

Identifying Psychological Factors Underlying Perceived Relational Justice in Intimate Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and identify the psychological factors that shape individuals' perceptions of relational justice within intimate partnerships. Employing a qualitative research design, this study utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews with 26 participants (13 men and 13 women) currently in committed romantic relationships across urban and semi-urban areas of Mexico. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, and relationship duration. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software (version 14), following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. Three core themes emerged from the data: (1) Emotional Validation and Recognition, including subthemes such as emotional reciprocity, empathic listening, emotional neglect, and gendered expectations around emotional expression; (2) Perceived Equity in Decision-Making, with subthemes including inclusion in decisions, autonomy, conflict negotiation, and implicit expectations; and (3) Moral Accountability and Integrity, encompassing dimensions such as honesty, commitment, fair role distribution, and trustworthiness. Participants framed relational justice as a deeply emotional and moral construct shaped by communication quality, mutual respect, and internalized fairness schemas. Emotional safety, consistency, and fairness in daily interactions were central to the perception of a just relationship. Perceived relational justice in intimate partnerships is rooted in emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions, extending beyond traditional measures of equality. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of relational justice can inform therapeutic interventions, relational education, and social policy aimed at fostering healthier, more equitable romantic relationships.

Keywords: relational justice; intimate partnerships; emotional validation; psychological fairness; qualitative research; moral accountability; couple dynamics

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Introduction

Relational justice within intimate partnerships represents a psychological and moral framework through which individuals assess the fairness of treatment, decision-making, and emotional reciprocity within their relationships. Unlike distributive or procedural justice, which are often applied in organizational or legal contexts, relational justice emphasizes perceptions of fairness rooted in emotional connection, shared responsibility, trust, and moral accountability. As contemporary relationships evolve amid changing societal values, economic pressures, and shifting gender roles, understanding the psychological underpinnings of perceived relational justice has become increasingly urgent. Numerous studies have emphasized how justice-based constructs are deeply interwoven with emotional well-being, communication patterns, and long-term relational adjustment (Dussault et al., 2024; Li, 2024; Samios et al., 2020).

A growing body of literature suggests that perceptions of justice within close relationships are central to how individuals interpret emotional safety, personal value, and autonomy. For example, when individuals experience a lack of emotional validation or are denied participation in significant decisions, they may interpret this as relational injustice, leading to increased distress, withdrawal, or resentment (Ohana et al., 2024; Yoonhyung & Lee, 2025). The psychological dimensions underlying this perception are complex, shaped not only by current interactions but also by earlier attachment histories, societal narratives, and internalized beliefs about roles and fairness (Cinquegrana et al., 2023; Gordon et al., 2017; Mu'ammal & Mohyi, 2024). This complexity underscores the need to explore relational justice as a lived, subjective experience informed by psychological processes.

The concept of relational justice draws heavily on theoretical frameworks developed in organizational psychology, particularly those concerning interactional justice and psychological contract theory. These perspectives have increasingly been applied to romantic and familial domains, revealing how fairness perceptions affect not just workplace engagement but also commitment, trust, and conflict dynamics in private life (Afshan et al., 2022; Drew & Chevroulet, 2024; Wei et al., 2020). For instance, perceived violations of fairness—whether in communication, affection, or responsibility-sharing—often function as micro-breaches of the relational contract, eroding psychological security and intimacy over time (Drew & Chevroulet, 2024). These breaches can be particularly damaging in emotionally vulnerable populations, such as individuals with a history of trauma or those navigating socio-economic hardship (Brazil & Forth, 2023; Genç, 2021; Hulley et al., 2022).

