Perceived procedural justice and psychological flourishing among mental health professionals in Macao: a moderated mediation model

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Abstract
This study aimed to examine whether and how organizational factors (i.e., procedural justice) are associated with psychological flourishing, an optimal mental state. Path analysis was conducted among 195 Chinese mental health professionals (females = 69%; Mean age = 30 years) in Macao, and results showed that emotional exhaustion partially mediated the positive association between procedural justice and psychological flourishing, whereas emotion regulation significantly diminished the effects of procedural injustice on emotional exhaustion. Our findings highlight the emotional mechanisms underlying the influence of organizational procedures on employees’ wellbeing, and wellness programs for enhancing employees’ emotional regulation skills are recommended.

Keywords Flourishing · Emotional exhaustion · Emotion regulation

Résumé
Justice procédurale perçue et épanouissement psychologique chez les professionnels de la santé mentale à Macao: un modèle de médiation modérée. Cette étude visait à examiner si et comment les facteurs organisationnels (c’est-à-dire la justice procédurale) sont associés à l’épanouissement psychologique, un état mental optimal. Une analyse de parcours a été menée auprès de 195 professionnels chinois de la santé mentale (femmes = 69%; âge moyen = 30 ans) à Macao, et les résultats ont montré que l’épuisement émotionnel médiait partiellement l’association positive...
entre la justice procédurale et l’épanouissement psychologique, alors que la régulation des émotions diminuait considérablement les effets d’injustice procédurale sur l’épuisement émotionnel. Nos résultats mettent en évidence les mécanismes émotionnels sous-jacents à l’influence des procédures organisationnelles sur le bien-être des employés, et des programmes de bien-être pour améliorer les compétences de régulation émotionnelle des employés sont recommandés.

Zusammenfassung
Wahrgenommene Verfahrensgerechtigkeit und psychologisches Aufblühen unter Fachleuten für psychische Gesundheit in Macao: Ein moderiertes Mediationsmodell. Ziel dieser Studie war es zu untersuchen, ob und wie organisatorische Faktoren (d. h. Verfahrensgerechtigkeit) mit psychologischem Aufblühen, einem optimalen Geisteszustand, zusammenhängen. Die Pfadanalyse wurde unter 195 chinesischen Fachleuten für psychische Gesundheit (Frauen = 69%; Durchschnittsalter = 30 Jahre) in Macau durchgeführt, und die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass emotionale Erschöpfung teilweise die positive Assoziation zwischen Verfahrensgerechtigkeit und psychologischem Gedeihen vermittelte, während Emotionsregulierung die Auswirkungen signifikant verringerte Verfahrensgerechtigkeit bei emotionaler Erschöpfung. Unsere Ergebnisse heben die emotionalen Mechanismen hervor, die dem Einfluss organisatorischer Verfahren auf das Wohlbefinden der Mitarbeiter zugrunde liegen, und Wellness-Programme zur Verbesserung der emotionalen Regulationsfähigkeiten der Mitarbeiter werden empfohlen.

Resumen
Justicia procedimental percibida y florecimiento psicológico entre los profesionales de la salud mental en Macao: Un modelo de mediación moderada recomendado. El objetivo de este estudio es examinar si los factores organizativos (es decir, la justicia procedimental) se asocian con el bienestar psicológico, un estado mental óptimo, y cómo lo hacen. Los resultados mostraron que el agotamiento emocional medió parcialmente la asociación positiva entre la justicia procedimental y el bienestar psicológico, mientras que la regulación emocional disminuyó significativamente los efectos de la injusticia procedimental sobre el agotamiento emocional. Nuestros resultados ponen de relieve los mecanismos emocionales que subyacen a la influencia de los procedimientos organizativos en el bienestar de los empleados, y se recomiendan programas de bienestar para mejorar las habilidades de regulación emocional de los empleados.

