Do my teachers treat me fairly? Examining the mediating effect of emotional support in the link between distributive justice and students' academic performance

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Abstract

The social psychology of justice has been a relatively under-researched topic in academic circles over the last few decades, especially in developing countries such as Tunisia. This paper endeavors to address this research gap by carrying out a survey on university students who are affiliated with the Faculty of Economics and Management of Nabeul (FSEGN), a distinguished public college situated in the governorate of Nabeul, Tunisia. The results obtained from the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using AMOS software version 23 showed that distributive justice and emotional support significantly and positively influence school grades and students' academic performance. Furthermore, it was found that emotional support partially mediates the link between distributive justice and university students' academic performance. The study emphasizes the crucial role of emotional support in the link between distributive justice and university students' academic performance. These results have many implications for higher education institutions, their teachers, and scholars on sustainable higher education.

Introduction

University is the perfect environment for gaining knowledge, learning, and growing through research and innovative thinking. On the other hand, understanding the unwritten rules of university culture can be a difficult task for many students (Coulon, 1997). Students often view university as a place where they exchange knowledge rather than as a preparation for their future careers (Dezauzier, 2010). For young students, university life brings significant changes, such as transitioning to adulthood and developing autonomous learning skills and independence (De Clercq et al., 2020). Hence, students' support with empathy, kindness, and compassion would positively affect their psychological state and their academic performance in the long term (Tan, 2022; Day & Robinson, 2022; Ambe et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of the "freedom trap" (Sandrin & Gillet, 2016) is an unexpected and often, misunderstood freedom that can cause anguish, stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and anxiety (Matthews et al., 2000; Boujut & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2007) among university students. In addition to the overwhelming workload (Boyer et al., 2001) and the expectation of performing well, students should learn how to self-regulate and manage their time effectively, often without the necessary preparation. University setting is also one of the environments where justice, kindness and injustice experiments occur (Fox & Aspland, 2024). The process of acquiring a certification from a university involves students completing coursework and assignments. At the same time, teachers evaluate their learning abilities, knowledge acquisition, and performance through various means, such as grades. These assessments serve as formal proof of university success or failure and are the sole means of meritocratic selection. Ultimately, the certification awarded to students enhances their university credentials and conditions the professional horizons of potential graduates.

This research deals with the ambiguous student reality, i.e., a student with little or no support is faced with three scenarios following the distribution of assessments (Boujut & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2007): fair assessment, over-assessment, or under-assessment. However, according to the principle of "equal contribution, equal reward" and the idea of comparison aggregates as characterized by Jasso (1980, 1990, 1993), students may perceive an inequity even when assessed fairly due to a comparison with their referent. This senseless injustice may negatively affect a student's behavior and relationship with their teachers, adversely affecting their academic performance. This paper suggests that emotional support can effectively prevent students from feeling a sense of injustice and promote distributive justice. Even if a student has been fairly assessed compared to their referents, they may perceive it as unfair. This perception of unfairness may seem illogical because the teacher has been just in terms of distribution. However, this sense of injustice can negatively affect the student's behavior, potentially damaging their relationship with their teachers and adversely affecting their academic performance. In this context, we postulate that emotional support can prevent students from assigning meaning to distributive justice and discourage them from focusing on the equity ratio in their relationships with their referents.

Drawing on Gouldner's norm of reciprocity (1960) and Blau's theory of social exchange (1964), we argue that students who feel emotional support from their teachers are more likely to balance their exchange relationship by demonstrating better contributions. In other words, students who feel supported would be more emotionally attached to their teachers and university (Wayne et al., 2002), leading to better academic outcomes. After identifying the problem, the research question we seek to answer is how distributive justice and emotional support will affect the academic success of university students, both directly and indirectly. To conclude, this research aims to examine the impact of distributive justice on the academic performance of higher education students directly and indirectly through emotional support. In other words, it examines the mediation effect of emotional support given to students in the link between distributive justice by their teachers and university students' academic performance.