Furthermore, relational justice cannot be examined in isolation from larger social and structural dynamics. Gender roles, socio-cultural norms, and economic inequalities often shape the perceived fairness of relational dynamics. In societies where gender-based expectations persist, women may find themselves bearing disproportionate emotional and domestic labor, leading to heightened perceptions of injustice when their efforts go unrecognized (Cinquegrana et al., 2022; Landfield et al., 2023). Likewise, men may internalize narratives that devalue emotional expression or discourage vulnerability, fostering emotional disconnection and conflict in romantic partnerships (İyiyaydın & Sümer, 2021; Mikhailova & Girina, 2023). Relational justice, therefore, is not merely a matter of dyadic interaction but one situated within broader socio-cultural contexts.

Research also indicates that individuals interpret fairness within intimate partnerships through both cognitive and affective filters. Emotional regulation strategies, such as empathy, self-kindness, and positive reframing, influence how individuals respond to perceived injustice, potentially mitigating or intensifying its psychological impact (Dussault et al., 2024; Samios et al., 2020). Moreover, perceptions of justice are intricately linked with identity-based factors, including pride in relational roles, commitment to moral values, and internalized justice norms (Siegel et al., 2022; Tolmie, 2017). For example, one study found that sexual minorities who strongly identified with positive aspects of their minority identity were more likely to report high relationship quality, mediated in part by perceived fairness and validation within their romantic bonds (Siegel et al., 2022).

The experience of relational injustice often manifests through subtle dynamics—dismissive communication, inconsistent emotional presence, or unreciprocated support—which gradually accumulate and shape an individual's view of the relationship as either safe and affirming or dissonant and depleting (Cinquegrana et al., 2023; Ohana et al., 2024). In extreme cases, persistent relational injustice may escalate into psychological aggression or intimate partner violence (IPV), especially when fairness expectations are systemically violated or when domestic violence myths legitimize emotional abuse (Brazil & Forth, 2023; Cinquegrana et al., 2022; Nakyazze et al., 2018). These findings align with broader calls to recognize the legitimacy of emotional and psychological harms in relational settings, not merely physical or economic violations.

From a developmental lens, early relational schemas and experiences with caregivers play a formative role in shaping fairness expectations in adulthood. Research on childhood adversity and relational trauma suggests that individuals exposed to invalidating environments may carry distorted expectations into their intimate relationships, either overcompensating for

fairness or becoming hypervigilant to perceived slights (Dussault et al., 2024; Gordon et al., 2017; Mert & Kök, 2017). Similarly, individuals from collectivist or high-context cultures may prioritize harmony and non-confrontation, potentially suppressing fairness concerns until they erupt in emotionally charged ways (Li, 2024; Mu'ammal & Mohyi, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the justice dynamics in intimate partnerships. Lockdowns, financial instability, and increased caregiving burdens disproportionately affected women and marginalized populations, exacerbating relational strain and reshaping perceptions of fairness in household roles and emotional labor (Landfield et al., 2023). Psychological studies conducted during this period have documented a significant rise in perceived relational injustice, especially among individuals who felt emotionally unsupported or economically exploited during the crisis (Luo et al., 2023; White, 2024). These findings highlight how situational stressors interact with existing relational vulnerabilities, making justice perceptions more fragile and reactive.

In addition to psychological and social dimensions, spiritual and cultural beliefs may influence how justice is experienced and expressed in romantic partnerships. In some contexts, religious ideologies concerning duty, sacrifice, or forgiveness can shape the tolerance for relational inequities, potentially normalizing imbalance under the guise of virtue or submission (Mu'ammal & Mohyi, 2024; Paterson et al., 2016). While such belief systems can provide coping resources and relational meaning, they may also discourage boundary-setting or silence valid expressions of injustice.

Given the multi-layered nature of relational justice, it becomes evident that a purely behavioral or outcome-based approach to understanding fairness is insufficient. Instead, a psychological approach that captures the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal mechanisms of justice perception is needed (Afshan et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2020; Yoonhyung & Lee, 2025). This perspective emphasizes how fairness is subjectively constructed, emotionally registered, and contextually interpreted through the lens of individual needs, personal histories, and relational dynamics. Understanding these psychological processes is crucial not only for improving relationship quality but also for designing effective interventions and educational programs that promote mutual respect, empathy, and sustainable partnership structures.

