

The Relationship between Ethnocultural Empathy and Perceived Organizational Support among Employees in Sabah, Malaysia

Razima Hanim Osman¹, Mariny Abdul Ghani², & Norzaliza Alis²

Universiti Malaysia Sabah¹

Universiti Utara Malaysia²

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600939>

Received: 21 June 2026; Accepted: 26 June 2026; Published: 09 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between ethnocultural empathy and perceived organizational support (POS) among government employees in Sabah, Malaysia. As workplace becomes increasingly diverse, understanding the role of ethnocultural empathy in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational support has become increasingly important. Drawing on Organizational Support Theory (OST), this study investigates the influence of four dimensions of ethnocultural empathy, empathic feeling and expression (EFE), empathic perspective taking (EPT), acceptance of cultural difference (ACD), and empathic awareness (EA) on employees perceived organizational support. Data was collected from 213 respondents representing diverse ethnic backgrounds using the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) and the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE). Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS to examine the relationships between the variables and to identify the strongest predictors of POS. Results revealed that two dimensions of ethnocultural empathy (EPT and ACD) were positively correlated with POS, indicating that employees who exhibit higher ethnocultural empathy perceive greater support from their organizations. Meanwhile EA dimension was negatively correlated to POS indicating employees who were aware of discrimination and stereotyping other ethnicity would have lower level of POS. Only EFE did not show a significant correlation to POS. Multiple regression analysis further identified EA as the strongest predictor of POS, followed by EPT. These findings suggest that employees' ability to recognize and understand cultural differences plays a critical role in shaping their perceptions of organizational support. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on organizational behavior by highlighting the importance of ethnocultural empathy in fostering a supportive work environment. Practically, the findings suggest that organizations can enhance employees' POS by fostering empathy, promoting cultural competence, and implementing inclusive workplace practices that strengthen social support and interethnic workplace relations.

Keywords: ethnocultural empathy, perceived organizational support, multicultural workplace, employees

INTRODUCTION

Perceived organizational support (POS) remains a crucial element in maintaining organizational efficiency. When employees feel their well-being is valued, they reciprocate with heightened motivation and commitment (Malik & Naeem, 2016; Tremblay & Landreville, 2015; van Knippenberg, et. al, 2015). Moreover, this positive relationship is mainly found consistent throughout the literature, where POS has the potential to spark employees' social indebtedness towards the organization (Rockstuhl, et. al, 2020) thus resulting in positive outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Kao et. al., 2023), presenteeism (Li, et. al, 2026), innovation (Wang et. al, 2026) and good leadership practice (Wei, et. al, 2026).

To fully comprehend the significance of POS in modifying employee behaviour, it is essential to ground the concept in its foundational theories – Organizational Support Theory (OST) and Social Exchange Theory (SET). POS began with the framework of OST, when employees personify their organization and interpret the treatment they received from the organizational agents (supervisors and organizational members) as reflective of the organization itself (Eisenberger et. al., 1986; Sun, 2019). When employees perceive that the organization values

their contributions and genuinely cares about their well-being, their socioemotional needs are fulfilled, leading to positive evaluations of the organization. Guided by the norm of reciprocity emphasized in SET, employees who experience high organizational support develop a sense of obligation to repay the organization through positive attitudes and behaviours, such as increases organizational commitment (Firmansyah et. al, 2022), improved job performance (Li, et. al, 2022), increases work effort and loyalty (Kurtessis et. al., 2017).

As empirical evidence continues to demonstrate the positive influence of POS on both employee outcomes and organizational efficiency, organizations are becoming more concerned with how POS can be strengthened and sustained over time. Since employees' POS do not develop automatically, researchers have highlighted the importance of examining organizational practices and workplace conditions that contribute to higher levels of POS. Therefore, understanding the contributing factors enables organizations to create a supportive work environment that encourages positive employees' attitudes and behaviours. Following Eisenberger et. al (2020) and Kurtessis et. al (2017) meta-analyses studies, the main antecedents of POS are the concept of organizational fairness, supportive environment and non-abusive workplace relationship. One possible explanation for why these antecedents influence POS is these antecedents may share a common underlying interpersonal element, namely empathy.

