

The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem in the Relationship Between Organisational Climate and Humiliation at Work.

A Multi-Group SEM Analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examined how the dimensions of organizational climate and humiliation at work are related and whether an individual's self-esteem moderates this relationship to see if self-esteem is a buffer against adverse work situations.

Methodology: There were 672 contract employees who completed questionnaires through a research panel. In this cross-sectional study, three measures were used *Organisational Climate Questionnaire*, *Humiliation Inventory* and the *Self-liking and Sense of Competence Scale*.

Findings: The study found that organizational climate correlates positively with employees' negative experiences. The study results revealed that it was mainly problems with

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co-workers and work organization that predicted experiences of humiliation at work, while difficult relationships with superiors translated into feelings of humiliation only in those with low self-esteem. In addition, the study examined the role of self-esteem in buffering stress and difficult emotions at work and found that while there was a positive correlation between organizational climate and self-esteem, there was no overall buffering effect of self-esteem on the relationship between organizational climate and humiliation at work.

Conclusions: Developing self-esteem among employees is important because it can lead to increased creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction. However, this study goes beyond the buffering role of self-esteem and shows that high self-esteem can also contribute to difficult states, such as humiliation. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, the conclusions should be interpreted within the limits of its design and are offered primarily from a theoretical standpoint. Nevertheless, this work is one of the few to address the topic of humiliation at work and its organizational correlates, and corresponds with theories that shed light on optimal versus high levels of self-esteem.

Keywords: humiliation, workplace humiliation, self-esteem, organisational climate, multi-group SEM

Experiencing unpleasant emotions at work, such as humiliation, is unfortunately a universal experience. Research provides information that even a single humiliating situation can carry the consequences of increased stress, depression, trauma and even suicide (Elshout et al., 2017; Ženda et al., 2021). Humiliation at work can result from economic and social hierarchies, unhealthy competitive relationships, exploitative company policies or the general atmosphere at work (Fisk, 2001; Varman et al., 2023). According to previous studies (Ženda et al., 2021), evaluation of the current workplace may be related to the experience of threatening situations, and these relations may indicate where to investigate potential risks of humiliation within the organisation. Qureshi et al. (2014) also found a negative relationship between organisational climate and bullying. Furthermore, the dimensions of organisational climate show moderate positive associations with conflict management (Apipalakula & Kummoon, 2017) and overall employee well-being (Viitala et al., 2015). These findings resonate with the Job Demands-Control-Support model (JDGS; Karasek & Theorell, 1990), which refers to the critical point of stress an employee may reach when confronted with high demands and low control and support. However, employees can reduce these negative effects by gaining more control over their work and establishing strong relationships with their supervisor and co-workers because the organisational context influences the opportunities and limitations for deriving dignity from workplace relationships (Crowley, 2013). Positive relationships with management are associated with more satisfying interactions with co-workers, whereas control structures that promote abuse can generate conflict between co-workers and humiliation resulting from a lack of mutual respect (Crowley, 2013). Thus, how employees perceive their workplace is related to what they secondarily experience and feel. To take preventive and corrective actions, it is necessary to investigate which elements of the organisational climate have high-strain outcomes (Goodboy et al., 2017).

Frequent humiliation at work perpetuates low self-esteem, making individuals see themselves as inferior, weaker, and dependent (Salter & Hall, 2020). Being a victim of unjust humiliation can have a profound impact, and low self-esteem may increase the risk of humiliation (Ravary & Baldwin, 2018; Svindseth & Crawford, 2019) and contribute to complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD; Salter & Hall, 2020). Under JDSC theory (Goodboy et al., 2017; Karasek & Theorell, 1990), self-esteem can be understood as a personal resource (Hobfoll et al., 2018) related to high control, buffering the experiencing of unpleasant events. Some findings (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2018) suggest that certain personality traits (i.e., dominance and sociability) moderate the relationship between aspects of organisational climate and job satisfaction. However, there is a literature gap in terms of the exact role of self-esteem in the relationship between organisational climate and the experience of organisational behaviours, such as humiliation.