The theoretical framework and hypotheses building

Social support refers to the various means an individual can use to cope with life's ups and downs by being part of a social network (Bozzini & Tessier, 1985). Social support is classified into four types according to the typology put forward by House (1981): emotional, instrumental, informational, and evaluative. For this research, we will focus on emotional support. Cherba et al. (2019), in their survey addressing social support in everyday stressful situations, affirmed that social support is instrumental in providing assistance and comfort to individuals, mainly through the expression of emotional support. Barling et al. (1988) argued that emotional support behaviors consist of sympathy, listening, and caring (1988:142), while Millette and Boislard (2023) suggested that emotional support takes the form of comfort, encouragement, and the expression of positive feelings.

Numerous research studies have highlighted the positive influence of emotional support on the antecedents of academic success. For instance, emotional support has been found to enhance students' concentration and minimize distractibility (Brosch et al., 2013; Walburg et al., 2014), improve their cognitive memorization (Gijbels et al., 2008; Montagrin et al., 2013), and enhance their decision-making abilities (Audrin & Sander, 2018). Other studies have established that students who receive emotional support from their peers and teachers perform better academically than those who do not (Demetriou et al., 2000). Moreover, various surveys conducted in international education systems have found that students who receive emotional support from their teachers are more likely to be committed and self-determined to succeed academically (Brault-Labbé & Dubé, 2010). Similar findings were reported by Suldo and Huebner (2006), who found that American students who perceived emotional support from their teachers were satisfied with their lives. More recently, Mwenzi et al. (2023) conducted a study on well-being and satisfaction at the University of Kinshasa with a sample of 250 final-year graduate students and found that personal well-being at the university positively and significantly affected students' academic performance. A recent study by Ambe et al. (2024) found that both social and cognitive presences are significantly

associated with students' academic performance, including their critical thinking.

Enguta and Andia (2023) defined academic performance as assessing a student's progress based on their contributions. The outcome of this performance can be either success or failure. Success is achieved when the student meets the learning objectives and receives formal recognition such as a certificate, a certificate of achievement, or a diploma. On the other hand, failure occurs when the student fails to meet the educational and cognitive objectives and has to repeat the year to fulfil the necessary requirements for success. We suspect that Nabeul students' failure may be partly due to teachers' lack of emotional support. This amplifies students' sense of distributive injustice, leading them to legitimize their failures.

Various types of justice have been devised to elucidate the relationship between individuals and their organizations. These forms encompass distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, as articulated by Deutsch (1985), Greenberg (1990), and Tyler and Lind (1992). However, this article focuses explicitly on distributive justice, centering around the core question of justice: "Did I receive what I deserved?" (Adams, 1965). Distributive justice, within this context, is mainly concerned with the fair or unfair allocation of resources. It is important to note that when discussing equity in distributive justice, the predominant framework is the equity theory developed by Homans (1961) and Adams (1965).

Equity theory is derived from Blau's (1964) theory of social exchange, and Adams (1965) conceptualized it, inspired by the relative deprivation theory of Stouffer et al. (1949), Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), Gouldner's theory of reciprocity (1960), and Homans' theory of distributive justice (1961), to prove the existence of relationships between perceptions of fairness and social comparison processes (DeVos, 2002). The theory focuses on the exchange of relationships between employees and employers, or in our case, between students and teachers. In a university context, a student's perception of fairness is not only based on the effort they put into their studies but also on their exchange relationship with their teacher. The referent is the person with whom the students compare themselves, assessing the ratio of their contributions and retributions to those of their referent to determine whether they have been judged fairly. Inadequate ratios result in a perception of inequity, which generates acute pressure, varying with the extent of the unfairness (Adams, 1965). According to Adams (1965), there are two ways to restore equity: by altering one's contributions or rewards or by taking on another referent while remaining in the same direct exchange relationship. Altering the referent's contributions and rewards is more practical than altering one's own, as cognitions towards the referent are less consolidated (Adams, 1965). Based on the above, we can state the next hypotheses to recognize the relationships between our constructs:

