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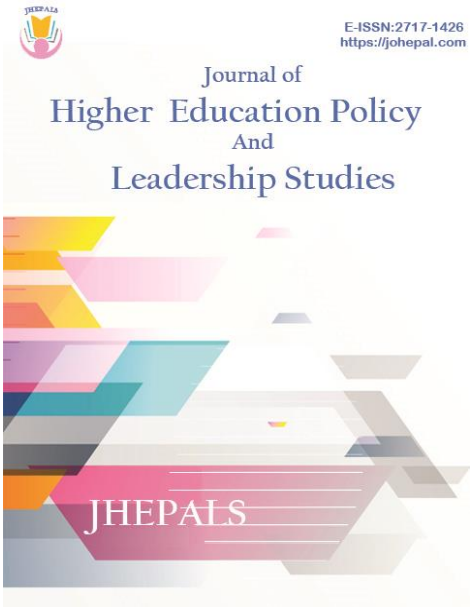

Perceived Teacher Fairness as a Predictor of Students' Well-being in Higher Education: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Emotion Regulation

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Perceived Teacher Fairness as a Predictor of Students' Well-being in Higher Education: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Emotion Regulation

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Abstract

The current study examined whether cognitive emotion regulation (CER) could mediate between fairness perceptions and university students' subjective well-being (SWB). A cross-sectional study of Iranian students (N = 492; ages 18–52) was conducted employing Likert-type questionnaires focusing on teacher justice, SWB (consisting of Life Satisfaction and Mood Level), and CER. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were used with a bootstrap sample of 5,000 to test parallel mediation by six CER strategies. The resulting trimmed measurement model indicated an acceptable fit (e.g., CFI = 0.909, RMSEA = 0.054). Perceived fairness had small-to-moderate direct effects on Life Satisfaction (β = .144, p = .006) and Mood Level (β = .147, p = .002). Notably, Positive Reappraisal strongly predicted both outcomes (βs = .465–.539), whereas Catastrophizing negatively predicted them (βs = −.239 to −.224). An analysis of indirect effects suggested that Fairness was related to higher SWB via greater Positive Reappraisal (βs = 0.066–0.076) and lower Catastrophizing (βs = 0.034–0.036). The model accounted for 36.5% of Life Satisfaction and 42.9% of Mood Level variance. These findings point to the importance of teacher justice practices in the classroom and have implications for both teacher training and raising students' awareness of CER strategies.

Keywords: Teacher Fairness; Classroom Justice; Subjective Well-being; Cognitive Emotion Regulation; Positive Reappraisal; Catastrophizing; Higher Education

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Introduction

Fairness and well-being in educational contexts contribute significantly to effective teaching and learning. For instance, a systematic review of the literature has indicated that students' justice perceptions affect key motivational and behavioral outcomes in class, including engagement and trust; conversely, perceived unfairness can be detrimental to motivation, increase hostility, and undermine performance (Rasooli et al., 2019). Recent work reconceptualizes fairness in the classroom as a multidimensional, socio-cultural construct that is involved in not only the whole assessment cycle but also other aspects of students' experiences in the classroom (Rasooli et al., 2023). Thus, the issue of classroom fairness is being acknowledged as a key concern among researchers and educators (Rasooli et al., 2023; Chory, 2023).

Likewise, understanding how well-being is conceptualized, identifying its predictors and outcomes, and trying to improve it is a worthy quest for policymakers and educators in the 21st century (see Hascher, 2023; Seligman et al., 2009; WHO, 2023, OECD, 2018). Well-being is viewed as an indicator of a supportive learning environment in which cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes mutually reinforce each other (Hascher, 2023). For example, well-being helps individuals cope with everyday challenges and maintain motivation and persistence (Diener et al., 2018), which is especially relevant for university students managing continuous assessment and performance pressure.

Despite the importance of classroom fairness and well-being, there is a paucity of research exploring the psychological mechanisms through which fairness perceptions affect well-being outcomes in university classrooms. One promising explanation involves emotion regulation processes, particularly cognitive emotion regulation (CER) strategies. These strategies are adaptive and can help people cope with the difficulties in their lives (Garnefski et al. 2001). Consequently, the current study is an attempt to fill in this gap. It aims to examine perceived teacher fairness as a predictor of students' subjective well-being (SWB), testing the mediating role of CER strategies.

Despite the mounting emphasis on the importance of classroom fairness on the one hand and student well-being on the other hand, research on finding the mechanisms connecting the two is left thin on the ground. Moreover, understanding whether CER can mediate this relationship is important because emotion regulation is an often-overlooked but crucial teachable strategy (Oxford & Gkonou, 2021), and it can potentially help students maintain higher levels of well-being in spite of the unfairness they perceive at university. Therefore, the current research is particularly novel in this regard especially in the context of Iran.

Literature Review

Fairness and Justice in Education

Fairness in educational contexts has evolved from a predominantly technical focus on bias and test fairness toward a broader social and relational construct. Organizational justice theory is among the established theories to study classroom justice and fairness (Rasooli et al., 2019). Accordingly, classroom justice is conceptualized to consist of a number of principles (e.g., equity, bias suppression, and respect) which are pigeon holed in three

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dimensions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, respectively (see Rasooli et al., 2019 for a systematic review). In higher education, these dimensions are involved in different aspects of the classroom: distributive justice is about just distribution of outcomes and resources such as grades and attention (Deutsch, 1975). It also considers the alignment of outcomes to effort and performance. It consists of principles such as equality, equity, and need. Procedural justice is concerned with the procedures used in the classroom such consistency in grading criteria and rubrics, bias suppression, and giving a voice to students (Leventhal, 1980). Interactional justice refers to interactions between teachers and students and includes principles such as dignity and respect on the one hand and timely, candid, logical, and transparent communication of information such as feedback on the other (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975; Leventhal, 1980). According to this theory, fairness is a subjective and global evaluation of the degree of being treated justly (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Goldman & Cropanzano, 2015). For example, if a teacher does not pay equal attention to all students, she has violated the principle of equality. This violation can lead to the perception of unfairness in students. Zhaleh et al.'s (2025) recent research in the context of higher education in Iran has provided further evidence for the distinction between justice and fairness. More generally, in educational settings, students' overall and subjective evaluations of classroom fairness stem from their perceptions of how the principles in distributive, procedural, and interactional justice are upheld or violated by their teachers, and these perceptions shape their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses (Rasooli, Zandi et al. 2019).