Literature View

Organisational Climate

Organisational climate has long been recognised as a crucial factor in employee and organisational success, which is specific to the company (Durniat, 2012), facilitates communication between employees and creates ready-made patterns of behaviour (Lipińska-Grobelny, 2020). Organisational climate is studied from different perspectives. Within the social cognition theory, organisational climate is viewed as the collection of perceptions, emotions, and actions shaped by employees' beliefs and observations of their workplace policies, practices, and procedures (Schneider et al., 2013), and therefore it is subject to change over time (Ehrhart et al., 2014). This approach is based on the idea that individuals within an organization construct their understanding of the work environment through their social interactions, interpretations, and other cognitive processes. Together, these shared appraisals, assumptions, and values (Schneider et al., 2013) form a general or "molar" organisational climate (Williams et al., 2022) with "distinctive patterns of collective feelings and beliefs" specific to an organisation and passed to its new members (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 50). The cruciality of organisational climate stems from the fact that the meaning attached to objective organisational conditions can influence employees' attitudes, behaviours, and performance within the organisation (Berberoglu, 2018).

On the other hand, there are approaches to organisational climate that draw on different theoretical frameworks, which allows them to provide additional insights into understanding employees' experiences in the organisation. Rosenstiel and Boegel (1992) proposed a concept of organisational climate based on Lewin's (1951) psychological field theory, where the individual's behaviour is influenced by personality and by his or her perception and interpretation of environmental conditions. Accordingly, organisational climate is constituted by the interaction between the organisational perceivable circumstances and employees'

competencies, needs, and values and refers to the group perception shared by all members (Durniat, 2012). Rosenstiel and Boegel (1992) assumed that organisational climate is a complex phenomenon (Durniat, 2012) with six dimensions universal to any organisation: employee relations, management style, work organisation, communication, employee representation, and personal development opportunities. Importantly, these authors did not describe different types of climate but rather a multidimensional organisational climate (Lipińska-Grobelny, 2020). Hence, an employee may rate the climate as generally more or less favourable or supportive. A positive organisational climate may even prevent interpersonal frustrations from escalating into acute conflicts and workplace humiliation (Zahlquist et al., 2009).

Humiliation at Work

Humiliation refers to any behaviour aimed at degrading, devaluing, or inducing feelings of unjust debasement. Humiliation is studied from three perspectives. It can be an internal experience (an emotion), an external event (bullying, violent conflict), or a set of systemic conditions (e.g., discrimination; Hartling & Lindner, 2016). Based on an electroencephalogram, Otten and Jonas (2014) recorded that humiliation is the most intense self-conscious emotion associated with depression, PTSD or suicide attempts (Elshout et al., 2017). The relational component of humiliation involves three roles: the humiliator, the humiliated and the witness (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991). The overall reported level of humiliation throughout life is influenced by past occurrences (experienced or observed from a witness perspective) and the fear associated with avoiding such situations in the future (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). Past research indicates that adverse behaviours, such as bullying, exclusion, discrimination, abuse, and unproductive actions, stem from the experience of humiliation (Robinson & Schabram, 2017). As such, humiliation has been implied to play an essential role in escalating inter-individual and intergroup conflicts. It can be perpetrated by employers, co-workers, and subordinates (Klein, 1991). Humiliation generates a dangerous desire for revenge in individuals, which disrupts their functioning in organisations (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009) and other areas of life (Pachowicz, 2014).