H1: Distributive justice positively affects students' academic performance

H2: Distributive justice positively affects emotional support

H3: Emotional support positively affects the academic performance of university students

H4: Emotional support mediates the link between procedural justice and university students' academic performance

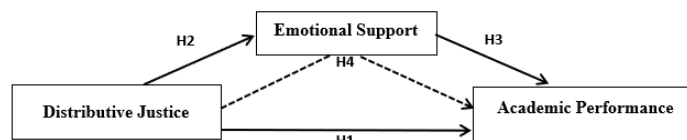Drawn on the above studies and research hypotheses, the research model was suggested (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The research conceptual framework.

Methods

Sampling

We conducted a comprehensive literature review to create our research questionnaire and identified three measurement scales with outstanding psychometric qualities. We made some adjustments to the items to suit our research needs. We chose Price and Mueller's (1986) six-item scale to measure distributive justice and used the seven-item Shakespeare-Finch & Obst (2011) scale for emotional support. Moreover, we employed Chen et al.'s (2009) four-item academic performance scale. Initially, we self-distributed the questionnaire to 200 male and female students from all specialities in the first, second, and third years at the Faculty of Economics and Management of Nabeul (FSEGN), a renowned public university located in the governorate of Nabeul, Tunisia, and belonging to the Carthage Rectorate. We were able to collect 179 questionnaires valid for analysis, with a response rate of 89.50%, with 76% female and 33% male respondents. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 equals "strongly disagree" and 5 equals "strongly agree"). The results showed that the minimum and maximum values of the questionnaire items ranged from 1 to 5. The averages ranged from 2.28 to 3.33, with standard deviation values ranging from 1.185 to 1.404 indicating that the responses are not condensed around the mean value.

Choice of measurement scales

Choosing appropriate scale items is a challenging task that has an important role in confirming the smooth progress of the study. The reliability and validity of the chosen items are directly proportional to the richness and significance of the information they provide. In this section, we present the measurement scales specific to the constructs that are being researched (see Table 1). All the items have been revised to suit our research requirements. Our questionnaire contains seven items based on the scale developed by Shakespeare-Finch & Obst (2011). The scale is considered the most appropriate and will be presented in the following format: respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement with the proposals by selecting the box that best represents

their response, as shown in (Appendix 1: The research instrument).

Table 1: Measurement scale used in the study.

Variables	Items	Reference
Emotional support	7	Shakespeare-Finch & Obst (2011)
Distributive Justice	6	Price and Mueller (1986)
Academic performance	4	Chen et al., (2009)

To measure distributive justice, we will use the measurement scale proposed by Price and Mueller (1986). This scale is capable of estimating the extent of distributive justice felt by students when they have their assessments and/ or grades. It will be included in our questionnaire (see Appendix 1: The research instrument). For the academic performance variable, we chose the academic performance scale developed by Chen et al. (2009), a scale with notable psychometric qualities. It will be presented in (see Appendix 1: The research instrument). In our research questionnaire, we will be using the five-point Likert scale. This scale has been proportioned to all the items in the questionnaire. Respondents must tick the box representing their degree of agreement or disagreement to indicate their preferences. The scale ranges from "strongly disagree" to "disagree," "indifferent," "agree," to "strongly agree". Table 1 shows the constructs of the study, their items and sources used in the study.

Data analysis

This study performed principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation via SPSS software (v.23) for examining the data representation. Variables' unidimensionality "Emotional Support, Distributive Justice and Academic Performance", was ensured as a single component showing 66.044%, 60.894% and 76.975% correspondingly of the total variance explained. For all variables, the KMO index showed respective values of 0.805, 0.777 and 0.824 (see Appendix 2). Therefore, the PCA findings confirmed that our factors suit factor analysis. Cronbach's Alpha was adopted for analyzing the reliability of items, and the values were 0.828, 0.785 and 0.900 correspondingly, which are satisfactory according to Nunnally (1978), with the following values. Additionally, we were able to reject the null hypothesis (see Appendix 2). The PCA was used to purify our measurement scales, which contained some factors that were weakly linked to the main constructs (see Appendix 2). The eliminated items (E1, E3, E6, D9, D12) represented factor contributions of less than (0.4).