Beyond merely the absence of physical and/or mental illness, psychological flourishing is a recent definition of wellbeing and happiness, consisting of both hedonic wellbeing (i.e., feeling good) and eudaimonic wellbeing (i.e., living well; Keyes, 2007, 2014). Psychological flourishing is considered to be an optimal state of psychosocial health and a useful indicator of overall psychosocial wellbeing because it encompasses multiple wellbeing domains, including emotional wellbeing (i.e., high life satisfaction and positive emotional experience), positive psychological
functioning (i.e., high levels of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive interpersonal relations, life meaning, and self-acceptance; Ryff & Singer, 1998), and positive social functioning (e.g., career and social contribution; Huppert & So, 2013). In other words, psychological flourishing relates to not only personal pleasure, but also fulfilment of self-achievement in life, as well as one’s positive contribution to others and the society (Kim et al., 2020). Inevitably, work and its related factors, such as work demands (Kim & Beehr, 2020) and workplace relationships (Colbert et al., 2016), influence employees’ psychological flourishing, but further research that identifies factors that promote psychological flourishing and those mechanisms underlying their effects is warranted in order to inform effective interventions designed to promote wellbeing among employees.

This study aimed to empirically elucidate the interplay of organizational factors (procedural justice) and personal factors (emotional exhaustion and emotion regulation) in influencing psychological flourishing among Chinese mental health professionals.

Mental health professionals’ wellbeing

Previous research has shown that mental health professionals tend to be vulnerable to psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, and job burnout (Butterfield et al., 2017; Hämmig, 2018), especially during the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Ornell et al., 2020), as the public, including mental health professionals, have been under tremendous psychological pressure since the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2020). However, lesser attention has been paid to the degree to which people who work to increase happiness in others are happy themselves. Although previous research also found that flourishing individuals are more likely to have prosocial behaviors, such as volunteerism (Nelson et al., 2016), an online mental health intervention study found that the mean scores of wellbeing in mental health professionals, which were assessed with the World Health Organization—Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5), were lower than those of the general population (Bolier et al., 2014). These findings indicate that mental health professionals’ wellbeing, including flourishing potential, may be at risk; thus, further research on whether organizational and personal factors may promote their wellbeing is warranted.

Among the limited literature on mental health professionals’ positive wellbeing, only one cross-sectional study measured psychological flourishing among mental health professionals (i.e., psychiatrists residing in a hospital setting), and its findings showed that high quality of life, high work-life balance satisfaction, and low emotional exhaustion were significantly associated with psychological flourishing (Kelly-Hedrick et al., 2020). However, organizational factors were not included and so the degree to which distal factors in the workplace are related to mental health professionals’ psychological flourishing remains unknown. The current study intended to fill this research gap by investigating whether and how organizational factors (i.e., procedural justice in our case) influence psychological flourishing via
a mediating and/or moderating mechanism with personal factors (i.e., emotional exhaustion and emotion regulation) among mental health professionals.

Organizational influence on flourishing: procedural justice

Procedural justice is one of the salient components of organizational justice, which is defined as perceived fairness and justice to employees in a workplace setting (Greenberg, 2010; Moorman, 1991). By definition, procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the process and procedures used to determine employee outcomes, such as distributions and promotions (Niehoff & Moorman, 1993). Procedural justice was found to be positively associated with both general psychosocial wellbeing (Huong et al., 2016; Rani et al., 2018), and specific wellbeing indicators, such as life satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2010). Although no published study has empirically examined the association between procedural justice and psychological flourishing, a positive relationship would be expected because the presence of procedural justice implies that the organizational procedures are impartial, which can build trust, respect, control, and empowerment (Duff et al., 2016), and hence a sense of justice and being fairly treated may motivate individuals to become more active in work and life (Dunaetz, 2010). We therefore hypothesized higher levels of procedural justice to be associated with higher levels of psychological flourishing in mental health professionals (Hypothesis 1). Meanwhile, as a factor at a relatively distal level (i.e., organizational level), procedural justice may be associated with employees’ overall flourishing via more proximal factors (e.g., personal factors). We hence further included emotional exhaustion, a work-related emotional condition, as a potential mediator in its relationship with psychological flourishing.