Organisations can provide a context for humiliation due to hierarchy, rivalry, power asymmetry, and conflict (Czarniawska, 2008; Kożusznik, 2017). Humiliation will have a particular character depending on different levels of self-esteem, the personality or mood state of the person being humiliated, their position in the pecking order, the amount of public exposure, as well as the degree to which the event is related to their physical or bodily reactions or condition (Svindseth & Crawford, 2019).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a person's confident attitude towards themselves in relation to their environment (Brockner, 1988) or the difference between the ideal and

the real self (Pope et al., 1988). Whether self-esteem is positive is not related to its level but to the degree of fit (Szpitak & Polczyk, 2015). Tafarodi and Swann (2001) argue that individuals assess themselves on two separate dimensions – acceptance/liking and strength/competence – which together form their overall self-esteem. More broadly, self-liking is related to experiencing oneself as a good or bad person and depends on the quality of the individual's social relations. Self-competence concerns perceiving oneself as effective, capable, and having a sense of agency and control. A high sense of competence is associated with a sense of power, efficiency, positive affect, and self-evaluation (Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2012; Szpitak & Polczyk, 2015).

Self-esteem is viewed as a personal, internal resource that is conserved and provides the basis for developing other resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). High self-esteem is also associated with optimal functioning, happiness, life satisfaction, self-improvement and better efficiency (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Conversely, negative self-esteem is related to abnormalities, antisocial behaviour, mental disorders, suicidal tendencies, aggression, and crime (Brockner, 1988; Ravary & Baldwin, 2018; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2012). Global and organisational self-esteem plays a central role in directing and motivating people's behaviour (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). While the exact mechanisms and timeline through which self-esteem impacts behaviour remain unclear, it is crucial to implement organisational policies that foster healthy self-esteem, as factors such as organisational size, adverse roles, job insecurity, discrimination, harassment, and anticipated change have been found to negatively affect organisational self-esteem in the workplace (Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

The Current Study

This study applies Lewin's Field Theory (1951), according to which behavior results from the interplay between personal characteristics and environmental factors. In this context, organizational climate represents environmental forces that can shape an individual's cognition, emotion, and behavior, including humiliation. Specifically, humiliation is viewed as an outcome of imbalance within the psychological field when external adverse circumstances overpower internal resources, disrupting psychological equilibrium. Importantly, the experience of humiliation is not solely dependent on the objective environment but on how the individual internally interprets and responds to those forces. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to examine the relationships between organisational climate dimensions with perceived humiliation at work.

Central to Field Theory (1951) is the notion that behavior arises from the interaction between personal and environmental components, not from either in isolation. This explains why not all employees exposed to the same organizational climate react similarly, as the experience of humiliation depends on the unique configuration of each individual's field, shaped by personal attributes such as self-esteem. Hence, the second aim of the study is to investigate the relation of organisational climate with humiliation in three groups: low, moderate and high self-esteem. This division was used to compare primarily marginal

groups with each other and to test non-linear relationships. Although self-esteem has been examined as a general protective factor in stress models (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Hobfoll et al., 2018), its role as a moderator in the relationship between organisational climate and humiliation remains unexplored. Importantly, humiliation is best understood as a cognitively and affectively constructed experience resulting from how individuals interpret relational and organisational signals (Collazzoni et al., 2015; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). From a phenomenological perspective, such assessments depend on the subjective field of perception, which makes personal dispositions crucial in shaping emotional responses (Rosenberg, 2002). In this context, self-esteem acts as a dispositional filter, influencing the interpretation of social feedback. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to perceive ambiguous signals in the workplace as personally degrading, thereby increasing vulnerability to humiliation (Ravary & Baldwin, 2018). In contrast, high self-esteem can buffer negative evaluations – or, in some cases, intensify reactions when expectations of respect are violated (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). This suggests that self-esteem may moderate the relationship between organisational climate and experienced humiliation by shaping perceptions and evaluations of hierarchical dynamics.

