

How do line managers differentiate HRM practices in multidisciplinary teams without compromising perceptions of equity and fairness?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how line managers differentiate Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) without compromising assumptions of fairness. Line managers in contemporary team-working workplaces must respond to the needs of individuals with normal, equal treatment. This research investigates three MDTs in two organizations in Kyrgyzstan, drawing on seven semi-structured interviews with line managers and employees.

From thematic analysis, four over-arching themes were identified: HRM Differentiation Strategies, Justification and Communication, Fairness Perceptions, and the Evolving Role of the Line Manager. The findings show that differentiated HRM-i.e., special support, training, or rewards-is common and widely accepted if perceived as fair. Workers did not expect to be treated equally but welcomed proportionality and situational suitability. Communication that was respectful and open was discovered to be a key motivation for legitimizing differentiated decisions and maintaining trust.

The study contributes to the theory of HRM by emphasizing the importance of interactional justice in teams, where not just outcomes but also explanations and delivery of decisions contribute to determining fairness. The study also offers empirical support for the fairness-consistency paradox in that it illustrates how managers reconcile the tension between flexibility and impartiality. Practically, the research suggests that effective differentiation in HRM requires situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and good communication skills. These implications guide the managers attempting to build trust based on coherence and fairness in multidisciplinary teams.

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Keywords

HRM Differentiation; Multidisciplinary teams; Fairness perceptions; Line Management; Organizational Justice; Interactional Justice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern organisations have increasingly relied on multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) to resolve multifaceted, knowledge-based issues that require the collective know-how of several disciplines (Saint-Pierre, Herskovic, & Sepúlveda, 2018). MDTs pool experts from diverse fields-e.g., engineering, information systems, or medicine-to exchange knowledge and solve problems more innovatively and efficiently (Hartgerink et al., 2013; Saint-Pierre et al., 2018). Diversity within MDTs is widely considered a key driver of innovation due to the ability to combine different modes of thinking and problem-solving (Fay et al., 2006). However, this same diversity also gives rise to coordination challenges. Team members tend to differ in communication styles, professional values, and interpretations of goals (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2019). These differences make it more challenging to manage multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), since professionals with different goals, values, and work styles require different management styles (Fay et al., 2006). This makes it more difficult to guarantee team consistency, collective understanding, and decision-making consistency (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2019). This diversity makes MDTs challenging to manage, particularly in delivering unified and consistent management (Fay et al., 2006).

Line managers play a critical role in the management of MDTs as they are typically responsible for applying Human Resource Management (HRM) practice to their teams (Kehoe & Han, 2019). Unlike HRM policies developed at an organisational level, line managers interact with staff on a daily basis and are obliged to translate official HRM policy to meet the individual dynamics and needs of their teams (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2012). In MDTs, this means working with employees from various professional identities, career trajectories, and expectations. To manage such complexity, line managers often engage in HRM differentiation-applying HRM practices such as recruitment, training, performance appraisal, or feedback differently based on the needs of individual employees (Aguinis & Bradley, 2010; Krausert, 2016). For instance, they may prioritise autonomy and career development for highly specialised roles but focus on teamwork and role clarity for more generalist roles. This process enables managers to better align HRM support with job demands, which can lead to higher motivation and performance (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013).

This HRM alignment practice to specific employee roles and team contexts is commonly referred to as HRM differentiation-the purposeful adjustment of HRM practices to suit different job requirements, skill levels, or strategic contributions (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021). HRM differentiation in MDTs can involve modifying performance feedback, training, or development opportunities to the individual roles in the team (Rofcanin et al., 2018). While these adjustments may improve person-role fit and motivation, they raise concerns about fairness and consistency. Employees tend to compare their treatment with that of their colleagues, and when differences are not adequately justified or explained, this can erode trust in management, reduce motivation, and damage team cohesion (Liu, Cooper, & Tarba, 2019; Marescaux et al., 2021). This challenge is especially pronounced in MDTs, where disparities in expertise, visibility, and authority already exist (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005; Rofcanin et al., 2018). Liu, Cooper, & Tarba (2019) argued that when line managers apply differentiated HRM practices without empathetic communication, some team members may feel overlooked or undervalued, even if the manager's rationale is

well-founded. They also mentioned that communication failures in HRM differentiation are likely to contribute to lower trust and discrimination perceptions. On the other hand, treating all team members identically may fail to recognise meaningful differences in contributions and roles-resulting in missed opportunities for support, development, or retention (Schmidt, Pohler, & Willness, 2017).