Findings

Factorization of items

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the fitness of the instrument adopted in the study gathering data. To report the CFA results, we undertook the following steps: First, absolute fit indices such as Chi²/ddl, which should be less than 5 (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991), SRMR (less than 0.05), and RMSEA (less than 0.08 and preferably 0.05) are undertaken to decide how accurately the

theoretical model reproduces the collected data (Roussel, 2005). Next, incremental indices such as NFI, TLI, and CFI are used to determine how well the examined model fits when compared to a more referenced model. The threshold value for these indices is 0.90 (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Then, we used the normalized x^2.

The results of first-order (Table 2 and Figure 2) CFA were found to show the fitness of the data. The Chi² reported that its degree of freedom x^2/ddl was 1.702, which was acceptable as it is blowing 3. Additionally, the RMSEA value was 0.063, indicating that the results were acceptable. Other values such as "NFI" (0.950), "TLI" (0.907), and "CFI" (0.930) indicated excellent fit as suggested by Roussel (2002). The results of our Skewness and Kurtosis confirm that the data are normally distributed, and all the variables followed the normal law (Table 2) as proposed by Kline (2015).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics.

Items	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional Support						
E2	1	5	3.25	1.369	-.318	-1.242
E4	1	5	3.01	1.404	-.109	-1.413
E5	1	5	3.18	1.384	-.272	-1.305
E7	1	5	3.19	1.385	-.218	-1.323
Distributive Justice						
D8	1	5	3.33	1.184	-.439	-.860
D10	1	5	3.31	1.185	-.494	-.892
D11	1	5	3.30	1.221	-.585	-.786
D13	1	5	3.21	1.227	-.432	-.963
Academic Performance						
P14	1	5	2.37	1.281	.616	-.763
P15	1	5	2.28	1.245	.885	-.201
P16	1	5	2.37	1.254	.730	-.488
P17	1	5	2.37	1.315	.687	-.724

Model fit: "($\chi2$ (50, N = 179) = 85.108 p < 0.001, normed $\chi2$ = 1.702, RMSEA = 0.063, SRMR = 0. 0643, CFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.907, NFI = 0.950, PCFI = 0.704 and PNFI = 0.644)".
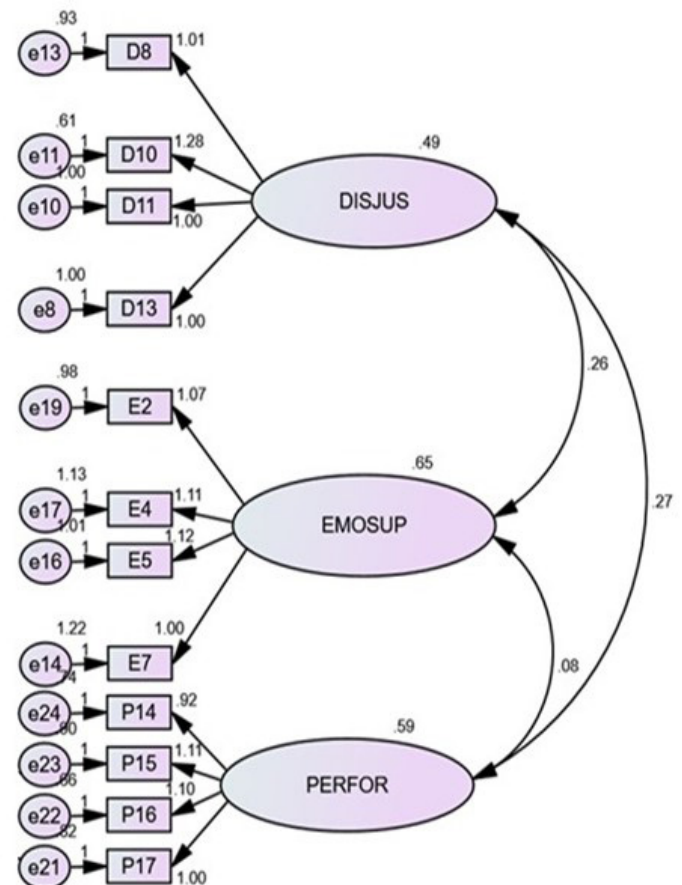

Figure 2: The unstandardized first-order model.