Using organizational justice theory, research in the Iranian educational context has had two foci: teachers and students' perception of fairness and justice. As regards teachers' perceptiosn of classroom assessment fairness, Rasooli et al. (2023), studying a group of Iranian high school teachers, found that their philosophies such as periodizing either equality or equity and experiences, such as being treated by their own teachers at school, interacted "with their encounters with social conditions of society, schools, and classrooms to influence their conceptions and articulated practices of fairness in classroom assessments" (p. 1). Rasegh et al. (2023) further explained how teachers' personal factors and social structures can form teachers' conception of classroom justice. Zhaleh and Zandi (2024) used conceptual metaphors to explore Iranian English teachers' conceptions of justice and found that justice and injustice were not necessarily the mirror image of each other. They further found that the teachers' understanding of the nuances of classroom justice was limited. Estaji and Zhaleh (2021) found that the most important difficulties Iranian English teachers had in implementing justice in the classroom consisted of institutional factors such as regulations and class size, students' diverse needs and expectations, and teachers' lack of experience and challenges in navigating their own emotions. To help teachers become more aware of organizational justice theory and implementing it, Estaji and Zhaleh (2022) ran a workshop. The findings support the effectiveness of explicit instruction of justice dimensions and principles to teachers.

Research on Iranian university students' perceptions of their teachers' fairness has been conducted both in general education (e.g., Darabi Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Rasooli et al., 2019) and in more specific domains such as language education (e.g., Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022). Using a critical incident technique with a sample of 502 university students, Rasooli et al. (2019) found that students expressed positive emotions such as happiness,

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satisfaction, feeling valued, and hopefulness in response to fair classroom practices by the teachers. Conversely, they reported that students indicated negative emotions, including anger, frustration, disappointment, and embarrassment, when describing unfair incidents. Moreover, in their study, fairness was associated with greater engagement and adaptation in class, while unfairness led to disengagement, passivity, and dissent. Zhaleh and Estaji (2025), employing a phenomenological design, examined the lived experiences of 55 Iranian EFL undergraduates concerning teacher fairness in university language classes. According to their findings, students demonstrated a variety of positive emotional reactions to perceived teacher fairness. For example, they felt peaceful when fairness was shown by their teachers, which reduced their stress and anxiety and fostered emotional trust and well-being. Zhaleh and Estaji (2025) further underlined students' experienced happiness as a result of fair teacher behavior, which created a supportive and engaging learning environment. Particularly, students felt secure when they were graded fairly, their rights were respected, and equal attention was given to all.

Similar to the findings regarding the Iranian educational context, the body of research in the Western world shows that teacher justice has behavioral and emotional consequences. Quantitative studies consistently indicate that classroom fairness affects positive outcomes such as motivation, engagement, and trust, and is associated with fewer negative responses such as resistance when injustice is perceived (See for a review Rasooli et al., 2019). For example, polite and honest behavior, which are the principles of interactional justice, on the part of teachers and fellow students, was associated with an increase in students' rule-abiding behavior (Donat et al., 2020). Perceived classroom fairness predicts positive learning outcomes (Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014), achievement (Kazemi, 2016), affective learning (Horan et al., 2012; Vallade et al., 2014), positive emotions and motivation (Chory-Assad, 2002; Kazemi, 2016). It can also affect positive relationships such as feelings of inclusion and belonging to the school (Peter & Dalbert, 2010), positive classroom climate (Sören et al., 2013), and engagement with school (Berti et al., 2010), and better teacher–student relationships (Horan et al., 2012). Conversely, injustice predicts perceived negative emotions (Horan et al. 2010), aggression toward teachers (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004), somatic complaints and worries about school (Donat et.al., 2016), anger (Chory et al., 2017), antisocial compliance-gaining tactics (Claus et al., 2012), cheating (Lemons & Seaton, 2011), truancy (Ishak & Fin, 2013), and bullying (Santinello et al., 2011). In sum, in addition to the effect of (un)fairness on classroom learning outcomes, the literature points to the fact that (un)fairness can lead to students' positive and negative emotional responses. The emotional effect of fairness carries implications for students' well-being (Peter & Dalbert, 2010) as positive emotions "fuel psychological and physical well-being" (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1373).

Well-Being in Education

Just as there is a positive relationship between fairness and educational outcomes, there is a positive relationship between well-being and success at school (Hascher, 2023). As more people spend a significant portion of their lives in schools and universities, ensuring students' wellbeing is worthwhile, not only because it is desirable to keep students happy and help them enjoy their time at school, but also because research shows that students with higher well-being experience many positive academic outcomes such as higher

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achievement, more engagement, and greater persistence (Gray & Hackling, 2009; Hagenauer, & Hascher, 2014; Reschly et al., 2008). Further, well-being can be a proxy for a high quality and conducive learning environment at school (Bradley et al., 2018). Consequently, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has included measures of teacher and learner well-being in all the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies from 2023 onwards (OECD, 2018). However, there is still need for further research on the factors affecting domain specific types of well-being such as the one in educational contexts (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025).