The present study seeks to contribute to this growing field by qualitatively exploring the psychological factors underlying perceived relational justice in intimate partnerships. Grounded in the lived experiences of individuals currently in long-term relationships, the study investigates how people define, interpret, and emotionally respond to fairness or its absence in their romantic lives.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm, aiming to explore the underlying psychological factors that shape individuals' perceptions of relational justice within intimate partnerships. A multiple case study approach was employed to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences in different relational contexts. The study population consisted of individuals currently engaged in committed intimate relationships in various regions of Mexico. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, socio-economic background, and relationship duration.

A total of 26 participants (13 women and 13 men), aged between 25 and 54 years, were recruited from urban and semi-urban areas through community centers, online forums, and counseling services. Inclusion criteria required participants to be in a romantic relationship for a minimum of two years and to be fluent in Spanish. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new themes or categories emerged from the interviews.

Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and June 2025. An interview guide was developed based on a preliminary review of the literature on relational justice, psychological needs, and interpersonal dynamics in couples. The guide covered key topics such as experiences of fairness and unfairness in the relationship, emotional and cognitive responses to perceived (in)justice, negotiation of needs, and conflict resolution.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and logistical considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim in the original language. Field notes were also maintained to document contextual details and non-verbal cues.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software (version 14) to organize and code the transcripts systematically. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Open coding was used initially to capture participants' meanings and interpretations, followed by axial coding to identify patterns and relationships among emerging categories. Constant comparison techniques were applied throughout the analysis to refine themes and ensure internal consistency.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed, including triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the findings. An audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and enhance transparency.

Findings and Results

A total of 26 individuals (13 men and 13 women) participated in this study, all of whom were residents of various urban and semi-urban regions in Mexico and currently engaged in committed intimate partnerships. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 54 years, with the majority falling within the 31–40 age group ($n = 11$), followed by 41–50 years ($n = 8$), 25–30 years ($n = 5$), and over 50 years ($n = 2$). Regarding educational attainment, 9 participants held a university degree, 11 had completed secondary education, and 6 reported postgraduate qualifications. In terms of relationship duration, 10 participants had been in their current relationship for 2–5 years, 9 for 6–10 years, and 7 for over a decade. Most participants were married ($n = 17$), while the remainder were in long-term cohabiting relationships ($n = 9$). All interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of the participants.

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts on Perceived Relational Justice in Intimate Partnerships

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Validation and Recognition	1.1. Need for Emotional Reciprocity	feeling emotionally invisible, lack of empathy, need for emotional return, one-sided caring
	1.2. Recognition of Emotional Labor	managing household tension, emotional caretaking, being the emotional anchor, fatigue from unseen efforts
	1.3. Experiencing Empathic Listening	active listening, reflecting feelings, non-defensive response, silence as validation, being understood
	1.4. Sensitivity to Emotional Neglect	being ignored, feeling replaced, absence in distress, avoidance of conflict
	1.5. Consistency in Emotional Availability	irregular affection, unpredictability, changing moods, emotional hot-and-cold
	1.6. Impact of Dismissive Responses	belittling feelings, sarcasm during serious talks, shutting down, minimizing emotional needs