Convergent validity and discriminant validity of measures

We adopted convergent validity to check the correlation between the constructs. For this, we checked the composite reliability (CR), which should be firmly above 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE), which should be firmly above 0.5. The findings indicated a verification of all variables (Table 3), as suggested by Joreskog (1988). We also examined discriminant validity. In doing so, we verified whether the square root of the AVE of every item is firmly greater than their relationships with other constructs. The findings (Table 3) prove that discriminant validity was confirmed for all constructs.

Table 3: Convergent and discriminant validity.

Items	S. L[1]	CR[2]	AVE[3]	MSV[4]	ASV[5]	1	2	3
1- Emotional support (α =0.828)		.864	.614	.186	.140	**.783**		
E2	.832							
E4	.745							
E5	.761							
E7	.794							
2- Distributive justice (α =0.785)		.894	.680	.186	.148	.309**	**.824**	
D8	.864							
D10	.769							
D11	.825							
D13	.837							
3- Academic performance (α =0.900)		.853	.593	.110	.102	.432**	.333**	**.770**
P14	.755							
P15	.769							
P16	.801							
P17	.754							

Moreover, the AVE scores for emotional support (0.614), distributive justice (0.680), and academic performance (0.593) significantly surpass the maximum shared variances (MSV) and average shared variances (ASV) of each variable, giving additional evidence of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010). The MSV and ASV values are taken from correlation (see Table 4). Additionally, the inter-correlation scores for each construct must not exceed the values of the diagonal, which indicate the square roots of the AVE specific to each factor (refer to bold values in Table 3).

Table 4: The correlation results.

		Distributive justice	Academic performance	Emotion support
Distributive justice	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	179		
Academic performance	Pearson Correlation	.309**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	179	179	
Emotion support	Pearson Correlation	.432**	.333**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	179	179	179

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

SEM findings

Once the measures' validity and reliability have been ensured, SEM is performed to verify the influence of distributive justice on academic performance through emotional support. The results obtained from the study showed the fitness of the data (Table 5). The results showed

[1]SL = Standard loading from the first-order model
[2]CR = Composite Reliability
[3]AVE = Average Variance Extracted
[4]MSV = Maximum Shared Value
[5]ASV = Average Shared Value

that Chi[2] compared to its degree of freedom x^2/ddl (1.428), which was acceptable when the x^2/ddl ratio is less than 3, as Jöreskog and Sörbom (1994) recommended. Additionally, the RMSEA index is equal to 0.049, which indicates a satisfactory adjustment (Didellon & Valette-Florence, 1995). The indices "IFI = 0.978, NFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.971, and CFI = 0.978" authenticate the values accepted by the literature showing a good fitness of the data. The standardized RMR, SRMR=0.0560, is excellent since it is very close to zero. The findings showed significant and positive relationships (Table 5, Figure 3). More specifically, distributive justice has a significant and positive effect on academic performance (β= 0.240, p <0.05) and emotional support (β= 0.50, p <0.001), which in turn significantly and positively influence academic performance (β= 0.23, p <0.05).

Table 5: Structural model results with standardized estimates.