Mediation effect of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, a core symptom of job burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005), is a condition of physiological, mental, and emotional depletion that occurs to individuals who remain in a high emotionally charged environment for a long period of time (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Emotionally exhausted individuals may experience chronic fatigue, weariness, helplessness, hopelessness, and feelings of depression (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Due to the nature of work in the helping professions, mental health professionals continually work under high levels of emotional demands, and hence it is not surprising that a systematic review found approximately 40% of mental health professionals surveyed suffered from emotional exhaustion (O’Connor et al., 2018). Emotional exhaustion can do serious harm to individuals’ physical and mental health. For example, Ahola et al. (2010) conducted a 10-year prospective register-linkage study among industrial employees and found that emotional exhaustion was significantly associated with all-cause mortality rate. In addition, emotional exhaustion has been found to be significantly and positively associated with loss of subjective wellbeing and
emotional distress, such as depression in various professions (Neto et al., 2017; van Daalen et al., 2009), including mental health professionals (Papathanasiou, 2015).

The negative influence of emotional exhaustion on psychological flourishing is also well-documented. To our best knowledge, three studies thus far have been conducted to test the relationship between emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing. Although these studies were limited due to their cross-sectional design, they consistently showed that those employees who were more emotionally exhausted scored lower on psychological flourishing in samples of teachers, internists, and psychiatrists residing in hospitals, as well as gynecologic cancer specialists (Freire et al., 2020; Kelly-Hedrick et al., 2020; Vetter et al., 2018). The various stressors, including negative emotional experiences, encountered by emotionally exhausted individuals leave them with impaired psychosocial functioning and poorer work performance (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Tuithof et al., 2017); therefore, they retain insufficient capacity for psychological flourishing. Apart from that, emotional exhaustion has been shown to have an adverse impact on employees’ mental wellbeing (Neto et al., 2017). We hence hypothesized that lower levels of emotional exhaustion would be associated with higher levels of psychological flourishing among mental health professionals (Hypothesis 2).

Emotional exhaustion is not only closely related to psychological flourishing, but it is also significantly associated with procedural justice. Among the three components of organizational justice (the other two components being interactional justice and distributive justice), procedural justice was revealed to be the only significant factor shown to be a buffer against job burnout (Aghaei et al., 2012). According to the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), an environment involving a threat of loss of resources (e.g., salary and job position), an actual loss of such resources, and/or a lack of gain in resources following resource spending induces psychological stress and stress-related outcomes. Procedural injustice, therefore, is considered to be a stressor in the workplace due to a situation in which employees do not receive a fair return on their effort but also fear and/or encounter a actual loss of resources (e.g., promotion opportunities) as a result of unfair organizational procedures. Such a stressor may deplete individuals’ personal resources (e.g., cognitive and emotional control) for coping and in turn increase one’s risk of stress-related outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion. In fact, procedural justice has already been empirically shown to be negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion among employees of various professions (Frenkel et al., 2012; Howard & Cordes, 2010), including mental health professionals (Gholampour & Pourshafei, 2018).

Considering both the protective effects of procedural justice against emotional exhaustion (Aghaei et al., 2012), and the adverse influence of emotional exhaustion on psychological flourishing as stated earlier, emotional exhaustion was speculated to mediate the adverse effects of low perceived levels of procedural justice on psychological flourishing. In this study, it was hypothesized that emotional exhaustion would mediate, at least partially, the effect of procedural justice on psychological flourishing among mental health professionals (Hypothesis 3).
Moderating effect of emotion regulation