Although much research has examined the impact of organisational climate on stress and burnout in the workplace (Aronsson et al., 2017; Loh et al., 2019), the specific role of organisational climate in shaping experiences of humiliation – a distinct and intensely self-conscious emotion – has received limited empirical attention. Existing research has focused on more general indicators of workplace well-being, leaving a gap in our understanding of how systemic organisational factors may contribute to feelings of degradation and relational harm (Elshout et al., 2017; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). The present study fills this gap by examining how dimensions of organisational climate relate to perceived humiliation and whether self-esteem modifies these associations in different subgroups, highlighting potential non-linear effects. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

1. Do dimensions of organisational climate predict the level of employee humiliation?
2. Do these relationships vary depending on the level of employee self-esteem?

Method

Participants

Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they were between 18 and 65 years of age and currently employed under a formal employment contract. The participants were 672 employees (female $n = 356$ and male $n = 316$) from Poland. Age ranged from 18 to 65 years ($M = 37.13$, $SD = 10.63$), and most participants had higher (56%) or secondary (35.7%) education. All participants

declared having a permanent employment contract, working in managerial (20.2%) and non-managerial positions (79.8%). The percentage of respondents who declared being white-collar workers was 62.9%, and that of blue-collar workers was 37.1%, with overall job tenure ranging from 1 month to 45 years ($M = 13.83$, $SD = 9.39$), and current workplace tenure ranging from 1 month to 39 years ($M = 7.24$, $SD = 7.38$).

Measures

Organisational Climate was measured with the Rosenstiel and Boegel *Organisational Climate Questionnaire* (Durniat, 2018; Rosenstiel & Boegel, 1992), with seven dimensions: pre-scale (a five item general assessment of organisational climate; e.g., "It's nice working for our company."; $\alpha = .94$), co-workers (e.g., "We lack a sense of community; everyone thinks only of themselves."; $\alpha = .81$), supervisors (e.g., "Our supervisors ensure that cooperation between subordinates runs smoothly and without conflict."; $\alpha = .89$), work organisation (e.g., "Interesting and unusual tasks are distributed fairly."; $\alpha = .75$), communication (e.g., "Those who are later responsible for the consequences of implementing long-term plans are never involved in drawing them up."; $\alpha = .86$), representation of the individual's interests (e.g., "The interests of employees are fully taken into account at our company."; $\alpha = .71$), and promotion opportunities (e.g., "Professional achievements are fairly evaluated at our company."; $\alpha = .83$). All reliability results provided have been determined on the basis of this study.

To measure humiliation at work, the *Humiliation Inventory* (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999) was adapted by adjusting the instructions and test items to assess how seriously the participants had been hurt in their current workplace. The scale has two dimensions: experience of humiliation at work (e.g., "In your current workplace, how seriously have you felt harmed by being teased?"; $\alpha = .97$) and fear of humiliation at work (e.g., "At your current workplace, how much do you fear being disrespected?"; $\alpha = .98$).

Self-esteem was assessed with the *Self-liking and Sense of Competence Scale* (SLCS-R; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; Szpitalak & Polczyk, 2015), consisting of two dimensions, self-liking (e.g., "I feel very comfortable with myself."; $\alpha = .85$) and sense of competence (e.g., "I am very effective at what I do."; $\alpha = .86$).

Procedure

The study was a voluntary and anonymous online survey conducted by an external company via a research panel. Employees were informed that they would take part in an online survey on difficult situations and working conditions. All participants were provided with written informed consent, which indicated that all data would be treated as strictly confidential. The questionnaire included the contact data of a psychologist if contact was needed. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Silesia in Katowice, No. KEUS 114/04.2021.

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 28 software for simple statistics, normality of data, reliability, and AMOS 28 software was used for a path model and a multi-group path model (Multi-group SEM) under ML estimation. The models were compared by BIC and the difference of Δ BIC between 6 to 10 was interpreted as strong evidence for a substantially better fit (Kass & Raferty, 1995). The paths between models were compared with Bonferroni-corrected z-scores with a significance level of $\alpha = .017$.