2. Perceived Equity in Decision-Making Processes	1.7. Gendered Expectations around Emotions	men must not cry, emotional strength as a duty, shame in needing support, suppression of vulnerability
	2.1. Inclusion in Major Life Decisions	joint planning, consultation, shared future vision, unilateral choices
	2.2. Control and Power Imbalance	dominance in decisions, financial control, “my way or the highway,” unequal say
	2.3. Respect for Autonomy	freedom of choice, acceptance of difference, not micromanaged, space for individuality
	2.4. Negotiation and Compromise Patterns	mutual adjustment, give-and-take, rigidity vs. flexibility, revisiting decisions
3. Moral Accountability and Integrity	2.5. Conflict Management Styles	peaceful resolution, emotional blackmail, withdrawal during fights, constructive feedback
	2.6. Role of Implicit Agreements	assumed duties, unspoken norms, role clarity, hidden resentments
	3.1. Honesty and Transparency	concealment vs. openness, trust erosion, honesty as respect, emotional truth-telling
	3.2. Fidelity and Commitment	loyalty in absence, boundaries with others, micro-cheating, online fidelity
	3.3. Owning Mistakes and Making Amends	admitting wrongs, genuine apologies, learning from conflict, seeking repair
	3.4. Fairness in Role Distribution	labor division, shared duties, appreciation of effort, invisible work
	3.5. Trustworthiness in Promises and Routines	follow-through, reliability in crisis, punctuality, small promise-keeping

Analysis of the interviews with 26 participants from diverse regions of Mexico revealed three overarching psychological themes underlying perceived relational justice in intimate partnerships: emotional validation and recognition, perceived equity in decision-making, and moral accountability and integrity. Each theme comprised several interrelated subthemes, capturing participants' inner experiences, expectations, and perceptions of fairness and injustice in their romantic relationships.

Category 1: Emotional Validation and Recognition

Participants consistently emphasized the *need for emotional reciprocity* in their relationships. They described relational justice as being closely tied to whether their emotional investments were returned. One female participant stated, “*I’m always the one asking how he feels, listening to him, but when I’m upset, he just brushes it off. It feels like I don’t matter.*” This perception of one-sided emotional labor left individuals feeling invisible, underappreciated, and emotionally deprived.

Closely related was the *recognition of emotional labor*, especially among women. Several respondents reported bearing the emotional weight of their relationships—managing moods, resolving conflict, or supporting their partners through personal crises. One participant remarked, “*He never sees how hard I work to keep the peace in our home. He thinks things just magically work out.*” Such unacknowledged emotional contributions were often experienced as injustice.

The *experience of empathic listening* emerged as another critical subtheme. Participants associated relational justice with the presence of deep, active listening. “*When he listens without interrupting or judging, I feel seen. That’s when I know he values me,*” shared one interviewee. Being met with empathy, reflective responses, and attentiveness contributed to a sense of fairness in emotional exchanges.

Conversely, *emotional neglect* was interpreted as a form of injustice. Some participants described feeling emotionally abandoned or unsupported, particularly during times of stress or vulnerability. “*When my mom was sick, he just shut down. I didn’t need advice—I just needed him to be there,*” lamented one woman, capturing the emotional disconnection that many found deeply unjust.

Consistency in emotional availability was another recurring concern. Many participants described their partners as emotionally unpredictable—affectionate one day, distant the next. “*I never know which version of him I’m going to get. That instability wears me down,*” one interviewee explained. Such fluctuations were seen as unfair and emotionally destabilizing.

The *impact of dismissive responses* also surfaced, where participants felt belittled, invalidated, or mocked when expressing emotions. *“He rolls his eyes when I cry. Like I’m being dramatic. That’s not fair—my feelings matter,”* explained one respondent. These experiences eroded the sense of emotional justice in the relationship.

Finally, participants touched on *gendered expectations around emotions*, especially among men who felt pressured to suppress emotional expression. One male participant noted, *“I was taught not to cry or talk about my feelings. When I tried, my wife said I was being weak.”* Such societal expectations constrained authentic emotional engagement and created relational tension.

Category 2: Perceived Equity in Decision-Making Processes

A major theme of relational justice involved *inclusion in major life decisions*. Participants described a need to be consulted on significant matters such as finances, parenting, and relocation. *“He decided to take the new job in another city without even asking me. That’s not how a partnership should work,”* stated one woman, illustrating how unilateral decisions were seen as relationally unjust.