Apart from the mediating role that emotional exhaustion might play in the relationship between procedural justice and psychological flourishing, another emotion-related personal factor, emotion regulation, may moderate this relationship. Emotion regulation refers to the ability to control one’s emotions and modulate one’s responses to affective stimuli (Uchida et al., 2015). Emotional regulation is considered to be a key element of emotional intelligence and plays an important role in an individual’s ability to manage both personal and social stress and in promoting wellbeing (Boyatzis et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence, as a personal resource in the workplace (Durán et al., 2010), may act as a buffer against the negative impacts of work-related stressors and help maintain or even promote an individual’s wellbeing in occupations with particularly challenging working conditions, such as the helping professions. The findings of previous research have provided some support to the buffering effect of emotion regulation. For example, individuals with higher levels of emotion regulation skills were found to adjust better to stressful working circumstances (Newton et al., 2016) than those with lower emotion regulation skills. Such findings are plausibly due to the ability of those with higher levels of emotion regulation to maintain “positive affect” and restrain “negative affect” (Cheung & Tang, 2012; Joseph & Newman, 2010), and in turn enhance their emotional resources. The availability of emotional resources allows employees with better emotion regulation to cope better with stressful organizational environments (e.g., low levels of procedural justice) and hence protects them from emotional depletion. We therefore hypothesized that emotion regulation would moderate the relationship between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion (Hypothesis 4). To be specific, emotion regulation was expected to weaken the adverse effect of procedural injustice on emotional exhaustion experienced by mental health professionals.

Emotion regulation may also alleviate the negative influence of emotional exhaustion on psychological flourishing because people with better emotion regulation are more resilient and adaptive (Gross & Muñoz, 1995; Troy & Mauss, 2011). Emotion regulation has been consistently reported to moderate the negative impacts of various stressors (e.g., unemployment-related stress and family-work conflicts) on certain specific wellbeing indicators (e.g., job satisfaction and suicide risk; Gao et al., 2013; Mérida-López et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence, as a whole, has also been found to buffer the negative impact of personal workplace-experience (e.g., bullying) on employees’ psychological flourishing in higher education institutions (Nel, 2019). Previous research findings suggest that emotion regulation is very likely to protect mental health professionals’ psychological flourishing from being adversely influenced by the negative effects of workplace-experience (i.e., emotional exhaustion in our case). Therefore, we hypothesized that emotion regulation would moderate (diminish) the negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing (Hypothesis 5).
The present study aimed to test the interplay of procedural justice, emotional exhaustion, and emotion regulation in their influence on employees’ psychological flourishing. We conducted the study among mental health professionals because they work under such great emotional demands (Scanlan & Still, 2019). It is the first study to empirically test the effects of procedural justice on psychological flourishing, as well as the mediating role of emotional exhaustion on such relationship. It is also the first study to examine the moderating effect of emotion regulation on the proposed mediation. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1, and we tested the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1** Higher levels of procedural justice are associated with higher levels of psychological flourishing.

**Hypothesis 2** Lower levels of emotional exhaustion are associated with higher levels of psychological flourishing.

**Hypothesis 3** Emotional exhaustion mediates the effect of procedural justice on psychological flourishing.

**Hypothesis 4** Emotion regulation moderates (diminishes) the relationship between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion.

**Hypothesis 5** Emotion regulation moderates (diminishes) the relationship between emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing.

**Methods**

**Participants and procedures**

We first contacted mental health organizations (e.g., clinics and government departments like the Health Bureau) in Macao, China, via email and invited their full-time
mental health professionals, who were also local residents, to voluntarily participate in an online, anonymous questionnaire survey. The invitation email had a QR code for the survey. Those mental health professionals who received the invitation email were encouraged to forward the email to their acquaintances who were also full-time mental health professionals in Macao. After sending the email, a follow-up phone call was made to the organizations to encourage them to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained before the survey, and participation was voluntary and without monetary rewards. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the research ethics panel of the Department of Psychology at the corresponding author’s affiliated university.

We received a total of 234 mental health professionals’ responses in our online system. Among them, the data of 39 participants were excluded because they were either non-Macau residents or they provided missing responses to more than 10% of those items of the questionnaire. Therefore, the sample size for data analysis was 195 (135 females and 60 males), with ages ranging from 22 to 58 years old ($M = 29.9, SD = 6.02$).

**Measures**

**Psychological flourishing**

Psychological flourishing was measured by the validated Chinese version (Tong & Wang, 2017) of the 8-item Flourishing Scale developed by Diener et al. (2010). A sample item is, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.” Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Higher mean scores indicated higher levels of psychological flourishing. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was .87.