Results			β	T value	P	R²	Hypothesis results
H1	DISTRIBJUSTICE → ACAPERFORMANCE		0.239	2.355	.019		Supported
H2	DISTRIBJUSTICE → EMOSUPPORT		0.503	4.802	***		Supported
H3	EMOSUPPROT → ACAPERFORMANCE		0.232	2.326	.020		Supported
	ACAPERFORMANCE					.144	

Model fit: "($\chi 2$ (50, N = 179) = 71.401 p < 0.001, normed $\chi 2$ = 1.428, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.0560, CFI = 0.978, TLI = 0.971, NFI = 0.930, PCFI = 0.741 and PNFI = 0.705)". *** Relationship is significant at the 0.001 level.
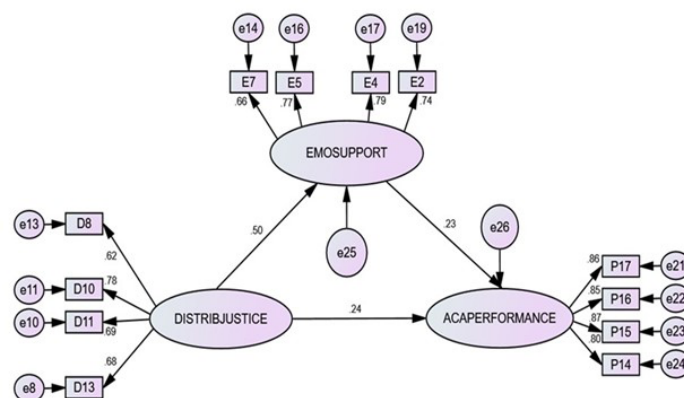

Figure 3: The structural model.

Furthermore, the robustness of the structural model is more substantiated by the significant coefficient of the value (R^2=0.144) (Table 5). In this study, academic performance is explained by distributive justice and emotional support using the structural model. In fact, we can explain approximately 14.4% of the variance in academic performance by using emotional support and distributive justice. To examine the mediating effect of emotional support that links distributive justice to academic performance, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach. This process includes some tests. Firstly, an examination of the link between distributive justice and academic performance has to be significant to express the presence of a mediation. Distributive justice was found to have a significant positive influence on academic performance (β= 0.239, p <0.05). The Student T equal was to 4.315 ≥ 1.96; p = 0.001). Secondly, we should ensure that distributive justice significantly affects the mediator "emotional support" by considering it as an exogenous variable in a regression analysis of emotional support on distributive justice (with β= 0.432 and a Student T equal to 6.372 ≥ 1.96; p = 0.001). The latter has a significant and positive influence on emotional support (β= 0.503, p <0.001).

Thirdly, we need to confirm that the relationship between the mediator and academic performance is significant. Emotional support has a significant positive influence on academic performance (β= 0.232, p <0.05). Here, we also make a regression of academic performance on both emotional support and distributive justice. Controlling the latter, the relationship between emotional support and academic performance should continue to be significant (with β= 0.185 and a Student T equal 2.619 ≥ 1.96; p = 0.001). Thus, the third step is respected.

Finally, to examine whether there is a partial or full effect of emotional support, we examined the direct and indirect links between distributive justice and academic performance. The link was positive and significant even when the mediator variable is considered, as seen in Table 6 of how distributive justice affects academic performance through emotional support (β= 0.158, with p=0.016 <0.05). Therefore, we could conclude that emotional support partially mediates the links between distributive justice and academic performance (see Table 6).

Table 6: Mediation type.

Parameter	β	Lower	Upper	P	Mediation
H4-DISTRIBJUSTICE → ACAPERFORMANCE Through EMOSUPPROT	0.158	0.061	0.316	0.016	0.016<0.05 Partial Mediation

Discussion

This research examined the direct influence of distributive justice by teachers on university students' academic performance using a sample of students from FSEG Nabeul, Tunisia, as well as the indirect effect on this relationship through emotional support from their faculty, family and peers. The research involved a representative sample of 179 students of all genders (67% female, 33% male) enrolled in first, second, and third-year bachelor's degree programs across all majors. A Statistical Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used for descriptive data analysis, PCA and consequent purification of the scales, while AMOS version 23 was used for SEM analysis.

