

Structural Path	Indirect Effect	BC (95% CI)
IL → PE → AOC	.10**	(.02, .19)

(** $p < .01$)

Table 5 presents the indirect association of IL and AOC through PE ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$; CI = 0.02, 0.19). This indicates a small but significant association of IL and AOC, mediated by PE. This is similar to the findings of past research conducted in different contexts (Siyal et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive workplace culture is essential to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for different employees. One of the most important environmental elements that fosters an inclusive environment is leadership. Research on inclusive leadership has demonstrated its benefits for workers including improved teamwork, innovative work practices, and job engagements (Ryan & Deci, 2024). The relationship between inclusive leadership (IL) and affective organizational commitment (AOC) is complex and multifaceted. This study also examined this complex relationship with the mediation of psychological empowerment (PE). For this purpose, the data were collected from the employees of AJ&K public sector universities. The collected responses were then empirically analysed. The results of the study show a significant positive relationship between IL and AOC. The study also found the significant mediation of PE in the relationship of IL and AOC. The findings of the current study were supported by previous empirical studies of similar nature.

The research findings supported the proposition that IL promotes AOC among employees. Inclusive leaders, by fostering an environment of openness, visibility, and accessibility, enable employees to feel valued, respected, and involved in decision-making processes. This sense of involvement and empowerment enhances employees' perceptions of their ability to influence their work environment, as well as their competence in fulfilling their roles. The study also confirmed that PE acted as a mediator between IL and AOC. In other words, IL indirectly influences AOC by fostering PE. These results confirm that inclusive leadership creates a foundation for employees to experience psychological empowerment, which is a critical factor in enhancing organizational commitment. Employees who perceive their leaders as inclusive are more likely to feel psychologically empowered, which subsequently enhances their organizational commitment. This mediation highlights the importance of leadership practices in fostering empowerment, which ultimately drives employees' emotional commitment to the organization.

The findings of the study provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership influences the emotional attachment of employees to their organizations. The findings show that the leaders who exhibit inclusive leadership can encourage and empower staff to gain commitment in return. These

findings have significant implications for organizations looking to enhance employee commitment, satisfaction and retention. Leaders who focus on inclusivity can empower their employees, leading to higher levels of engagement and organizational loyalty. To ensure a pleasant atmosphere for diverse employees, the leaders must actively promote inclusion and ensure psychological empowerment. This study has, however, few limitations which the readers should consider while interpreting the findings and be addressed in future studies. First, this study collected cross-sectional data, which could further be worked out by using time lagged in future for further robust results. Second, the study collected responses from subordinates only, which may be extended in future by applying a dyadic approach. Third, the sample of the study is geographically concentrated, which could hamper the generalizability of findings. Future research can be conducted on a larger and geographically dispersed sample for broader and comprehensive results.

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