There are different types of well-being such as objective, physical and societal well-being to name but a few. The focus of current research is on subjective well-being (SWB), which refers to the personal assessment of how people feel and to what extent they are satisfied with their lives (Dalbert, 2013). SWB is generally conceptualized as having at least two components (Diener et al., 2003; Diener et al., 1999): a cognitive component (i.e., a personal evaluation of life and how satisfying it has been) and an affective component (i.e., moods and emotions) representing people's evaluations of the events that occur in their lives (Diener et al., 1999).

One of the predictors of student well-being is classroom fairness (Münscher et al., 2020; Peter & Dalbert, 2010). Students spend a significant portion of their lives in educational settings and are under constant stress due to assessment, deadlines, classroom workload, and interactions that affects their emotions. In all of these activities, fairness is implicated as teachers' attention to distributional, procedural, and interactional dimensions of justice can give rise to positive emotions in students, which in turn support SWB.

Peter and Dalbert (2010) showed that students' perceptions of teachers' justice towards them affected their well-being, particularly their feelings of inclusion and belonging to the school. In one of the more recent and large-scale studies, Münscher et al. (2020) studied the relationship between university students' personal belief in a just world and their life satisfaction as a cognitive component of well-being. They were also interested to see whether or not personal belief in a just world affects academic cheating. They carried out their research on 1135 German and 634 Turkish students and found that personal belief in a just world directly predicted the students' life satisfaction. These researchers demonstrated that students' experience of justice from their fellow classmates could mediate the relationship between belief in a just world and life satisfaction. Notably, they showed that students' experience of justice from teachers mediated the effect of personal belief in a just world on cheating. These results did not differ between the two countries. According to these researchers, perceived justice from teachers and students increases feelings of belonging and social inclusion, which can affect students' well-being and motivate them to accept and observe rules and social norms. These studies indicate that there is a relationship between classroom fairness and well-being and demonstrate that this relationship is far from being simple as a number of factors such as belief in a just world could mediate this relationship. Dalbert (2001) argued that belief in a just world is sustained by assimilation processes that help people cope with unjust or adverse experiences. Another candidate for mitigating the negative outcomes of unfairness is cognitive emotion regulation (CER). Despite a sizable body of research on the belief in a just world and how it directly and indirectly affects students' moods and well-being (e.g., Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005; Donat et al., 2016; Donat et al., 2018; Münscher et al., 2020) there is a paucity of research on the

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mediating role of adaptive CER strategies in the context of classroom fairness and well-being.

Emotion Regulation Mediating between Well-Being and Fairness

One of the less researched candidates for mediating the relationship between classroom fairness and well-being is the adaptive cognitive and emotional strategies used by students. They can potentially help mitigate the effect of unfairness.

The mitigation process can be complex. Previous research has shown that people differ in how they psychologically process negative events such as injustice (Bondü & Esser, 2015; Maltese et al., 2013; Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999). For example, it has been found that schoolchildren with higher degrees of sensitivity to injustice experience less joy in learning (Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018). People are not only different in the way they process negative events, they also vary in how they control their negative emotions.

As mentioned previously, one psychological process people use when faced with a negative event is belief in just world (Dalbert, 2001) and another one is emotion regulation (ER). More formally, ER is "the cognitive way of managing the intake of emotionally arousing information" (Garnefski et al., 2001, p. 1314). CER is comprised of a host of adaptive and maladaptive cognitive strategies people utilize in response to negative events. Some of the most important types of these adaptive strategies include positive reappraisal, acceptance, putting into perspective, planning, positive refocusing, and—on the maladaptive side—self-blame, other-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing. These strategies can be measured using questionnaires. The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) by Garnefski et al. (2001) is commonly used to assess how students cope with academic stress. Previous studies (e.g., Beaumont et al., 2023; Garnefski et al., 2007) have demonstrated the impact of emotion regulation on people's mental health and well-being.

In educational settings, CER can help students cope with the pressures they experience in classrooms. Adaptive CER strategies, such as positive reappraisal, have been shown to affect better emotional outcomes and greater academic engagement while maladaptive strategies, like rumination or self-blame, have been correlated with negative emotions and disengagement (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007). However, little research has focused on shedding light on how CER can mediate the relationship between perceived (un)fairness and well-being. In other words, if CER has the potential to mitigate the detrimental impact of negative emotions on well-being, the increased state of well-being that arises as a result can have a positive impact on the educational achievements.

Current Study

This research tries to shed light on the complex relationship between fairness perceptions, CER, and SWB. While the relationship between fairness and well-being has been studied (Münscher et al., 2020; Peter & Dalbert, 2010), investigating these constructs through the mediating role of CER offers a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial processes that influence student wellbeing.

A well-researched framework for understanding how fairness can be conceptualized and perceived is organizational justice theory in educational contexts (Rasooli et al., 2019), which posits that teachers' following of justice principles leads to students' perceptions of

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fairness, which in turn influence their emotional responses, affecting attitudes and behaviors (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Goldman & Cropanzano, 2015). Accordingly, this research posits two hypotheses. First, the perception of teachers' fairness influences students' well-being directly. Second, CER mediates the effect of fairness on wellbeing. In other words, university students who perceive fairness in the classroom are more likely to engage in adaptive cognitive emotional responses, which promote well-being (i.e., life satisfaction and mood). Conversely, perceptions of unfairness lead to maladaptive emotional responses, which undermine their well-being. Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Do perceptions of classroom fairness by university students directly predict their subjective well-being (SWB)?
2. Does cognitive emotion regulation (CER) mediate the relationship between classroom fairness perceptions and SWB?