**Procedural justice**

Procedural justice was measured by the 7-item procedural justice subscale of the Organizational Justice Scale developed by Moorman (1991). The Chinese version was validated by Leung et al. (2007) and was used in this study. A sample item is, “The decision-making process of the institution where I work provides opportunities to appeal or challenge the decision.” Responses were rated and scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with higher mean scores representing higher levels of perceived procedural justice. The Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .93 in this study.

**Emotional exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion was measured by the 9-item emotional exhaustion subscale of Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), with a 4-point response scale, ranging from 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*. Its Chinese version used in this study was validated by Tang (1998). A sample item is, “I feel emotionally
drained from my work.” Higher mean scores indicated higher levels of emotional exhaustion. The Cronbach’s alpha of the subscale was .89 in this study.

**Emotion regulation**

Emotion regulation was measured by the 4-item emotion regulation subscale of Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002). A sample item is, “I am able to control my temper and handle difficulties rationally.” Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, with higher mean scores representing higher levels of emotion regulation. The Cronbach’s alpha of the subscale was .90 in this study.

Participants also answered several items regarding their demographic and job-related information, including gender, age, educational attainment, fulltime position, workplace, tenure, and weekly work hours (Table 1).

**Data analysis**

Preliminary analyses, including descriptive statistics, independent-samples t test, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and correlation analyses, were conducted in SPSS 26 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Path analysis was conducted in AMOS 24 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA), with missing data being treated using Bayesian multiple imputation. Referring to the suggestions of Schreiber (2008) and McDonald and Ho (2002), a good model fit was deemed to be demonstrated by the following fit indices: a nonsignificant chi-square test result, with the relative chi-square not larger than 3; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should exceed .90; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR) should be less than .08. Moreover, the mediation effect was tested with the bootstrapping approach (MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2008), and the coefficients were estimated with a 95% confidence interval (CI) based on the percentile method with 10,000 bootstrap samples.

Before evaluating the hypothesized moderation effects of emotion regulation on the relationships among procedural justice, emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing in the path model, we first mean centered these variables and then multiplied the independent variable and the moderator in order to avoid issues of collinearity. The effects of procedural justice, emotion regulation, and emotional exhaustion reported were based on the centered variables. The means and standard deviations reported were from the uncentered variables. This analytic approach followed the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991).
Results

Sample characteristics

A majority of the participants (69.2%) were female, with ages ranging from 22 to 58 (M = 29.9), and they had all obtained a bachelor degree or above. Over half were social workers (52.3%), and the remaining participants were counselors (25.1%), clinical psychologists/psychotherapists (8.7%), and other mental health professionals (13.8%). Nearly half worked in nongovernmental organizations, 29.2% in school settings, and the remainder in hospitals, clinics, government
departments, or other settings. On average, participants reported having engaged in their current job for 4.8 years. A majority (73.9%) worked 41–48 h a week.

**Preliminary statistics**

As shown in Table 2, gender was not significantly associated with any variables, whereas age was negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.18$, $p = 0.010$) and positively correlated with psychological flourishing ($r = 0.19$, $p = 0.009$). Education attainment and work hours correlated negatively ($r = -0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and positively ($r = 0.21$, $p = 0.004$) with emotional exhaustion, respectively; Therefore, age, educational attainment, and work hours were controlled for in the subsequent path analyses. An ANOVA was conducted and showed that fulltime position and main workplace had no significant association with emotional exhaustion ($F[3, 192] = 0.22$, $p = 0.882$ and $F[5, 190] = 1.52$, $p = 0.186$, respectively) and psychological flourishing ($F[3, 192] = 0.46$, $p = 0.714$ and $F[5, 190] = 1.11$, $p = 0.355$, respectively).

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of the major variables are presented in Table 2. As hypothesized, emotional exhaustion was negatively correlated with psychological flourishing ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$). Procedural justice was negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with psychological flourishing ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). Emotion regulation was positively correlated with procedural justice ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.001$) and psychological flourishing ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$).