Therefore, the principal challenge is how line managers can adapt HRM practices to meet the needs of diverse professionals in MDTs without undermining perceptions of fairness and equity among team members. Although difficult, it is essential to strike a balance between responsiveness and consistency in managing multidisciplinary teams (Pak et al., 2024). Line managers are expected at the same time to adapt HRM practices to individual needs and to promote fairness and organizational consistency-a paradox that needs to be carefully managed (Fu et al., 2020). The tension arises especially acutely in diverse team settings, where inconsistency will likely sound alarm bells for equity (Pak et al., 2024). While research on HRM differentiation is growing, limited knowledge exists on how managers actually perform this balancing act in practice-particularly within the context of MDTs. Much of the existing literature has focused on HRM differentiation across departments or job categories at the organisational level (Krausert, 2016; Marescaux et al., 2021), rather than within closely collaborating teams. Furthermore, little is known about how line managers communicate and justify these differences to ensure that all staff members-regardless of their background or role-feel fairly treated.

To fill this gap, the present study investigates the following research question: *How do line managers differentiate human resource management practices in multidisciplinary teams without compromising employees' perceptions of equity and fairness?* A problem often addressed from an organisational justice perspective (Colquitt et al., 2001). Organisational justice theory describes how employees view fairness in terms of outcomes (distributive justice), procedures (procedural justice), and interpersonal treatment (interactional justice). Moreover, an important part of this study is the manner in which such HRM decisions are accounted and justified by line managers, in a way that maintains trust, which has a central influence on fairness perceptions. More specifically, it examines how managers adapt HRM practices and how they use communication strategies to justify those decisions in ways that maintain trust and cohesion. By exploring the daily experiences and actions of line managers, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which they reconcile individual needs with collective fairness in diverse team settings.

This study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enhances the literature on HRM differentiation and organisational justice by examining how these processes unfold in small, heterogeneous teams rather than across broader organisational units. It connects HRM differentiation with fairness perceptions, illustrating how line managers balance responsiveness to individual needs with maintaining equity in the team. Practically, the findings offer specific guidance for HR professionals and line managers seeking to implement more inclusive and effective HRM systems in diverse team contexts. By identifying strategies that support fairness while acknowledging employee diversity, the study aims to promote more sustainable and equitable HRM practices.

The remainder of this thesis is structured to address the research question methodically and reflect the sequence of the research

process. The next section presents a comprehensive literature review of HRM differentiation, line managers' roles in HRM implementation, fairness perceptions, and MDTs collaboration. It defines key terms, outlines relevant theoretical perspectives, and identifies the research gap this study aims to address. This is followed by the methodology section, which details the qualitative research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The findings section then presents the empirical results from interviews with line managers, organised around emergent themes. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, comparing and contrasting them to highlight novel insights. The thesis concludes with a summary of the main findings, reflections on their theoretical and practical implications, and recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review integrates the theoretical foundation for how line managers differentiate HRM practice in MDTs and maintain fairness and equity perceptions. It builds on four interrelated streams of research: HRM differentiation, line managers as HR agents, fairness perceptions, and the distinctive dynamics of MDTs. Together, these sections help to identify how differentiated HRM practices are enacted and constructed in the fluid context of multidisciplinary teamwork.