Research Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The study adopted a quantitative approach to test the two hypotheses outlined above. The sample consisted of N = 492 university students in Iran (see Table 1). They were aged between 18 and 52 years (M = 23.4, SD = 5.8). The majority were female (62%) and 34.8% male. Approximately, 3.2% of the participants did not declare their gender. The majority of the participants consisted of undergraduate students (67.1%), followed by master's (22.5%) and doctoral students (11.4%). Further, students from a wide range of majors in humanities, engineering, basic sciences, and medicine from both state and private universities and from 29 out of 31 provinces in the country were represented in the sample.

Table 1.
Demographic Information of the Student Participants

Demography	N
Age	
18-22	235
23-27	126
28-32	30
33-37	24
38-42	11
43-47	5
48-52	4
Gender	
Male	305
Female	171
Education	
Undergraduate	330
Masters	106
PhD	56

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Perceived Teacher Fairness and Well-being

Data were collected via a suite of online questionnaires. The questionnaires were introduced to the participants during their regular class hours in two universities in Iran (convenience sampling). Participation was entirely voluntary: students were informed about the study and were given assurances about the anonymity of their answers. Those who agreed to participate were given a link to the questionnaires. In addition to the convenience sampling, students were encouraged to share the link with friends and classmates and through social media. The additional snowball sampling element was introduced to the recruitment strategy. Thanks to snowball sampling, participation went beyond the two universities.

The questionnaires, which—on average—took between 10 and 15 minutes to complete were administered in Persian. All the instruments were translated by a professional translator and piloted with a group of university students, followed by in-person interviews which ensured clarity of the items and students' understanding. Necessary revisions were made prior to the main data collection. No incentives were offered to the participants.

Instruments

Three commonly used instruments in the literature were employed in the study, each had a six-point Likert scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*.

Fairness in the Classroom: The students' perception of fairness was measured using a 10-item scale entitled Teacher Justice Scale (TJS) developed by Dalbert and Stöber (2002). This instrument has been widely recommended for measuring holistic fairness perceptions in educational settings (Rasooli et al., 2023). The items from this scale (e.g., My teacher generally treats me fairly.) formed the latent fairness factor in this study.

Subjective Well-Being: The Trait Well-Being Inventory (TWBI; Dalbert, 1992) was used to assess subjective well-being. It consists of 13 items covering two dimensions of SWB: Life Satisfaction and Mood Level. Life Satisfaction was measured with seven items about satisfaction in the past (e.g., When I think back on my life so far, I have achieved much of what I aspire to do), present (e.g., I am satisfied with my life), and future life (e.g., I believe that much of what I hope for will be fulfilled). Future satisfaction is also known as forward looking satisfaction. Mood Level was assessed with six items (e.g., I usually feel quite cheerful). The two subscales informed the outcome latent factors in the study.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation: The study used the short form of the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; Garnefski et al., 2001), comprising 27 items across nine subscales. According to the CERQ manual (Garnefski et al., 2002), self-blame refers to attributing responsibility for the negative event to oneself and focusing on personal mistakes or guilt (e.g., I feel that I am the one to blame for it.). Acceptance involves moving on with life acknowledging that the difficult situation cannot be changed and the negative event cannot be undone (e.g., I think that I have to accept that this has happened). Rumination means constant focus on the negative emotions and thoughts aroused by the negative event (e.g., I often think about how I feel about what I have experienced). Positive refocusing denotes redirecting one's attention to pleasant matters so as to distance oneself from the negative event. (e.g., I think of something nice instead of what has happened). Refocusing on planning emphasizes considering taking concrete steps or using strategies for dealing with the difficult situation (e.g., I think about how I can best cope with the situation). Positive

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reappraisal entails interpreting the bad event as something meaningful in terms of personal growth or resilience (e.g., I think I can learn something from the situation). Putting into perspective involves an attempt to minimize the severity of the problem by comparing it with more serious possibilities (e.g., I think that it all could have been much worse). Catastrophizing entails exaggerating the negativity of the event, treating it as among the worst possible incidents that can happen to a person (e.g., I often think that what I have experienced is the worst that can happen to a person). Finally, other-blame refers to attributing responsibility for the unfavorable event to others rather than the self. (e.g., I feel that others are to blame for it). These CERQ subscales functioned as the mediating factors in the study.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted in R version 4.5.1. The primary packages were Lavaan for CFA and SEM, and semTools for assessing reliability and validity of the measures. First, each of the three instruments were evaluated to ensure their reliability (internal consistency) and validity of the proposed structures using CFA. Following the measurement phase, the structural model was tested by running SEM. Fairness was specified as a predictor of both Life Satisfaction and Mood Level. The six CERQ subscales were added as parallel mediators to evaluate whether or not CER strategies explained the effect of fairness on well-being outcomes.

The Analysis used the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimator. To evaluate mediation, bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used, and the costumery bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects were calculated.

Model fit was evaluated using the following indices: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) (values ≥ .90 = acceptable), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (≤ .08 = acceptable, ≤ .05 = close fit; with 90% CI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) (≤ .08 = acceptable).

Results

Prior to answering the research questions, CFA was used to inspect the reliability and validate the structure of the instruments used in the study. Afterwards, the hypothesized structural model was evaluated using SEM. The analytic process involved several stages.