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics and correlations of all the variables (N = 195)

| Variables                  | Mean | SD  | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   |
|----------------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Gender#                 | –    | –   | 1   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   |
| 2. Age                     | 29.91| 6.02| .06 | 1   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   |
| 3. Education attainment#   | –    | –   | -.06| .28***| 1   | –   | –   | –   | –   | –   |
| 4. Tenure                  | 4.84 | 5.14| .12 | .79***| .15*| 1   | –   | –   | –   | –   |
| 5. Work hour               | 2.22 | 0.99| -.08| -.11 | -.13| -.15*| 1   | –   | –   | –   |
| 6. Procedural justice      | 3.11 | 0.79| -.05| .14  | .08 | .11 | -.13| 1   | –   | –   |
| 7. Emotion regulation      | 4.73 | 1.01| –.13| -.06 | .16*| -.05| -.06| .23**| 1   | –   |
| 8. Emotional exhaustion    | 2.29 | 0.61| .06 | -.18***| -.26***| -.13| .21**| -.43***| -.32***| 1   |
| 9. Psychological flourishing| 4.93 | 0.76| .00 | .19***| .14 | .14 | -.10| .36***| .28***| -.43***|

Note. #binomial variable coding: gender (0 = male, 1 = female); education attainment (0 = bachelor, 1 = master or above). * $p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001
Path Analysis

We first tested the hypothesized path model (see Figure 2) while controlling for the effects of demographic variables (i.e., age, education attainment, and work hours). The model fit was adequate, with $\chi^2 (1) = 2.42$, $p = .120$, $\chi^2/df = 2.42$, $CFI = .995$, $SRMR = .010$, and $RMSEA = .086$. The model explained 25% of the variances in psychological flourishing. The path coefficients from procedural justice to psychological flourishing ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) and from emotional exhaustion to psychological flourishing ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$) were significant, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively.

The hypothesized mediation effect was further tested with the bootstrapping approach. The results showed that procedural justice had a significant total effect ($\beta = .29$, 95% CI [.12, .44]), direct effect ($\beta = .20$, 95% CI [.02, .35]), and indirect effect ($\beta = .09$, 95% CI [.03, .17]) on psychological flourishing. The findings indicated that the relationship between procedural justice and psychological flourishing was partially mediated by emotional exhaustion; Hypothesis 3 was hence supported.

Figure 2 also shows the results of the moderating effects with standardized path coefficients. Covariances were added between predictor variables (i.e., procedural justice, emotion regulation, emotional exhaustion, and their products) and control variables (i.e., age, education attainment, and weekly average working hours). The effects of the interaction between procedural justice and emotion regulation (PJ×ER) on emotional exhaustion was significant ($\beta = .30$, 95% CI [.18, .41]), indicating that the relationship between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion was moderated by emotion regulation.

We followed Aiken and West’s (1991) procedures and plotted the relationship between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion under conditions of low (1 SD below the mean), middle (the $M$), and high (1 SD above the mean) levels of emotion.

* $p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$
regulation (see Figure 3). At low and middle levels of emotion regulation, procedural justice and emotional exhaustion showed significant, negative associations (simple slope = –.44, 95% CI [–.56, –.33], and simple slope = –.25, 95% CI [–.34, –.16], respectively). However, in cases in which emotion regulation levels were high, procedural justice and emotional exhaustion showed a nonsignificant association (simple slope = –.06, 95% CI [–.18, .07]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4, which stated that emotion regulation would weaken the relationship between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion, was supported.

The effects of the interaction between emotional exhaustion and emotion regulation (EE × ER) on psychological flourishing was nonsignificant (β = –.05, 95% CI [–.20, .14]), and so Hypothesis 5, which stated that emotion regulation would moderate the relationship between emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing was not supported.