First, the results found a positive and significant relationship between distributive justice and university students' academic performance. This means that students are more likely to achieve better academic performance when they perceive justice for their evaluation and grades. Students then would achieve their learning outcomes and achieve their expected grades. This is consistent with the findings of Dalbert (2000), who found that students who perceived distributive justice from their teachers achieved better results in core subjects. Furthermore, a study by Dalbert and Maes (2002) on a sample of 1,000 students provided clear evidence of a significant and positive association between teacher justice and student motivation to succeed.

Second, the study also found a positive and significant correlation between distributive justice and emotional support. This confirms that when students perceive distributive justice in their evaluation and grades, this positively affects their emotional support as they would feel emotionally supported by their teachers. This supports Tatar's

(1998) qualitative study, which suggests that emotional support perceived by students towards their teachers was inherent to distributive justice by granting better grades, enjoyable activities, and a manageable workload. Similarly, Suldo et al. (2009) found that fairness was positively correlated with perceived emotional support from teachers in their quantitative and qualitative research on a sample of 401 students. Students living in a fair environment, free from injustice and discrimination in terms of treatment or distribution, are more likely to trust their teachers and believe in their emotional support.

Third, the study also established a positive and significant relationship between emotional support and academic performance. When students are emotionally supported by their network and their teachers, this enhances their academic performance, including their learning outcomes and grades. This is consistent with the findings of Malecki and Demaray (2003), who demonstrated that emotional support significantly influences teachers' social skills and academic competence based on their empirical study comparing four types of support - emotional, instrumental, evaluative, and informational. Constructive relationships between teacher and student refer to the degree to which students feel respected, supported, and valued by their teachers (Doll et al., 2004). Students with positive links with their teachers are more likely to be involved in their studies, leading to better academic performance (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). This also supports Ambe et al. (2024) findings that students' evluation of their social presence is associated with their academic performance.

Fourth, regarding the nature of mediation, particularly that of emotional support, the results found that the link between distributive justice and academic performance remained significant even after the introduction of emotional support as a mediator. Therefore, it was concluded that emotions partially mediate the relationship between distributive justice and university students' academic performance. The findings confirm the significant role of emotional support in controlling the link between distributive justice and university students' academic performance, which deserves more attention from teachers, families and university administrators, as will be discussed in the implications section.

Implications of the study

Drawing on the results revealed by this research, we propose some important implications for faculty and decision-makers at higher education institutions. Our study demonstrates that distributive justice for teachers is essential for students' emotional support and academic performance. It is, therefore, important that university teachers ensure that their students perceive distributive justice. Students would perceive this when their teachers judge them fairly for the work they did and for the effort they put in their work. When students perceive this, they would feel emotionally supported. In addition, our findings suggest that teacher fairness towards students, subjective and dependent on individual personalities, should be complemented with emotional support. This research showed that emotional

support softens students' dissatisfaction with perceived injustices, enabling them to ignore the favorable or unfavorable character of the distribution they have received and positively affect their university students' academic performance. Therefore, teachers should provide their students with a classroom climate where the spirit of fairness reigns, creating psychological security, well-being, and added value in terms of learning, which form the foundations for greater academic success. Based upon our research findings, we strongly encourage teachers in Tunisian higher education institutions and other institutions worldwide to provide iterative 360° feedback to their students, with anonymous evaluations as a preventive measure. This guarantees the veracity of responses and enables students to express their concerns in the classroom freely or the shortcomings observed in their teachers' behavior without fear of potential reprisals. In addition, we encourage teachers to apply emotional support to their students and maintain a kind environment to ensure the positive academic performance of their students. Support from families and peers is important for students, especially in societies like Tunisia, where people are socially affected by their network (Gharbi et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022).