Results of the CFA Analysis

The initial CFA included all the items from TJS, TWBI, and CERQ scales, but due to poor fit, some modifications were made to the model and some of the items were removed from the study. Particularly, the first-order factors in the Life Satisfaction aspect of TWBI did not fit well. As indicated by Dalbert (1992), Life Satisfaction can be defined by three first-order factors (past, present, and future-oriented). Also, all three subscales can be subsumed under the second-order factor of Life Satisfaction (Dalbert, 1992). We opted for the second-order solution in the modified model. Further, several low-performing items were removed (i.e., item two from TJS, item one from TWBI, and item 13 from CERQ) to improve model fit.

For CERQ, the full nine-subscale structure was evaluated but due to low loadings and poor reliability some of the items and subscales had to be removed. Therefore, out of the nine subscales in the CERQ, six subscales (Self-blame, Acceptance, Refocus Planning, Positive

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Reappraisal, Catastrophizing, and Other-blame) were retained. After trimming the model, the reliability was improved with CFA demonstrating acceptable fit to the data, X^2 (678) = 2001.71, $p < .001$; CFI = .909, TLI = .898; RMSEA = .054, 90% CI [.050, .057]; SRMR = .049.

All factor loadings for the modified model were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and generally moderate to strong (see Table 2). The second-order Life Satisfaction factor showed strong loadings on its three first-order components of past, present, and future (λ = .935–.783; R^2 = .875–.612). Loadings for the Mood Level component of TWBI ranged from .665 to .897. Loadings for TJS ranged from .550 to .855. As regards CERQ, the loadings for the subscales were as follows: Positive reappraisal from .599 to .864; and catastrophizing from .641 to .837. Composite reliability (CR) values for the latent constructs ranged from .685 to .922. The average variance extracted (AVE) values were at or above .50 for most factors (exceptions were Acceptance, Self-blame, and Refocus Planning, which were slightly below .50). These results are consistent with acceptable internal consistency (i.e., reliability) and convergent validity for the retained measures (See Table 4).

Table 2.
Standardized Factor Loadings (λ) and Item Reliabilities (R^2) for the Measurement Model

Construct	Indicator	Std. loading (λ)	Item R^2
Life Satisfaction (2nd-order)	LifeSatisPresent	0.935	0.875
Life Satisfaction (2nd-order)	LifeSatisPast	0.883	0.779
Life Satisfaction (2nd-order)	LifeSatisForward	0.783	0.612
Fairness	TJS1	0.788	0.621
Fairness	TJS3	0.644	0.414
Fairness	TJS4	0.808	0.653
Fairness	TJS5r	0.744	0.553
Fairness	TJS6	0.738	0.545
Fairness	TJS7	0.855	0.732
Fairness	TJS8	0.550	0.302
Fairness	TJS9	0.630	0.397
Fairness	TJS10	0.830	0.689
LifeSatisPresent	TWBI6	0.882	0.778
LifeSatisPresent	TWBI9	0.851	0.723
LifeSatisPast	TWBI4	0.729	0.531
LifeSatisPast	TWBI12	0.820	0.672
LifeSatisForward	TWBI3	0.809	0.655
LifeSatisForward	TWBI7	0.771	0.595
Mood Level	TWBI2	0.873	0.761
Mood Level	TWBI5	0.888	0.789
Mood Level	TWBI8	0.748	0.559
Mood Level	TWBI10	0.665	0.443
Mood Level	TWBI11	0.733	0.537
Mood Level	TWBI13	0.897	0.804
Selfblame	CERQ1	0.657	0.432
Selfblame	CERQ10	0.644	0.415
Selfblame	CERQ28	0.740	0.547
Acceptance	CERQ2	0.544	0.296
Acceptance	CERQ11	0.842	0.709
Acceptance	CERQ29	0.607	0.369
RefocusPlan	CERQ5	0.703	0.495

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RefocusPlan	CERQ14	0.527	0.277
RefocusPlan	CERQ32	0.724	0.524
PosReappraisal	CERQ15	0.599	0.359
PosReappraisal	CERQ24	0.744	0.553
PosReappraisal	CERQ33	0.864	0.746
Catastrophizing	CERQ17	0.837	0.700
Catastrophizing	CERQ26	0.641	0.411
Catastrophizing	CERQ35	0.761	0.579
Otherblame	CERQ9	0.740	0.548
Otherblame	CERQ18	0.732	0.536
Otherblame	CERQ36	0.789	0.622

Note: Values are standardized (Std.all). All item loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The top three rows report the second-order Life Satisfaction factor loadings onto first-order factors.

As shown in Table 3, the latent variables in the study—after trimming the model—showed significant correlations at $p < 0.05$ with only a few exceptions. As expected, the correlations between the adaptive strategies and Fairness, Mood Level and Life Satisfaction were positive. Conversely, maladaptive strategies were negatively associated with Fairness, Mood Level, and Life Satisfaction. The correlation between Fairness and the CER strategies were generally small while the correlation between these strategies with Mood Level and Life Satisfaction were generally small to moderate. Notably, the correlation between Mood Level and Life Satisfaction as well as that between Positive Reappraisal and Refocus on Planning was high in magnitude.

Table 3.
Latent Variable Correlations among the Constructs Used in the SEM

Variable	Fairness	Mood Level	Life Satisfaction	Self-blame	Catastrophizing	Other-blame	Acceptance	Refocus on Planning	Positive Reappraisal
Fairness	1.00								
Mood Level	0.25*	1.00							
Life Satisfaction	0.25*	0.90*	1.00						
Self-blame	0.01	-0.19*	-0.12*	1.00					
Catastrophizing	-0.14*	-0.45*	-0.45*	0.25*	1.00				
Other-blame	-0.22*	-0.26*	-0.30*	-0.14*	0.50*	1.00			
Acceptance	0.07*	0.10	0.15*	0.28*	-0.10	-0.20*	1.00		
Refocus on Planning	0.14*	0.38*	0.44*	0.02	-0.33*	-0.29*	0.49*	1.00	
Positive Reappraisal	0.13*	0.61*	0.59*	-0.02	-0.40*	-0.26*	0.26*	0.73*	1.00

Note: Values are latent correlations. Asterisk (*) denotes significance at $p < 0.05$ level.