Results

To assess the relations of self-esteem with organisational dimensions of climate and humiliation at work and to investigate differences in the mediating effect of self-esteem, a path analysis with a multigroup analysis was conducted. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the Variables Included in This Study

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-liking	3.35	0.73	—					
2. Self competence	3.04	0.49	.62***	—				
3. Self-esteem	3.20	0.55	—	—	—			
4. Experience of HW	1.67	0.91	-.22***	-.11**	-.20***	—		
5. Fear of HW	1.96	1.08	-.30***	-.23***	-.30***	.75***	—	
6. HW	1.82	0.96	-.29***	-.20***	-.28***	—	—	—
7. OC pre-scale	3.16	0.97	.18***	.17***	.20***	-.23***	-.27***	-.27***
8. OC co-workers	3.09	0.71	.21***	.16***	.21***	-.48***	-.43***	-.48***
9. OC supervisors	3.06	0.78	.20***	.16***	.21***	-.41***	-.42***	-.44***
10. OC work organization	3.26	0.67	.19***	.11***	.18***	-.51***	-.44***	-.50***
11. OC communication	3.04	0.75	.20***	.16***	.20***	-.35***	-.36***	-.38***
12. OC representation	2.99	0.74	.15***	.15***	.17***	-.38***	-.39***	-.41***
13. OC promotion opportunities	2.90	0.85	.19***	.17***	.21***	-.37***	-.38***	-.40***

Note. HW – humiliation at work; OC – organizational climate.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

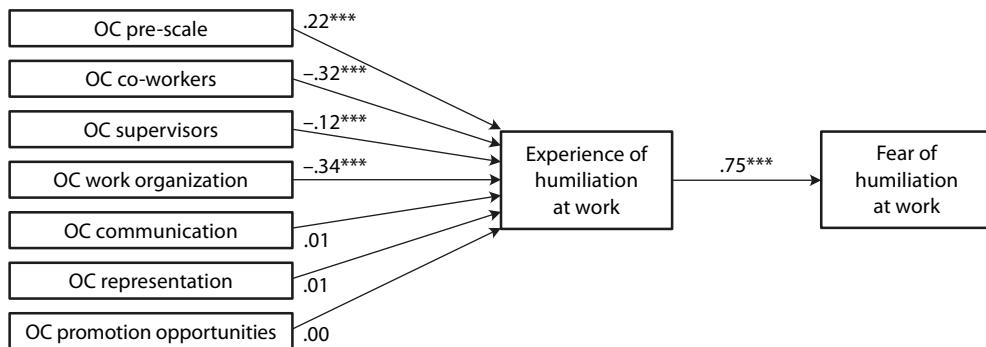
General Model: Path Analysis for the Entire Sample

The first model examined relationships between the dimensions of organisational climate and the experience of humiliation at work and between the

experience and fear of humiliation at work across the entire sample in the path model (Fig. 1). Significant associations were observed between the dimensions of organisational climate: pre-scale, co-workers, work organisation with experience of humiliation at work. The association between the experience of humiliation at work and the fear of future humiliation was strongly positive. The model showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (7) = 23.365, p = .001$, NFI = .996, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .059.

Figure 1

Model Testing the Associations of Organizational Climate Dimensions (OC) With Humiliation at Work (N = 672)



Note. The path values are standardized coefficients.

*** $p < .001$

Moderation Model: Multi-Group Path Model of Different Levels of Self-Esteem

To compare the associations from the first model, an analogous multi-group path model for different levels of self-esteem (i.e., low, moderate, and high) was created by dividing self-esteem by the 33rd and the 66th percentile (Table 2). The multi-group model showed a very good fit, $\chi^2 (21) = 30.17, p = .09$, NFI = .99, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03. The models for each group were compared based on BIC (BIC_{low} = 198.48, BIC_{mod} = 194.5, BIC_{high} = 191.10), and the model for high self-esteem was substantially better fitted than the model for low self-esteem ($\Delta\text{BIC}_{\text{low-high}} = 7.39$). Path coefficients were compared to analyse how aspects of organisational climate predicted experiencing humiliation at work between groups of low, moderate and high self-esteem (Table 3).