**Discussion**

As the demand for psychological assistance keeps increasing in recent years in Macao (Journal Cheng Pou, 2020), mental health professionals are under high-workload pressure and often work for long hours. For example, about 30% of our participants worked 45 h or more per week during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such challenging context, it is particularly important to find ways to promote mental health professionals’ psychological wellbeing (indicated by psychological flourishing in our case), which acts as a personal resource in career development process by facilitating individuals to be self-contained, actively plan for their career, and actualize their potential at work (Rothmann, 2014). This study hence aimed to examine the interplay among procedural justice and personal emotional characteristics in influencing the psychological flourishing of mental health professionals. It was the first
study that tested the direct and indirect effect of procedural justice on psychological flourishing and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in this relationship, as moderated by individuals’ ability to regulate their emotions. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported by the significant direct effects of procedural justice and emotional exhaustion on psychological flourishing. Emotional exhaustion is not only a risk factor for psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression; Ahola et al., 2010; van Daalen et al., 2009), but it is also negatively associated with overall emotional well-being, such as psychological flourishing (Kelly-Hedrick et al., 2020), most likely by depleting an individual’s emotional resources and lowering his or her motivation to engage in personal development and growth.

Our study’s findings also supported Hypothesis 3, in that procedural justice was associated with psychological flourishing indirectly via emotional exhaustion. The observed negative association between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion is congruent with previous findings that one’s perceptions that one’s workplace operates with fairness or justice might serve as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion and overall job burnout (Kampa et al., 2017; O’Connor et al., 2018) and contribute to psychological wellbeing (Le et al., 2017). Our findings provide evidence that perceptions of procedural injustice may hinder employees from flourishing via increasing their emotional exhaustion in the workplace. Drawing on conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), perceived procedural injustice is a potential stressor that may deplete employees’ cognitive and emotional resources and hence increase the risk of being emotionally exhausted. Such perceived injustice in organizational systems would eventually demotivate employees from developing (Greenberg, 2010; Sutanto et al., 2018). A working environment with high procedural justice hence reduces people’s emotional depletion due to work and in turn maintains their psychological functioning to the degree they are capable and motivated to personally grow in different settings. Our findings provide practical insights that organizations may reduce their employees’ emotional illbeing and facilitate their pursuit of states of optimal psychosocial wellbeing by improving employees’ perception of procedural justice. Such interventions could in turn inspire employees’ self fulfilment in not only life but also career, and hence improve their job performance (Swalhi et al., 2017).

In support of Hypothesis 4, emotion regulation did have a significant moderating effect on the association between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion in this study. To be more specific, the negative association between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion became nonsignificant when emotion regulation was high. This finding would appear to indicate that emotion regulation is able to alleviate the adverse impact of procedural injustice on emotional exhaustion. The finding is consistent with those of previous studies regarding the buffering effects of emotional intelligence on the negative association between stressful environments and mental health. For instance, Shkoler and Tziner (2017) found that higher levels of emotional intelligence reduced the strength of the relationship between organizational injustice and job burnout among employees from various professions. Emotional regulation skills, in fact, have been suggested to contribute to one’s supply of personal resources (Buruck et al., 2016), which are malleable via training, can enhance wellbeing at work, and help in managing negative emotions. Since organizational
environments are not always readily changeable, it is particularly important for employees to be equipped with sufficient personal resources, such as emotion regulation skills and strategies, in order to adapt to less favorable environments and lower their vulnerability to psychological distress in the form of emotional exhaustion. As mental health professionals are susceptible to high levels of emotional exhaustion (McCormack et al., 2018), organization-based training programs, such as affect regulation training (ART; Berking & Lukas, 2015), which would improve employees’ ability of emotion regulation, are called for.

Although emotion regulation was able to mitigate the effects of perceptions of procedural injustice in increasing emotional exhaustion, its ability to buffer the negative effects of emotional exhaustion on psychological flourishing among mental health professionals appears to be limited, and Hypothesis 5 was not supported. One possible explanation for this nonsignificant finding is that when individuals are emotionally exhausted, it becomes increasingly more difficult for them to further regulate their emotions because their emotional resources have been so depleted in their prior attempts at self-regulating their negative emotions at the workplace. Emotional exhaustion can simply overwhelm one’s capacities for self-regulation. Therefore, the adverse consequences (e.g., lower level of psychological flourishing) resulting from emotional exhaustion cannot be mitigated by emotion regulation. This finding highlights the potential tremendous impacts of emotional exhaustion on individuals’ wellbeing, not only in terms of negative but also positive dimensions of wellbeing.