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. For most constructs, the square root of AVE exceeded their interconstruct correlations, which supports discriminant validity. However, it should be noted that the correlation between Mood Level and the second order factor of Life Satisfaction was high (r = . 91), which suggests conceptual overlap. To investigate this issue further, a model comparison was

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conducted. A CFA where Mood Level and Life Satisfaction were specified as components of a single higher order factor of Well-being was run. The results indicated that although this alternative model fit the data, it did not differ significantly from the model in which Life Satisfaction and Mood Level were considered distinct constructs ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 9.89$, $p = 0.13$). Given there is strong theoretical evidence in the literature, which distinguishes the emotional and affective nature of Mood Level from the evaluative nature of Life Satisfaction (Dalbert, 1992; Lucas et al., 1996), both of these constructs were retained for the SEM analysis. Also, Positive Reappraisal and Refocus Planning showed a high latent correlation ($r = .73$), which was only marginally lower than the square root of their AVEs (√AVE = .756 and .650, respectively). This indicates a potential overlap between these two adaptive strategies, despite the fact that they remained statistically distinguishable in the model. For all other constructs, discriminant validity was supported. After ascertaining the suitability of the trimmed model as regards validity and reliability the hypothesized structural model was tested.

Table 4.
Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and √AVE for the Trimmed CFA Model

Construct	CR	AVE	√AVE
Fairness	.911	.539	.734
LifeSatisPresent	.870	.770	.878
LifeSatisPast	.763	.617	.785
LifeSatisForward	.782	.642	.801
MoodLevel	.922	.670	.819
Selfblame	.722	.467	.683
Catastrophizing	.793	.566	.752
Otherblame	.798	.570	.755
Acceptance	.712	.463	.681
RefocusPlan	.685	.422	.649
PosReappraisal	.796	.571	.756

Note: CR ≥ .70 indicates acceptable internal consistency. AVE ≥ .50 and √AVE greater than inter-construct correlations support convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Results of the SEM Analysis

The structural model tested the effects of perceived Fairness on Life Satisfaction and Mood Level, both directly and indirectly via the six retained CERQ subscales (See Tables 5 and 6). It was found that fairness had a significant positive direct effect on Life Satisfaction ($\beta = .144$, $p = .006$) and on Mood Level ($\beta = .147$, $p = .010$).

The model also tested the effect of Fairness on the six CER strategies (See Table 5). Accordingly, as expected, Fairness had a significant direct and positive effect on Positive Reappraisal ($\beta = .080$, $p = .027$) and Refocus on Planning ($\beta = .067$, $p = .024$), which are adaptive strategies. Conversely, Fairness was negatively associated with Catastrophizing ($\beta = -.152$, $p = .006$) and Other-blame ($\beta = -.189$, $p = .000$), which are maladaptive strategies. However, the effect of Fairness on Self-blame and on Acceptance was negligible and non-significant respectively.

Further, the model tested the effect of the six CER strategies on SWB. As anticipated, Positive Reappraisal had a strong positive effect on both Life Satisfaction ($\beta = .465$, $p < .001$) and Mood Level ($\beta = .539$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, Catastrophizing negatively predicted

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both of SWB components (i.e., Life Satisfaction: β = −.239, p < .001; Mood Level: β = −.224, p < .001). Although Self-blame was associated with lower Mood Level (β = −.147, p = .005), it did not predict Life Satisfaction. Paths which involved the remaining strategies (i.e., Acceptance, Refocus Planning, and Other-blame) were not found to be statistically significant.

Table 5.
Structural Paths, Direct Effects (Standardized) with Bootstrapped 95% CIs (Unstandardized)

Outcome	Path	β (Std)	p	Boot 95% CI (unstd)	Sig.
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction	0.144	0.006	[0.046, 0.270]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Self-blame → Life Satisfaction	-0.087	0.140	[-0.277, 0.032]	No
Life Satisfaction	Acceptance → Life Satisfaction	0.035	0.540	[-0.136, 0.291]	No
Life Satisfaction	Refocus Plan → Life Satisfaction	0.074	0.329	[-0.167, 0.411]	No
Life Satisfaction	Positive reappraisal → Life Satisfaction	0.465	< .001	[0.609, 1.225]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Catastrophizing → Life Satisfaction	-0.239	< .001	[-0.367, -0.125]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Other-blame → Life Satisfaction	-0.080	0.191	[-0.253, 0.053]	No
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level	0.147	0.002	[0.060, 0.286]	Yes
Mood Level	Self-blame → Mood Level	-0.147	0.005	[-0.362, -0.071]	Yes
Mood Level	Acceptance → Mood Level	0.006	0.906	[-0.178, 0.218]	No
Mood Level	Refocus Plan → Mood Level	-0.022	0.720	[-0.301, 0.191]	No
Mood Level	Positive reappraisal → Mood Level	0.539	< .001	[0.778, 1.467]	Yes
Mood Level	Catastrophizing → Mood Level	-0.224	< .001	[-0.356, -0.132]	Yes
Mood Level	Other-blame → Mood Level	-0.053	0.345	[-0.220, 0.082]	No
Selfblame	Fairness → Selfblame	0.006	0.094	[-0.097 0.107]	No
Acceptance	Fairness → Acceptance	0.41	0.237	[-0.024 0.113]	No
RefocusPlan	Fairness → RefocusPlan	0.067	0.024	[0.011 0.128]	Yes
PosReappraisal	Fairness → PosReappraisal	0.080	0.027	[0.008 0.149]	Yes
Catastrophizing	Fairness → Catastrophizing	-0.152	0.010	[-0.269 -0.037]	Yes
Otherblame	Fairness → Otherblame	-0.189	0.000	[-0.284 -0.093]	Yes