The pre-scale of organisational climate predicted experience of humiliation only at moderate level of self-esteem. The dimension of co-workers was predictive irrelevant of the level of self-esteem (b ranged from $-.51$ to $-.32, p < .001$; Tables 2 & 3). The supervisor dimension was predictive only at a low level of self-esteem and differed from a high level of self-esteem. The dimension of work organisation was predictive at all levels of self-esteem but was significantly

stronger at low self-esteem compared to high self-esteem ($b_{\text{low}} = .59$ vs. $b_{\text{high}} = .19$, $p = .004$). The communication dimension was a positive predictor of the experience of humiliation for low self-esteem workers and a negative predictor for high self-esteem workers. The dimension of representing interests was not predictive irrelevant of the level of self-esteem. The dimension of promotion opportunities predicted humiliation only at a moderate level of self-esteem. The association of experience and fear of humiliation was not dependent on the level of self-esteem.

Table 2

Results of Multi-Group Analysis (Low, Moderate and High Self-Esteem)

	Low self-esteem (n = 248)				Moderate self-esteem (n = 222)				High self-esteem (n = 202)			
	B	β	se	t	B	β	se	t	B	β	se	t
OC-PS → HW1	.12	.12	.10	1.24	.41	.39	.10	4.14***	.08	.11	.08	.95
OC-CW → HW1	-.37	-.26	.11	-3.29***	-.51	-.35	.12	-4.13***	-.32	-.38	.09	-3.45***
OC-S → HW1	-.43	-.35	.18	-2.42*	-.16	-.12	.21	-.74	.20	.25	.14	1.40
OC-WO → HW1	-.59	-.39	.11	-5.15***	-.40	-.27	.12	-3.26**	-.19	-.21	.09	-2.04*
OC-C → HW1	.31	.24	.14	2.26*	-.21	-.15	.16	-1.32	.24	-.30	.12	-2.09*
OC-R → HW1	-.02	-.01	.14	-.14	.25	.18	.15	1.68	-.13	-.16	.10	-1.24
OC-PO → HW1	.18	.14	.12	1.45	-.27	-.22	.13	-2.02*	.11	.16	.09	1.20
HW1 → HW2	.84	.69	.06	14.85***	.84	.73	.05	15.92***	.90	.83	.04	20.76***

Note. Organizational climate dimensions: OC-PS – pre-scale; OC-CW – co-workers; OC-S – supervisors; OC-WO – work organization; OC-C – communication; OC-R – representatives of individuals' interests; OC-PO – promotion opportunities; humiliation at work: HW1 – experience of humiliation at work; HW2 – fear of humiliation at work.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Comparisons of Pairs of Parameters Between the Groups of Low, Moderate and High Self-Esteem Groups

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Low self-esteem	Low self-esteem	Moderate self-esteem
		vs. moderate self-esteem	vs. high self-esteem	vs. high self-esteem
		<i>z-score</i>	<i>z-score</i>	<i>z-score</i>
OC-PS	→ HW1	2.07*	0.36	-2.61**
OC-CW	→ HW1	-0.85	0.32	1.22
OC-S	→ HW1	1.01	2.77**	1.40
OC-WO	→ HW1	1.09	2.68**	1.37
OC-C	→ HW1	2.47**	-3.07**	-0.13
OC-R	→ HW1	1.33	-0.64	-2.10*
OC-PO	→ HW1	2.46**	-0.43	2.34**

Note. Organizational climate dimensions: OC-PS – pre-scale; OC-CW – co-workers; OC-S – supervisors; OC-WO – work organization; OC-C – communication; OC-R – representatives of individuals' interests; OC-PO – promotion opportunities; humiliation at work: HW1 – experience of humiliation at work.