2.1 HRM in Multidisciplinary Teams

MDTs are composed of professionals from different functional or professional fields that work together for shared goals (Saint-Pierre, Herskovic, & Sepúlveda, 2018). Unlike traditional work teams, which are generally composed of members with related roles or functions, MDTs integrate diverse perspectives, possibly including specialists from the education, healthcare, sales, or operations sectors (Fay et al., 2006). As an example, a school management team may include teachers, administrative staff, and sales or marketing personnel working together to maximize performance. MDTs are valued for their ability to foster creativity, innovation, and more inclusive problem-solving (Fay et al., 2006). However, this heterogeneity also leads to differences in terms of role expectations, professional values, communication styles, and performance measurement, making standardized HRM practice difficult to implement across the board (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2019; Kelly et al., 2011). In this regard, one-size-fits-all HRM is typically not sufficient as it may not address the various needs, identities, and career paths of professionals on the team (Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Kelly et al., 2011). As a result, applying a single set of practices may end up leaving some roles unsupported or in conflict with what individuals actually require to perform their work. Thus, HRM differentiation becomes not only useful but necessary to enable that the specific professional contributions within MDTs are recognized and nurtured appropriately (Ratcheva, 2009; Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2012).

At the same time, MDTs tend to be high on interdependence such that members have to closely coordinate with each other and rely on one another in order to deliver shared outputs (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). Such closeness increases visibility to HRM-related discrepancies-e.g., differentially accessible feedback, flexibility, or recognition-and can quickly lead to feelings of imbalance or unfairness (Rofcanin et al., 2018). Because employees always observe how others are treated, any discrepancy or lack of explanation in HRM can be magnified in such circumstances (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021).

But evidence suggests that a general high level of collective team identity can offset these effects (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). When employees feel that they are part of a good and valued team, they will be more likely to accept or tolerate differentiated treatment-especially when framed as an absolute requirement for the team's ultimate success (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005; Hartgerink et al., 2013). A positive team climate, where there is trust, open communication, and shared objectives, helps employees view HRM differentiation as not being personal bias but as a legitimate and purposeful one (Fay et al., 2006; Rofcanin et al., 2018).

Despite such findings, there has been little empirical evidence of how line managers in reality resolve such tensions in MDTs once they do emerge (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021; Rofcanin et al., 2018). Much of the HRM differentiation literature has originated from the organisational or departmental environments (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021), rather than from diverse teams where collaboration and interdependence are central. There is also limited understanding of how managers justify differential treatment and how managers ensure fairness in everyday team interactions (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Liu, Cooper, & Tarba, 2019). This research aims to address that gap by investigating how line managers tailor HRM practices in MDTs, communicate to team members the rationale for such decisions, and manage fairness perceptions in the moment.

2.2 Understanding HRM Differentiation

HRM differentiation refers to the intentional variation of HRM practices across jobs, teams, or individuals, depending on job requirements, employee potential, or strategic value (Aguinis & Bradley, 2010; Schmidt, Pohler, & Willness, 2017). HRM differentiation allows organisations to move away from uniform HRM systems by tailoring recruitment, training, performance appraisal, or reward policies to better suit the nature of work or individual contributions (Krausert, 2016; Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021). This difference can be formal-e.g., separate career tracks or stratified benefits-or informal, through manager discretion in daily interactions (Marescaux et al., 2013).

The benefits of such differentiated approaches are well documented. These include, for example, from increased employee motivation, improved alignment to strategic goals, and more effective talent management (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Marescaux et al., 2012). Differentiation allows employee-job fit that, in turn, fuels engagement, performance, and retention (Marescaux et al., 2013; Liu, Cooper, & Tarba, 2019). It also allows for more efficient allocation of scarce HR resources to high-impact jobs or development needs (Krausert, 2016).

Yet issues do occur when differentiation is perceived to be undeserved or lacking consistency. Employees make social comparisons, and when they observe that there are differences in how colleagues are treated-particularly within the same work team-this can generate perceptions of unfairness, favouritism, or neglect (Liu et al., 2019; Rofcanin et al., 2018). These problems are compounded if managers fail to communicate the rationale for differentiation, or if unofficial practice contradicts official policy (Marescaux et al., 2021). Additionally, if differentiation routinely benefits particular jobs or professional groups, it can reproduce or intensify existing power imbalances, particularly in inter-professional teams (Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005).

In MDTs, this tension is particularly acute: although HRM differentiation may be necessary to respect different professional needs and inputs, it also increases the risk that some workers will feel overlooked or undervalued (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). Therefore, HRM differentiation is both a technical or strategic decision, but it is also a relational one that involves dealing with power relations, resource access, and perceptions of fairness among peers (Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Rofcanin et al., 2018; Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021) Line Managers as Adaptive Agents in MDTs.