Further, a bootstrapped mediation with 5,000 resamplings showed that the effect of Fairness on Life Satisfaction was partly mediated by Positive Reappraisal (indirect β = .066, 95% CI_unstd [.01, .15]) and by reduced Catastrophizing (indirect β = .036, 95% CI_unstd [.01, .09]). The corresponding total indirect effect was β = .133 (p = .005), and the total effect of Fairness on Life Satisfaction was β = .278 (95% CI_unstd [.19, .42], p < .001). Likewise, as regards Mood Level, a significant positive indirect effect via Positive Reappraisal (β = .076, 95% CI_unstd [.01, .18]) and a negative indirect effect via Catastrophizing (β = .034, 95% CI_unstd [.01, .08]) was observed, lending support to the mediating role of these constructs. The total indirect effect was β = .118 (p = .011), and the total effect was β = .265 (95% CI_unstd [.19, .43], p < .001).

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Perceived Teacher Fairness and Well-being

Table 6.
Indirect and total effects of Fairness: Structural paths, indirect, and total effects of fairness (standardized) with bootstrapped 95% CIs (unstandardized)

Outcome	Effect	β (Std)	p	Boot 95% CI (unstd)	Sig.
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Self-blame)	-0.001	0.876	[-0.016, 0.015]	No
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Acceptance)	0.002	0.651	[-0.009, 0.016]	No
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Refocus Plan)	0.012	0.409	[-0.014, 0.048]	No
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Pos. reappraisal)	0.066	0.039	[0.008, 0.149]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Catastrophizing)	0.036	0.040	[0.009, 0.085]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Fairness → Life Satisfaction (via Other-blame)	0.018	0.235	[-0.010, 0.058]	No
Life Satisfaction	Total indirect effect of Fairness	0.133	0.005	[0.049, 0.257]	Yes
Life Satisfaction	Total effect of Fairness	0.278	< .001	[0.189, 0.424]	Yes
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Self-blame)	-0.002	0.861	[-0.025, 0.023]	No
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Acceptance)	0.000	0.928	[-0.011, 0.011]	No
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Refocus Plan)	-0.003	0.739	[-0.030, 0.020]	No
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Pos. reappraisal)	0.076	0.035	[0.011, 0.177]	Yes
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Catastrophizing)	0.034	0.036	[0.009, 0.083]	Yes
Mood Level	Fairness → Mood Level (via Other-blame)	0.012	0.372	[-0.016, 0.049]	No
Mood Level	Total indirect effect of Fairness	0.118	0.011	[0.034, 0.251]	Yes
Mood Level	Total effect of Fairness	0.265	< .001	[0.190, 0.432]	Yes

Note: β = standardized coefficient (Std.all). Confidence intervals are for the unstandardized estimates based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples with percentile CIs. Outcomes are Life Satisfaction (second-order) and Mood Level. R^2 for the outcomes: Life Satisfaction = 0.365; Mood Level= 0.429.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study started with two research questions. First, whether perceptions of teacher fairness (as measured by TJS) directly predict university students' SWB as measured by TWBI. Second, whether or not CER strategies mediate the relationship between fairness perceptions and well-being. Based on the standardized effect sizes reported in the results section and using conventional guidelines offered by Cohen (1988), the direct paths from Fairness to well-being inclusive of Life Satisfaction and Mood Level were small to moderate in magnitude, while the paths from Positive Reappraisal to both outcomes were moderate-to-large in size. Catastrophizing also appeared as a significant mediator.

As expected, Fairness was found to be associated with a reduction in Catastrophizing, which in turn predicted lower Life Satisfaction and Mood Level. However, the size of these indirect effects was very small (β = .04 for both well-being outcomes). These results mean that while Catastrophizing is statistically relevant, its substantive contribution is limited

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compared to Positive Reappraisal. All in all, the SEM model accounted for 36.5% of the variance in Life Satisfaction and 42.9% of the variance in Mood Level.

As regards the direct effect, these results are consistent with the relatively scant literature on fairness and well-being (e.g., Münscher et al., 2020; Peter & Dalbert, 2010) and are significant as they provide further support for the effect of teacher justice on student well-being, particularly from less-represented contexts.

A plausible explanation for the findings is that the perceptions of classroom fairness tend to promote positive emotions and perceptions of unfairness, conversely, evoke negative emotions (e.g., Chory et al., 2017; Rasooli et al., 2019; Zhaleh & Estaji, 2025). These emotional responses are consequential for students' well-being (Fredrickson, 2004).

As for the mediation effect, it was expected that by engaging in cognitive strategies such as positive reappraisal, individuals become more resilient and tolerate, or even master, adverse life experiences (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2006), which naturally boosts their well-being. In the current study, Positive Reappraisal was the strongest adaptive predictor, and Catastrophizing was a significant maladaptive predictor of student well-being. As the analysis of the data demonstrates, Positive Reappraisal is the central pathway from Fairness to SWB. To the best knowledge of the author, no prior research has studied the mediating role of CER in the path from fairness to well-being to allow the evaluation of the findings of this study my means of comparison. Nevertheless, the findings are congruent with the literature on the association between reappraisal and well-being. Previous research has shown that in school contexts, there is a within-person relationship between higher reappraisal and higher school-related well-being over time (Beaumont et al., 2023).