Limitations

Three major limitations of this study should be noted. First, the study’s design used convenience sampling, which may limit the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of current findings to not only the local employee population but also employees of other ethnicities. Second, all variables (i.e., procedural justice, psychological flourishing, emotional exhaustion, and emotion regulation) in this study were measured by self-report questionnaires, which may lead to a weakened strength of associations between those variables due to common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman’s one factor test was adopted to address this issue, and all items of the four observed variables were entered into an exploratory factor analysis with unrotated factor solution. Results of the exploratory factor analysis showed that there were multiple factors instead of a single factor or a general factor that accounted for the majority of covariance, indicating that our findings were not much influenced by common method variance. However, the Harman’s one factor test only crudely estimates the effects of common method variance instead of statistically controlling for those effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Data from other sources (e.g., supervisors and colleagues) are recommended as methods of external validation in future research with common method variance issues. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study determined that we cannot make any causal inference based on the results. Future research may adopt a longitudinal research design to test the chronological effects of procedural justice on both emotional exhaustion and psychological flourishing. We further suggest
that the potential reciprocity of these variables should also be tested, as Freire et al. (2020) found that psychological flourishing partially mediated the relationship between psychological capital and burnout among teachers and pointed out that both psychological capital and psychological flourishing could act as personal resources to reduce burnout. Experimental studies and/or intervention studies for testing the moderating effect of emotion regulation on the association between procedural justice and emotion exhaustion are also recommended.

**Implications**

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present study enriches the literature on whether and how procedural justice is associated with psychological flourishing of employees. The latter is an invaluable resource that promotes individuals’ career development (e.g., by playing a facilitating role in improving workplace safety and job retention; Coetzee & Oosthuizen, 2017). Therefore, it is important for organizations to find ways to cultivate this personal resource. While the PERMA model (i.e., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) proposed by Seligman (2011) is useful in enhancing level of flourishing, our study highlighted the importance of perceived procedural justice where it relates to psychological flourishing, either directly and via the mediation of emotional exhaustion. As suggested by Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001), organizations may foster employees’ sense of procedural justice by creating a fair and equal workplace, improving the communication quality inside the organization, and finding avenues by which employees’ voices can be heard. These measures should improve employees’ perceptions of procedural justice, reduce their emotional exhaustion, and facilitate the development of psychological flourishing. It is also suggested that organizations may assess the levels of psychological flourishing of employees, especially junior mental health professionals who have just started their vocational careers. Those who score low in psychological flourishing may need additional vocational and psychological support from their supervisors where positive work relationship is vital in establishing psychological flourishing (Colbert et al., 2016). Moreover, trainings of emotion regulation skills, such as ART, are also recommended to mental health professionals. By emotional regulation training, employees could attain more positive emotion, which is an important attribute that fosters the psychological flourishing (Seligman, 2011) and possibly other important personal resources (e.g., Fredrickson, 2004). Besides, better emotional regulation also functioned as the buffer between procedural justice and emotional exhaustion. In addition to researching the effects of emotion regulation skills training, further study is warranted to identify other potential personal strategies that may buffer the adverse effect of emotion exhaustion on employees’ diverse wellbeing indicators, including psychological flourishing and work satisfaction.

**Author contributions** HMY was responsible for research conception and design, and conducted the literature review, finding interpretation, and manuscript writing. MH was responsible for the data analysis.
and finding interpretation. FC was involved in research conception and manuscript writing. CTJC and ISC were responsible for data collection and were involved in research design. AMSW was responsible for coordination and was involved in research design, finding interpretation, and manuscript preparation. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest**  The authors report no conflict of interest.

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