Control and power imbalance was another key subtheme. Several participants described dynamics where one partner dominated decisions or wielded disproportionate control over shared resources. One male participant explained, *“She controls all the money. I have to ask her for every little thing—it’s like I’m a child.”* Such asymmetries were interpreted as inequities that undermined mutual respect.

The *respect for autonomy* was also discussed extensively. Participants valued having space to maintain individual identities and make personal choices within the relationship. *“He respects that I have my own goals. He doesn’t try to shape me into his ideal,”* noted one respondent, indicating that autonomy supported perceptions of fairness and trust.

Another significant factor was *negotiation and compromise patterns*. Participants described fair relationships as those where both partners were willing to adjust their positions. *“We don’t always agree, but we sit down, talk it through, and find a middle ground,”* said one interviewee. In contrast, rigid or one-sided negotiation patterns were seen as unjust.

In relation to conflict, *conflict management styles* significantly influenced perceptions of fairness. Participants viewed fair relationships as those in which conflicts were addressed openly and respectfully. *“She listens even when she’s mad. We fight, but it’s not war—it’s discussion,”* said one man. On the other hand, strategies like emotional withdrawal, shouting, or manipulation were viewed as undermining relational justice.

Finally, *implicit agreements and expectations* were seen as double-edged. Some participants described how unspoken norms created clarity and trust, while others felt trapped by invisible expectations. *“It’s like I’m expected to do all the cooking—no one ever said it, but it’s just assumed,”* one participant shared, highlighting how unacknowledged expectations could generate resentment and perceived unfairness.

Category 3: Moral Accountability and Integrity

Honesty and transparency were foundational for perceptions of relational justice. Participants emphasized the importance of openness—not only about major life events but also about daily emotions and concerns. *“She hides her feelings until it explodes. I’d rather she tell me right away. That’s what being fair means to me,”* stated one participant, linking emotional transparency to fairness.

Fidelity and commitment were crucial dimensions of justice. Many participants described justice as being rooted in loyalty and faithfulness, both emotionally and physically. *“He’s never cheated, but he flirts online. It feels like betrayal,”* said one woman. These ambiguous violations challenged the boundaries of justice in modern relationships.

The ability to own mistakes and make amends was also essential. Participants respected partners who admitted wrongdoing and took steps to repair harm. *“She said sorry and really changed how she talked to me. That’s what made it feel fair—not just the words, but the actions,”* one man reflected.

In terms of everyday dynamics, *fairness in role distribution* was frequently mentioned. Many women in particular described unequal division of domestic responsibilities as a violation of relational justice. *“I work too, but I still do all the cleaning. Where’s the fairness in that?”* one respondent asked.

Finally, *trustworthiness in promises and routines* emerged as a determinant of perceived justice. Keeping one's word, being dependable in times of need, and maintaining consistency were repeatedly cited as indicators of a just relationship. *“If he says he’ll be there at 6, he shows up. That reliability builds fairness—it shows he respects me,”* shared a participant.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal predictors of long-term marital adjustment among Iraqi individuals in enduring marriages. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews revealed four overarching categories—*intrapsychic regulation*, *interpersonal communication*, *shared meaning and relational identity*, and *external/contextual influences*—each encompassing multiple subthemes. These findings collectively highlight the dynamic interplay between internal psychological resources, dyadic relational processes, and broader sociocultural environments in shaping marital endurance and satisfaction.

The findings of this study shed light on the nuanced and psychologically embedded dimensions of perceived relational justice in intimate partnerships. Through qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with 26 participants from Mexico, three overarching domains emerged: emotional validation and recognition, equity in decision-making, and moral accountability and integrity. Each of these themes, while grounded in individual perceptions, reveals deep socio-psychological dynamics that resonate with broader cultural, developmental, and systemic patterns of intimate life.