As regards the centrality of the construct of reappraisal and catastrophizing, Garnefski and Kraaij (2007) reported a study that connected CER to depressive symptoms and anxiety across two measurement points of the same adult populations. The measures were administered twice with a one-year interval. In the first measurement, depressive symptoms and anxiety were most reliably predicted by positive reappraisal, catastrophizing, rumination, and self-blame, while at the second point, only reappraisal and catastrophizing retained predictive value for anxiety. Garnefski and Kraaij's (2007) results are in line with the mediation results observed in the present study as regards the importance of these two strategies.

An outstanding issue that needs to be addressed here is the possible reason for the significant mediating role of Catastrophizing despite showing a small effect size. Aldao and Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) demonstrated that adaptive strategies such as positive reappraisal show greater cross-situational variability than maladaptive strategies, and this flexibility is associated with lower psychopathology. In the academic setting examined here, perceptions of fairness may lend themselves particularly well to reappraisal processes, whereby students may reinterpret adverse experiences in terms of growth or resilience. Catastrophizing, on the other hand, may overlap conceptually with related maladaptive responses such as Rumination and Self-blame, thus reducing its unique predictive power and effect size in the SEM model in this study. Nevertheless, more research is needed to shed light on this issue.

In conclusion, by exploring the relationship among classroom fairness, emotion-regulation, and well-being, the paper offers three contributions. First, it attempted to propose an explanation of how fairness perceptions may affect well-being via CER strategies. The findings suggest that perceived fairness enhances students' well-being partly

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because it tends to increase positive reappraisal while discouraging catastrophizing. Second, it tried to extend the fairness literature to a non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic; Afifi & Cornejo, 2020; Bates, 2021) higher education context, as recommended by Chory et al. (2022). Third, it provided a structural model that has theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications and Further Research

A challenge facing theoretical development of the models dealing with well-being is identifying the likely predictors and mediators. However, inclusion of more components and constructs in a model creates its own problems such as the need for a larger sample size, not to mention the fact that such elaborate models need longer surveys to measure the numerous components. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to recruit participants who are willing to dedicate more of their time to carefully answer the survey questions. Given these challenges the multi-componential complex theoretical SEM model proposed in this study was able to explain a fair amount of variation in the well-being of students (36.5% of the variance in Life Satisfaction and 42.9% of the variance in Mood Level). Although these results point to the significance of fairness in the classroom and the importance of adaptive CER strategies for students' well-being in higher educational settings, they do not provide the full picture of the predictors of students' well-being and the direct and indirect psychological mechanisms through which they interact. Other candidate predictors may include classroom anxiety and enjoyment that can be affected by classroom fairness on the one hand and in turn affect students' wellbeing on the other hand.

Further, future studies could combine qualitative student reports with quantitative, behavioral, and trace indicators (e.g., LMS feedback logs) to shed more light on how students' perception of fairness can give rise to certain behaviors in the classroom. Finally, because the trimmed CERQ used here excluded three subscales, replication studies with the full nine-strategy structure are encouraged as they would clarify whether additional adaptive strategies (e.g., putting into perspective) affect well-being directly or indirectly.

Other strands of research on well-being suggest that the indicators of students' well-being do not merely include an emotional component, whether hedonistic (e.g., presence of joy and satisfaction and absence of negative emotions) or eudemonic (e.g., positive feelings ensuing competence and mastery). According to the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), in addition to hedonistic and eudemonic components, well-being includes engagement (i.e., being deeply involved and absorbed in activities), relationships (i.e., building strong, supportive connections with others), and meaning (i.e., finding purpose and meaning in life). Future researchers are encouraged to explore the effect of classroom fairness on other indicators of well-being in addition to SWB.

Practical Implications

The results have potential for practical interventions for teachers and students to boost educational outcomes. Since classroom fairness and CER strategies are significant predictors of student wellbeing, it is essential to provide instructors with justice-oriented and CER development training programs. However, teacher education programs and teacher training courses do not include concrete guidelines for upholding justice and its nuances in the

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classroom. Therefore, it is recommended that in the short-term workshops are held for teachers and university professors. Research has indicated that such workshops can increase the awareness of teachers (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022) and potentially enable them to better understand and apply justice principles in their classrooms. In the long-term, the recent research findings in the field of classroom fairness can be incorporated into pre-service teacher education or offered by universities as part of in-service professional development.

Similarly, by holding workshops for students about the importance of learning CER adaptive strategies they could be given the awareness to use them in the face of difficulties during their university years and beyond. This can make them more resilient in the face of negative experiences such as perceived unfairness in the classroom.

Limitations and Further Research

The current study acknowledges some limitations and encourages further research on a number of outstanding issues. Particularly, cross-sectional designs limit strong causal inferences. For example, reverse paths (e.g., students high in SWB perceiving more fairness) cannot be ruled out. Convenience or snowball sampling within one country, with certain demography, and in a particular domain (e.g., higher education classrooms) may limit generalizability; multi-national and multi-cultural longitudinal studies with measurement invariance and random sampling could test directionality and capture within-person dynamics (for a discussion, see also Beaumont et al., 2023). Thus, the results may not generalize well to other non-educational settings, younger age groups, or other cultures.

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Human Participants

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Originality Note

The work is original, and where others' work is used, they are properly cited.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author declares that [ChatGPT-5] was used for drafting an early version of the article, just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author to write different parts of the research.

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