Empathy encourages individuals to recognize the emotional experiences and needs of others, which may influence how the organizational agents communicate, and treat employees. Organizational agents, namely leaders and coworkers who demonstrate empathy are more likely to engage in considerate and professional communication (Fuller, et. al, 2021), and respectful conflict resolution (Klimecki, 2019) which in turn enhance employees' perceptions of organizational support. However, "empathy without knowledge of the cultural background and practical experience with the different ethnic groups may not lead to satisfying and fair treatment and helping behaviour" (Rasoal, 2011, p.7). Moreover, with multicultural and diverse work environments, ethnocultural empathy is essential for fostering understanding, collaboration, and mutual respect among employees from different backgrounds (Newman, et. al, 2023). Ethnocultural empathy involves the ability to recognize and appreciate the experiences and perspectives of individuals from other cultures, which helps reduce biases, prevent misunderstandings, and improve communication (Wang, et.al, 2003; Rasoal, et. al, 2011).

Given Malaysia's ethnically diverse workforce, organizational practices that emphasize empathy and cultural sensitivity are increasingly important in promoting workplace harmony and employee well-being. Malaysian organizations, especially in the state of Sabah, often consist of employees from various indigenous backgrounds (Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut and many more), each with distinct cultural values and communication styles. Consequently, organizational agents who demonstrate empathy and respect toward these differences that come from various ethnic background, are more likely to feel valued and appreciated by the organization (Arghode, et. al, 2022). This may help reduce interpersonal conflict, abusive work relationships, and cultivate positive perceptions of organizational support.

Although previous studies have identified organizational fairness, supportive workplace environments, and non-abusive relationships as important antecedents of POS, limited attention has been given to the role of empathy as a potential underlying factor connecting these workplace experiences. Since empathy promotes understanding, compassion, and supportive interpersonal interactions, it may play an important role in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational support. Moreover, limited studies have specifically examined how ethnocultural empathy among organizational members contributes to employees' perceptions of organizational support within the Malaysian workplace context. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between ethnocultural empathy and perceived organizational support (POS) among government employees in Sabah, Malaysia.

Hypothesis of the study

Ethnocultural empathy, comprising four dimensions—empathic feeling and expression (EFE), empathic perspective taking (EPT), acceptance of cultural difference (ACD), and empathic awareness (EA)—is hypothesized to influence employees perceived organizational support (POS).

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted in this study, with quantitative data analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire in gathering information from a larger number of respondents while focusing on specific variables under investigation. The sample size determination was conducted using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator (Raosoft, Inc., 2004), adopting a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin error and a 50% response distribution. For a target population of 469 employees in one of government agencies in Sabah, the recommended sample size was 212 respondents. This figure is consistent with the sample size recommendations of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), which range from 210 to 214 respondents for a population of this magnitude. Therefore, a total of 213 respondents were included in the study.

The questionnaire comprised two established instruments designed to measure perceived organizational support and ethnocultural empathy. Perceived organizational support was assessed using the 16-item Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger et. al., (1986). The SPOS is a widely used instrument that evaluates employees' perceptions of the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Previous study has reported high levels of internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .95 (Miceli & Mulvey, 2000). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Ethnocultural empathy was measured using the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE) developed by Wang et. al., (2003). The SEE assesses individuals' capacity to understand, appreciate, and empathize with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The scale consists of four dimensions: 1) Empathic Feeling and Expression (EFE) with item such as "When I know my friends are treated unfairly because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, I speak up for them." 2) Empathic Perspective Taking (EPT) with item such as "It is easy for me to understand what it would feel like to be a person of another racial or ethnic background other than my own." 3) Acceptance of Cultural Differences (ACD) with item such as "I feel irritated when people of different racial or ethnic background speak their language around me." 4) Empathic Awareness with item such as "I am aware of how society differentially treats racial or ethnic groups other than my own." Previous studies have reported satisfactory reliability coefficients for SEE, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .71 to .90 (Wang et. al., 2003; Peifer, et. al., 2016). Respondents rated each item on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree that it describes me) to 6 (strongly agree that it describes me).