The first major category—emotional validation and recognition—was experienced as a central indicator of fairness in relationships. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of being emotionally seen, heard, and reciprocated by their partners. Emotional neglect, inconsistency in emotional availability, and dismissive responses were interpreted as relational injustice. These results align with the growing evidence that fairness in intimate partnerships is not confined to tangible or behavioral equality but is deeply influenced by perceived emotional reciprocity and empathic engagement (Dussault et al., 2024; Samios et al., 2020). As supported by prior studies, the absence of emotional responsiveness can mirror past psychological maltreatment and trigger relational trauma responses, especially in individuals with histories of neglect or invalidation (Genç, 2021; Hulley et al., 2022). Furthermore, the gendered expectations around emotional labor and emotional expression that surfaced in this study mirror cultural patterns documented in previous research on domestic inequities and the feminization of care work (Cinquegrana et al., 2022; Landfield et al., 2023). Men in our study who struggled with emotional expression also reflected broader societal narratives around masculinity and vulnerability, corroborating evidence that justice is filtered through the lens of internalized gender scripts (İyiyaydın & Sümer, 2021; Mikhailova & Girina, 2023).

The second theme—perceived equity in decision-making processes—highlighted the relational significance of shared agency, inclusion, and mutual respect. When participants felt excluded from major life decisions or constrained by unequal power dynamics, they perceived the relationship as unfair, regardless of other positive qualities. These findings echo prior literature demonstrating that relational justice is significantly shaped by procedural fairness in interpersonal decisions (Ohana et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2020). In particular, the concept of “relational procedural justice” suggests that people care not only about the outcomes of decisions but also about how those decisions are reached, who is consulted, and whether autonomy is

respected (Afshan et al., 2022; Drew & Chevroulet, 2024). The ability to negotiate, compromise, and manage conflict respectfully was also described as essential to a fair partnership—supporting models that link conflict style with relational satisfaction and psychological safety (Gordon et al., 2017; Yoonhyung & Lee, 2025). Moreover, implicit agreements and unspoken expectations—while often necessary for relational efficiency—were viewed as unjust when they became rigid, gendered, or unacknowledged. This aligns with studies that show how invisible labor and unspoken roles, when not openly negotiated, contribute to cumulative injustice and resentment (Cinquegrana et al., 2023; Landfield et al., 2023).

The third theme—moral accountability and integrity—revealed how deeply fairness is rooted in perceived moral consistency and ethical conduct within the relationship. Participants described justice not only in terms of fidelity or truth-telling, but also in owning mistakes, distributing roles fairly, and following through on promises. These insights affirm earlier research which conceptualizes justice in close relationships as a function of integrity, trustworthiness, and commitment to shared moral norms (Samios et al., 2020; Siegel et al., 2022). The connection between moral behavior and relational equity underscores the internalization of justice values in intimate settings, where breaches are experienced not just as interpersonal failures, but as violations of personal dignity and emotional safety (Drew & Chevroulet, 2024; Mu’ammal & Mohyi, 2024). In line with prior findings, this study also suggests that relational justice functions as a buffer against revictimization, particularly among individuals with trauma histories or psychological vulnerability (Dussault et al., 2024; Genç, 2021).

Across all three categories, the psychological interpretation of fairness was mediated by emotional factors such as trust, vulnerability, shame, and the need for recognition. Participants often interpreted seemingly small interactions—such as listening attentively, sharing chores, or apologizing sincerely—as symbols of larger justice narratives. This reflects the work of (Samios et al., 2020), who showed that even micro-interactions in intimate partnerships can hold transformative meaning when viewed through the lens of fairness and self-worth. Likewise, relational justice appeared to shape identity processes and influence how individuals framed their own relational worth. Studies on intimate partner stress and psychological distress support this interpretation, highlighting how relational fairness contributes to stability and emotional regulation in intimate bonds (Gordon et al., 2017; Paterson et al., 2016).