2.3 Line Managers as Adaptive Agents in MDTs

Line managers-responsible for the daily operations of a team or unit and employees-are increasingly identified as being central players in HRM practice application (Kehoe & Han, 2019). As shown by Nehles, Bondarouk, and Labrenz (2017), line managers not only perform HRM practices but they in fact interpret, adjust, or even deviate from formal policy to fit team needs. This adaptive behaviour comes closest to Situational Leadership Theory, which states that effective leaders will adjust their style to fit the needs and maturity of their followers (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). However, in this study, flexibility is conceptualized in terms of relational HRM and fairness perceptions, rather than leadership style. Whereas HR experts design formal policies and plans, it is typically line managers who interpret such plans in the local team context and become the bridge between organisational purpose and individual experience (Kehoe & Han, 2019; Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013). Their proximity to employees enables them to interpret policy in a lenient way, adapt application to team, and directly influence employee perceptions of HRM fairness (Marescaux et al., 2013; Krausert, 2016).

In MDTs, where staff share divergent professional values and career orientations, line managers would automatically resort to relational HRM-informal, tailored practices such as individualised coaching, adaptive feedback, or personalised development planning (Ratcheva, 2009; Oborn & Dawson, 2010). Ratcheva (2009) and Oborn and Dawson (2010) contend that these in-formal adjustments can bridge the distance between formalised policy and the heterogeneity of needs of MDTs, encouraging commitment and individualized support. This flexibility, however, is associated with risk and ambiguity. Liu, Cooper, and Tarba (2019) state that where various practices are used by line managers informally or without explicit explanation, the employees can struggle to understand why variation exists, with the risk of perceived unfairness. This has the ability to create an impression of bias or favouritism, especially when the reasons behind are not clearly communicated (Liu et al., 2019). In this context, line managers are not only HRM implementers but also fairness mediators responsible for guaranteeing that differentiation is seen as legitimate and respectful-merely not arbitrary (Liu, Cooper, & Tarba, 2019; Rofcanin et al., 2018; Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021). Their justification, consistency, and ability to explain decisions are important aspects on whether differentiation supports or undermines team cohesion (Marescaux et al., 2021; Rofcanin et al., 2018).

2.4 Equity and Fairness Perceptions

Fairness- addressed in most accounts via organisational justice-is a crucial element of the way employees understand and respond to HRM practices (Colquitt et al., 2001; Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021). Theory of organisational justice defines three rudimentary principles of justice- distributive,

procedural, and interactional- and these define the way in which employees will judge HRM practices (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021).

Distributive justice is the perceived fairness of the outcomes that people receive, such as promotions, rewards, or opportunities for advancement (Colquitt et al., 2001). Employees compare these outcomes to their own effort and others' reward (Colquitt et al., 2001). In multidisciplinary teams, this comparison is particularly pertinent when tasks differ in visibility or perceived strategic value (Rofcanin et al., 2018). Procedural justice is with respect to the perceived fairness of the procedures used to make those decisions- whether they are stable, unbiased, and involve employee voice (Colquitt et al., 2001). In MDTs, where employee backgrounds and expectations differ, open and stable procedures become even more important to guarantee legitimacy (Marescaux, De Winne, & Brebels, 2021). Interactional justice deals with the interpersonal treatment of employees when HRM decisions are being implemented, for example, whether they are treated with respect and whether reasons are communicated clearly (Colquitt et al., 2001). Liu, Cooper, and Tarba (2019) believe that even if outcomes are not equal, respectful communication and sound reasoning can lead employees to feel that HRM differentiation is fair and legitimate.

With respect to HRM differentiation, all three dimensions of justice come into play as employees not only assess what they are receiving but also how the decision is made and how the decision is conveyed (Marescaux et al., 2021; Rofcanin et al., 2018). The employees not only compare what they are receiving with others, but also if the processes were open and if the communication was respectful (Marescaux et al., 2021). For instance, when a specialist gets more training than a generalist, the team is still able to accept this if the manager explains clearly why the extra training is needed for the specialist and how it will improve the performance of the team as a whole (Schmidt, Pohler, & Willness, 2017).