RESULTS

Correlatons

Results revealed that two dimensions of ethnocultural empathy were positively correlated with Perceived Organizational Support (POS) with Empathic Perspective-Taking dimension (EPT) ($r = .245, p < .00$) and Acceptance Cultural Differences (ACD) ($r = .183, p < .00$), indicating that employees who exhibit higher ethnocultural empathy perceive greater support from their organizations. Meanwhile EA dimension was negatively correlated to POS ($r = -.202, p < .00$) indicating employees who were aware of discrimination and stereotyping other ethnicity would have lower level of POS. Only Empathic Feeling and Expression (EFE) did not show a significant correlation to POS.

Table 1: Correlation among the variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. EFE	-				
2. EPT	.343**	-			
3. ACD	.195**	.495**	-		

4. EA	.367**	.032	-.109	-	
5. POS	.095	.245**	.183**	-.202**	-

n=213

Regression

The results showed that 33.9% ($R^2=.339$), $F(4,208)=6.744$, $p<.001$ of variance in POS was explained by the dimensions of ethnocultural empathy. The largest proportions of variance in POS column were explained by Empathic Awareness dimension (EA) ($\beta= -.244$, $t= -3.413$, $p<.001$) and the second was Empathic Perspective-Taking dimension (EPT) ($\beta= .197$, $t= 2.512$, $p= .013$).

Table 2: Multiple regression

	Perceived Organizational Support (POS)		
Ethnocultural Empathy Dimensions	Standard Coefficient (β)	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Empathic Feeling & Expression (EFE)	.110	1.456	.147
Empathic Perspective-Taking (EPT)	.197	2.512	.013
Acceptance Cultural Difference (ACD)	.037	.491	.624
Empathic Awareness (EA)	-.244	-3.413	<.001

n=213

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that Empathic Awareness (EA) dimension is the main predictor in enhancing perceived organizational support (POS) among employees in Sabah. The negative relationship between EA and POS suggests that employees who are more aware of instances of ethnic discrimination and stereotyping within their organizations tend to perceive lower level of organizational support. This finding may be explained by the heightened sensitivity of individuals with greater empathic awareness toward issues of inequity and social injustice which they have been exposed to or have seen (Wang et. al., 2003). For instance, individuals often exhibit stronger empathic responses when witnessing members of their own ethnic or racial group experiencing distress or discrimination (Mathur, et. al, 2010). Similarly Fix (2020) reported that people with higher levels of empathic awareness are far more conscious the existence of racial oppression and prejudice within social and even organizational context. The present finding may be particularly relevant in Sabah, given its highly multicultural state in Malaysia, with employees from diverse 33 ethnic groups, cultural, and with 80 different linguistic dialects working together in both public and private sectors (the Official Website of Sabah State Government, 2021). In such a context, EA becomes particularly important because employees are more likely to notice differences in treatment, cultural sensitivity, and patterns of inclusion or exclusion in the workplace. When ethnic discrimination or stereotyping is perceived, it may be interpreted more strongly in a multicultural environment, thereby reducing employees' sense of belonging and their perception that the organization values and supports them fairly. Therefore, in the context of Sabah's multicultural workforce, EA may play a crucial role in shaping how employees interpret organizational climate and support.

The predictive effect of EA on POS may be understood through its relationship with prosocial behaviour. According to Kapikiran (2023), studies showed there were indirect relationship between ethnocultural empathy and prosocial behaviour, where it encourages individuals to cooperate, support one another, and contribute to harmonious interpersonal relationships (Getrude, 2024) with people of different ethnic origin. Furthermore,

previous studies showed that empathy has positive link to social support (Hafenbrack, et. al, 2020, Longmire & Harrison, 2018). However, when employees perceive discrimination, unequal treatment or when empathy is insufficiently embedded within the organizational culture, their sense of organizational support may diminish, potentially weakening prosocial tendencies and reducing positive workplace interactions. This explanation is consistent with Organizational Support Theory (OST), which suggests that employees develop general beliefs regarding the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, et. al., 1986). According to OST, employees interpret the actions of supervisors, coworkers, and organizational practices as indicators of the organization's support and concern for its workforce (Sun, 2019). Therefore, a diverse workplace environment characterized by ethnocultural empathy and social support is likely to strengthen employees' perceptions that the organization values and cares for them. In contrast, the absence of an empathetic organizational environment may negatively influence employees' attitudes toward the organization thus reducing employees' level of POS.