* $p < .05$; ** $p_{Bonf} < .017$

Discussion

General Model

The paper aimed to show relationships between organisational climate dimensions and the experience of humiliation at work in the path model and to assess the relationship between the past experience of humiliation at work with the current fear of it. As the study was conducted using a cross-sectional design, it does not allow for causal inferences. Therefore, the interpretations and implications presented should be regarded as theory-driven conclusions, grounded in existing theoretical frameworks. The results suggest that the experience of humiliation at work may be, to some extent, predicted by the individual's relationship with co-workers. This supports the theory that co-worker support may act as a prevention against acts of humiliation (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). The low evaluation of the dimension of co-workers may also be due to the multiplicity of direct relationships, each of which may be conflicting or result from the competition for status, resources or power between co-workers (Czarniawska, 2008; Kozusznik, 2017).

Associations between work organisation and the experience of humiliation include the performance of tasks beyond assigned duties and the unpredictability

of organisational processes. A humiliated employee cannot control the work environment, experiencing a violation of the psychological contract or unfavourable role conditions (Pierce & Gardner, 2004), especially with increased demands and a low sense of control and support when self-esteem is low (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Other studies showed that formalisation and participation in decision-making were positively related to procedural justice but negatively related to organisational politics. In contrast, power hierarchy and spatial distance were positively related to organisational politics but unrelated to procedural justice (Aryee et al., 2004). A component of humiliation is a sense of injustice, which is complementary to the above reports. Feelings of injustice are accompanied by lowered self-esteem and loss of well-being, which can worsen the individual's opinion of themselves as an employee (Heck et al., 2005). The experience of humiliation at work may be associated with abuse of power and brutal management (Kożusznik, 2017), but no link has been shown with perceptions of superiors. Contact with superiors is less frequent than with co-workers, and any criticism from the former may be considered constructive due to the hierarchy. It may also be perceived as degrading but deserved and thus cause more shame or guilt than humiliation (Collazzoni et al., 2015).

The areas of communication, representation of an individual's interests, and opportunities for promotion appear to be of marginal importance for the experience of humiliation at work and the fear of it. The experience of humiliation in the current workplace strongly determines the fear of experiencing similar situations in the future. The sense of humiliation is so acute that it triggers anticipatory anxieties and can trigger avoidance strategies and passivity in the employee (Payne, 1968). High levels of perceived humiliation may be associated with high tension, which the employee may try to relieve by humiliating and degrading others (Klein, 1991; Pachowicz, 2014).

Moreover, the cultural context in which this study was conducted is relevant when considering how hierarchy is interpreted in the workplace and experiences of humiliation. Poland is characterised by high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011), which may normalise hierarchical distance and reduce the likelihood of openly questioning authority. These cultural dimensions may also increase the emotional intensity of hierarchical interactions, potentially reinforcing perceived humiliation when expectations of respect or fairness are violated.

Moderation Model – Multi-Group

The general path model explores linear relationships across the sample. Therefore, for co-workers and work organisation areas, the associations of climate with humiliation at work occur at each level of self-esteem. The same model was tested to see how it behaved with different levels of self-esteem (low, moderate and high) in order to explore its moderating effect and to note differential non-linear relationships. Perceptions of management style and support from superiors are associated with the experience of humiliation at work only at low

levels of self-esteem, which may be evidence of the buffering role of self-esteem, according to which high self-esteem mitigates the effects of stress (Baumeister et al., 2003). Additionally, according to the theory of Hobfoll et al. (2018), self-esteem, referred to as an internal resource, may be a factor by means of which an individual copes well with criticism and demands from superiors. Communication or access to information and its relationship to humiliation experienced at work is extremely interesting due to the significant and positive link at low self-esteem, insignificant at moderate self-esteem, and significant but negative at high self-esteem. Overload, or the nature of information at work, can affect employees' cognitive-affective states differently based on the level of self-esteem. Possibly, low levels of self-esteem make conversations humiliating, and perceived as judgmental, reprimanding or threatening. Vice versa, with high levels of self-esteem, a lack of communication can be hurtful due to feelings of exclusion. In addition, self-esteem, as an internal resource, can act as a filter for information noise and difficulties arising from interpersonal communication (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Based on the representation of an individual's interests, the experience of humiliation at work could not be predicted. The opportunity for promotion entered into a relationship with humiliation only at moderate self-esteem. Possibly, those with low self-esteem may not have the ambition to expect such a promotion, and those with moderate self-esteem are likely to see the possibility of promotion in their own actions. High self-esteem may be associated with the employee's satisfaction with their current position.