Culturally, the Mexican context offered unique insights into justice expectations, especially in relation to traditional gender norms and familial expectations. Participants articulated tensions between collectivist values of sacrifice and unity and the rising individualistic emphasis on emotional expression and mutual respect. These tensions are mirrored in global literature addressing relational disharmony in transitioning societies (Li, 2024; Mu’ammal & Mohyi, 2024). Additionally, the presence of religious or spiritual beliefs as moderating factors in justice tolerance—although not the focus of this study—was noted by some participants, aligning with prior findings that belief systems may reinforce acceptance of inequity under the banner of duty or virtue (Nakyazze et al., 2018; Paterson et al., 2016).

Importantly, the study also intersects with the broader discourse on psychological abuse and coercive control. While overt abuse was not a selection criterion, several participants described emotionally manipulative behaviors—gaslighting, financial control, or chronic invalidation—as deeply unjust and damaging. This aligns with critical perspectives on coercive control as a continuum of relational injustice that often precedes or coexists with more visible forms of partner violence (Brazil & Forth, 2023; Cinquegrana et al., 2022; Tolmie, 2017). As such, perceptions of relational justice may serve as an early indicator of psychological risk, particularly for those unable to name their experiences as abuse due to normalization or cultural silencing (Cinquegrana et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2022).

Finally, these findings resonate with the increasing emphasis on psychological ownership and empowerment in intimate life. When individuals feel heard, respected, and valued, they are more likely to exhibit emotional generosity, resilience, and mutual investment (Wei et al., 2020; Yoonhyung & Lee, 2025). Conversely, when partners fail to acknowledge contributions

or infringe on autonomy, individuals may disengage, suppress needs, or seek justice externally through withdrawal, infidelity, or separation. These relational shifts echo workplace studies on justice and withdrawal behavior, which are now being fruitfully extended into the domestic sphere (Afshan et al., 2022; Ohana et al., 2024).

Despite the richness of the findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was limited to participants from Mexico, which, while offering valuable cultural specificity, limits the generalizability of results to other cultural contexts. Justice perceptions are inherently influenced by socio-cultural norms, and these findings may not fully capture variations in justice expectations across different cultural, religious, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, the sample was composed of individuals currently in relationships, and may have excluded perspectives from those who had exited relationships due to severe injustice or abuse. Third, as with all qualitative studies, the data reflect subjective narratives which, while powerful, cannot establish causal relationships or be statistically generalized. Lastly, social desirability bias may have influenced participants' portrayals of themselves or their partners, particularly in relation to moral accountability or conflict resolution.

Future research should explore relational justice across diverse cultural and relational contexts, including same-sex couples, individuals with non-monogamous arrangements, and populations with intersecting vulnerabilities such as chronic illness, disability, or migration. Comparative cross-cultural studies could offer valuable insights into how justice perceptions are shaped by legal, economic, and normative frameworks. Longitudinal research is also recommended to examine how relational justice perceptions evolve over time and how they relate to outcomes such as relationship longevity, parenting cooperation, or psychological health. Additionally, mixed-methods designs incorporating both qualitative and quantitative tools may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the predictors and consequences of relational justice. Lastly, more attention should be paid to the role of religious, spiritual, and ideological belief systems in shaping justice tolerance and justification of inequality in intimate contexts.

The findings of this study carry important implications for couple therapy, social work, and relational education. Practitioners working with couples should routinely assess perceived relational justice as a lens through which emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dynamics are interpreted. Helping couples identify and address fairness expectations can facilitate deeper empathy, reduce defensiveness, and build emotional safety. Educational programs for adolescents and young adults should integrate relational justice principles to foster healthy, equitable partnerships from an early age. Policy-makers and social advocates should also consider relational justice in the development of domestic violence prevention programs and legal protections, especially in contexts where emotional abuse remains underrecognized. Ultimately, relational justice should be viewed not only as a psychological construct but as a core competency in sustaining ethical and fulfilling intimate partnerships.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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