The findings further indicate that Empathic Perspective-Taking (EPT) is the second predictor in enhancing perceived organizational support among public employees in Sabah. As one of the dimensions in the ethnocultural empathy instrument, EPT refers to an individual's capacity to understand the experiences and emotions of others, particularly those from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Wang et al., 2003). Since EPT is classified as a form of cognitive empathy, the present finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that cognitive empathy is positively associated with the provision of social support (d'Osia & Meier, 2024). Applying this perspective to the Sabah context, where public and private organizations operate within a highly multicultural environment characterized by considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. Employees with higher levels of EPT are likely to be more capable of appreciating differing viewpoints, understand the experiences of colleagues from diverse backgrounds, and reducing potential misunderstanding arising from cultural differences. Consistent with this argument, Kapikirin (2023) explained that the perspective-taking component of empathy is associated with lower levels of discriminatory attitudes. Moreover, individuals who demonstrate empathy would also have the willingness to be open to differences as well as similarities between one's own group and others (Peña-Acuña, et. al., 2025). Such cognitive understanding may contribute to more positive workplace interactions and foster a climate of mutual respect and cooperation. Moreover, Taufiq (2019) noted that a positive perception of others is often shaped by one's willingness to attend to favourable information about them. In the organizational context, employees who maintain a positive perspective toward their organization are more likely to interpret organizational actions and practices as supportive. Consequently, such a perspective may strengthen employees' perceptions that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being.

The findings of this study have important implications for organizational support in multicultural workplaces. The findings highlight the importance of EA and EPT as key factors influencing employees' POS. Beyond serving as interpersonal competencies, these dimensions of empathy appear to shape how employees interpret workplace experiences, particularly in relation to fairness, inclusion, and interpersonal treatment. Employees who can recognize discriminatory practices and understanding the perspectives of colleagues from diverse ethnic backgrounds are more likely to foster constructive workplace relationships characterized by mutual respect, cooperation, and social support. As such, organizations should consider promoting empathy-related competencies through diversity and inclusion initiatives, intercultural communication training, and empathetic leadership development programs. These efforts may strengthen workplace cohesion, enhance social support networks, and reinforce employees' perceptions that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Such initiatives may be especially beneficial in multicultural contexts such as Sabah, Malaysia, where positive interethnic relations are essential for maintaining a supportive and inclusive organizational climate.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by extending the application of Organizational Support Theory (OST) while also offering additional insights through the lens of Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. According to COR Theory, individuals are motivated to acquire and preserve valued resources (Holmgreen, et. al, 2017). Within the COR framework, social support constitutes a key socio-emotional resource that individuals seek to acquire and maintain (Holmgreen, et. al., 2017). In the organizational context, POS may be viewed as a valuable socio-emotional resource that helps employees navigate workplace challenges and interpersonal demands. The findings suggest that EA and EPT may facilitate employees' access to this resource

by promoting supportive workplace relationships and reducing perceptions of discrimination, thereby contributing to more favourable evaluations of organizational support.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of ethnocultural empathy on perceived organizational support (POS) among employees in Sabah, Malaysia. The findings revealed that Empathic Awareness (EA) and Empathic Perspective-Taking (EPT) were significant predictors of POS, highlighting the importance of ethnocultural empathy in shaping employees' POS within a multicultural workplace. By extending the application of Organizational Support Theory (OST) and incorporating insight from Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this study suggests that POS functions as a valuable workplace resource that is influenced by employees' empathic capacities. promoting empathy and inclusivity within organization may therefore contribute to stronger support systems, improved workplace relationships, and support organizational diversity climate.

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