Conclusions

Developing self-esteem among employees is important because it can lead to increased creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction (Ravary & Baldwin, 2018). However, this study goes beyond the buffering role of self-esteem and shows that high self-esteem can also contribute to difficult states, such as humiliation. It is worth noting that people with low self-esteem may be particularly vulnerable to humiliation because they interpret ambiguous social cues as more threatening or rejecting, in line with rejection sensitivity theory (Downey & Feldman, 1996). This heightened sensitivity may stem from a chronic expectation of negative evaluation, which amplifies the perceived severity of interpersonal insults or unfair treatment (Ravary & Baldwin, 2018). Conversely, individuals with high self-esteem may experience difficult interpersonal events differently, not because they are resilient, but because high self-esteem is often associated with higher personal standards, a stronger sense of entitlement, or a need to maintain one's image (Baumeister et al., 2003). As a result, such individuals may perceive critical feedback or loss of control not as a threat to their status but as a violation of expected respect, leading to emotional reactions such as humiliation through wounded pride rather than shame or guilt (Collazzoni et al., 2015; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2012). Work organisation and co-workers have

an impact on the likelihood of experiencing humiliation at work, and in the case of relationships with co-workers, it is intensified when self-esteem is higher. In other cases, the level of self-esteem moderated the relationship between workplace climate and humiliation, but in a non-linear way, going beyond the buffering hypothesis. At low self-esteem, most of these associations were significant, so it is worth raising employees' self-esteem to an optimal, not high, level.

The findings of this study yield several practical implications for fostering self-esteem in the workplace. First, organizations should provide employees with access to workshops that focus on leveraging personal strengths, such as cognitive reframing and goal setting (Costantini et al., 2019). These should be complemented by training and development programs designed to build confidence and strengthen other personal resources (Filosa & Alessandri, 2024). Second, leadership practices that promote autonomy, such as delegating challenging tasks and involving employees in decision-making, have been shown to support the development of healthy self-esteem (Farh & Chen, 2014; Kim & Beehr, 2018). Third, enhancing self-esteem can also be achieved by fostering a sense of social inclusion in the workplace, where employees have access to mentoring relationships and supportive networks (Liao, 2025). Finally, organizations should strive to cultivate an environment that affirms individual self-worth, encourages mutual trust, embraces failure as a learning opportunity, recognizes achievements, and demonstrates organizational support and fairness (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). These goals can be achieved through transparent communication, regular engagement surveys, team meetings, and initiatives aimed at promoting employee well-being. In conclusion, this paper shows the relationship between employees' subjective evaluations and the experience of difficult emotions, which have negative consequences for their functioning and health (Ženda et al., 2021). These considerations need to be further deepened by examining other factors that employees encounter in the workplace. Conducting longitudinal or experimental studies to capture the causality of these phenomena would also be valuable.

The study has some limitations, including the use of a cross-sectional survey that limits analysis of bidirectional relationships. Given the subjective and sensitive nature of humiliation, the exclusive use of self-report measures may limit the interpretability of the results. To strengthen future research, it would be beneficial to include complementary perspectives, such as observer assessments or behavioral data, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. However, the survey's strengths include the large sample size and the use of reliable questionnaires for investigating the employees' subjective evaluations of their work experiences.

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