However, when HRM differentiation is unjust or often precedes certain positions without proper reason, there may be perceived bias, exclusion, or even favouritism on the part of staff members-particularly in interdependent groups such as MDTs (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). Rofcanin et al. (2018) note that fairness perceptions do not only depend on HRM policies themselves but also on how policies are construed- on the basis of perceived intent, procedural consistency, and interpersonal treatment. These impressions are most susceptible in MDTs, where professional differences, power differences, and differences in task centrality already exist (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005).

In summary, this review emphasizes that HRM differentiation is an imperative requirement in multidisciplinary teams, allowing line managers to balance HRM practices across various professional roles and task requirements. However, it also raises fairness concerns that must be managed with tact and sensitivity by way of explanation, communication, and employee justice perceptions. The line manager then becomes a central figure, not just as an HRM policy implementer but also as a broker of equity and coherence in highly interdependent team environments. Theoretical frameworks are helpful, but very little empirical insight is available as to how such dynamics actually function in practice. This study attempts to fill that gap by studying how line managers respond to adaptation of HRM practices in MDTs at the expense of fairness, and how they grapple with combining responsiveness and consistency in real-life team settings.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology approach used to examine how line managers differentiate HRM practices in MDTs without compromising perceptions of equity and fairness. It outlines the research design, the sampling strategy, the process of data collection, and the data analysis method. The qualitative nature of the research is explained and accounted for through reference to the scholarly literature. Through description of the way research was conducted, this chapter aims to provide transparency and operate in the interests of trustworthiness of the results.

3.1 Methodological Approach and Participant Selection

The research takes a qualitative design to examine how HRM practices are carried out by line managers in MDTs while maintaining perceptions of fairness and equity. To address this research question, it was required to adopt a methodological strategy that allows in-depth understanding of managerial reasoning, team dynamics, and fairness perceptions in situation. For this reason, a qualitative research design was selected. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate to examine complex, context-dependent processes and socially constructed phenomena, such as perceptions of fairness and interpersonal functioning in MDTs (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). Rather than testing a priori assumptions, qualitative research offers the potential to collect rich, descriptive data to uncover how line managers interpret, communicate, and perform HRM differentiation in practice (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Line managers play a central role in HRM implementation, and qualitative methods are extremely well-suited to investigate how they deal with conflicting pressures and team-level issues (Bos-Nehles, 2010). Furthermore, Rofcanin et al. (2018) note that HRM differentiation is firmly influenced by co-worker perceptions and contextual processes-phenomena that cannot be distilled in non-real-world settings. These insights guided this study's methodological choices in validating the value of participant-centered, context-sensitive research. A qualitative design thus enables a close analysis of how HRM differentiation is enacted and justified in MDTs and fairness achieved in such socially complex environments. This format allows in-depth exploration of interpretations, reasoning, and experiences of participants, and is thus highly appropriate to investigate HRM differentiation as a relational and context-dependent practice (Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Ratcheva, 2008).

The study makes use of purposeful sampling and enrolls seven participants across two organisations, and both operate within Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan was selected as the research setting since the local organisations are accessible to the researcher and because team-based work arrangements are becoming more significant in post-Soviet management cultures. The evolution of innovative HRM practices in the country provides a meaningful focus for analysing fairness and differentiation in transforming economies. Three MDTs are investigated in total. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active working members of a multidisciplinary team for at least six months in their current team. Each MDT consisted of a line manager and one or more staff members. Participants were sampled through direct contact and referral via organisational gatekeepers known to the researcher. One MDT is examined within the first organisation using interviews with one line manager and two employees. Two MDTs are examined within the second organisation, which operates two separate branches, with one line manager and one

member of staff being interviewed per team. Purposeful sampling is a commonly used qualitative research technique to identify information-rich cases that yield rich insights into the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2013). This format enables the researcher to examine both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives of HRM practices-how they are rolled out and how they are interpreted.