The theoretical contribution of our research lies in organizational relationships, particularly in the context of higher education. Based on Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity and Blau's (1964) theory of social exchange, we have concluded that emotional support can dissuade students from giving meaning to distributive justice or equity ratio declined by their relationship with their referent. Earlier research (Tan, 2022; Day & Robinson, 2022; Ambe et al., 2024) has recognized the value of kindness, heartware, social and cognitive presence for students' support and their academic performance. However, this study found that emotional support could affect the relationship between their perceptions of distributive justice by their teachers and their academic performance. We found that students who receive emotional support from their teachers, who take care of their well-being and value their contributions, would feel a deliberate obligation to balance the exchange relationship that binds them to their teachers by demonstrating a similar or even better contribution. To alleviate their sense of indebtedness, students will develop an unconditional attachment to their teachers and their university. This argument would open the door for scholars on future studies on the impact of emotional support given to students by their teachers, families and peers on other aspects such as quality of life and perceptions of their career.

Conclusion

The experience that students have in the university environment has a significant impact on their academic performance and future careers. The results of this research align with Taylor's (1962) research that fairness, particularly distributive justice, is a crucial characteristic of good teachers as perceived by university students. This means that students who feel that their teachers treat them fairly are more likely to perform well academically. Furthermore, this study has shown that emotional support positively affects university students' academic development at FSEG Nabeul,

Tunisia. We agree with previous research that emotional support helps improve concentration (Walburg et al., 2014), cognitive memorization (Montagrin et al., 2013), and critical thinking (Ambe et al., 2024) among university students. Our research showed that emotional support could change students' perceptions of inequity and would encourage them to accept their teachers' evaluations, which ultimately affect their academic performance. Hence, we suggest that university teachers should put more emphasis on emotional support to mitigate the negative perception by students about distributive injustice and ensure positive academic performance.

This research has some limitations, albeit these limitations are avenues for further studies. Firstly, the study sample was predominantly female (67%), which limits the generalization of the findings since this was undertaken at only one higher education institution. Further studies could be conducted on a sample representative of male and female participants. Secondly, the cross-sectional design used in the study may not provide a complete understanding of the relationship between distributive justice and academic performance. Therefore, further research could include other types of social support, such as instrumental, informational, and evaluative, to investigate their mediating effects on academic performance among higher education students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The research instrument.

The emotional support scale

- In my college:

E1: "There is someone I can talk to about the pressures in my life"
E2: "There is at least one person that I can share most things with"
E3: "When I am feeling down there is someone, I can lean on"
E4: "There is someone in my life I can get emotional support from"
E5: "There is at least one person that I feel I can trust"
E6: "There is someone in my life that makes me feel worthwhile"
E7: "I feel that I have a circle of people who value me"

The distributive justice scale:

As far as my grades and evaluations during tests and exams are concerned, my teachers judge me fairly:

D8: "For the work I did well"
D9: "In return for the stress caused by the difficulty of the course"
D10: "For the effort I put in"
D11: "In recognition of my seriousness"
D12: "In view of my responsibilities"
D13: "In view of my intellectual level"

The academic performance scale:

P14 I have improved my grades this academic year
P15 I have assimilated my entire course
P16 I achieved my learning objectives
P17 I have developed my skills in the specialty I want to do

Appendix 2

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's test.

		Emotional Support)	Distributive Justice	Academic Performance
"Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy"		0.805	0.777	0.824
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	255.664	194.628	437.570
	df	6	6	6
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000

Table 2: Total variance explained.

	items	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
		Total	% of variance	% Cumulative	Total	% of variance	% Cumulative
Emotional Support	1	2.642	66.044	66.044	2.642	66.044	66.044
	2	.563	14.069	80.113			
	3	.430	10.754	90.867			
	4	.365	9.133	100.000			
Distributive Justice	1	2.436	60.894	60.894	2.436	60.894	60.894
	2	.625	15.623	76.518			
	3	.528	13.197	89.714			
	4	.411	10.286	100.000			
Academic Performance	1	3.079	76.975	76.975	3.079	76.975	76.975
	2	.382	9.556	86.530			
	3	.314	7.859	94.389			
	4	.224	5.611	100.000			

Table 3: Reliability statistics.

	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Emotional Support	0.828	4
Distributive Justice	0.785	4
Academic Performance	0.900	4