The team is the unit of analysis, rather than the organisation. This choice reflects the study's focus on daily HRM practices and fairness processes as they unfold in small, interactive units. Having two organisations included allows for comparison of team environments and the identification of contextual variation in employee attitudes and managerial practice. Although the sample size is modest, the combination of dual perspectives (managers and employees) and multiple teams provides a rich foundation for exploring patterns and tensions in HRM differentiation and fairness. Small sample sizes are justified in qualitative research on the basis that the aim is not statistical generalisation but to build detailed, context-sensitive insights into how participants experience and make sense of social phenomena (Ishtiaq, 2019).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Seven individuals were researched from three MDTs placed in two Kyrgyzstan organisations-one in private retail company, and one in private kindergarten in two branches. For each of the teams, employees and line managers were interviewed to gather information from both sides of the HRM implementation divide. Three line managers-two from education teams and one from a sales team-and four employees (a teacher, a marketer, a sales specialist, and a psychologist) participated in the study. They all had at least 6 months of working experience in the respective teams. Cross-role sampling allowed for comparison of the use and comprehension of HRM differentiation across different functional contexts. An overview of the participants with relevant information is summarised in Appendix 9.4.

Data for this study collected by semi-structured interviews, offering the potential both for consistency across participants and the potential to follow up in more detail on specific matters. Separate interview guides developed for the HR manager and the employee to reflect their different roles, perspectives, and experiences within the MDT. The interview questions address key topics such as the customization of HRM practice, communication style, the rationale for differentiated treatment, and fairness perceptions in the team context. These questions align with the overall themes of the study and are included in Appendices 9.2 and 9.3. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, which will provide time to consider the complexity of HRM differentiation and perceptions of equity. Online interviews conducted due to the geographical setting of the company in Kyrgyzstan. The mode of interview has the advantage of accessibility as well as flexibility, and allowing participation regardless of location.

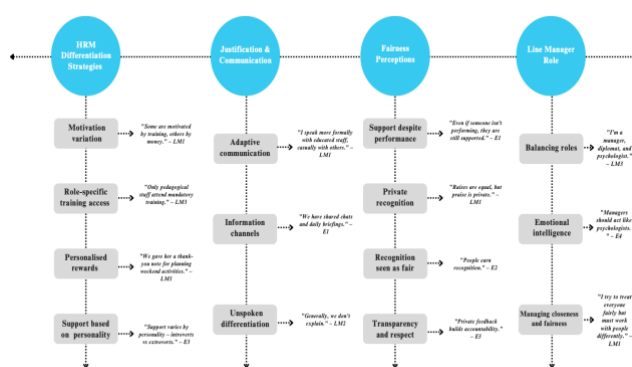
Prior to every interview, the respondents asked to sign an informed consent for the audio recording of the interview. Audio taping of the interviews offers a way of securing accurate recording of the data for later analysis and reduces the possibility of researcher interpretation bias when notes are being taken. Confidentiality assured to the participants, and all personal identifiers removed during transcription. The recordings destroyed securely after transcription. Transcripts were the primary source of data for the thematic analysis phase.

Data Analysis

After transcription, the interview data were analysed using the six-step thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016). The method was selected based on its theoretical flexibility in revealing and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets. The method was in alignment with the objective of the study in exploring how line managers recognize HRM practices in MDTs without compromising fairness perceptions. Thematic analysis enables detailed comparisons to be drawn between different participant groups—such as line managers and employees—which renders it appropriate for this two-way analysis.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2016) six steps approach. The first phase was familiarisation, whereby the researcher read and transcribed the interviews multiple times and recorded first impressions as well as taking notes. This served to establish common themes of fairness, personalisation, and discretion. In step two, initial coding, the researcher hand-coded suitable text passages using a mixed deductive and inductive process. Theory-based codes like distributive justice, differentiation of bonuses, and emotional support were utilized, grounded in literature (Colquitt et al., 2001; Marescaux et al., 2021), and new codes like "private praise" or "manager as psychologist" were derived from participant words. This second step provided 45 initial codes in total. The third phase, theme searching, entailed the grouping together of codes that were associated with one another. For example, bonus scheme, praise, and recognition codes all fell under a broader theme of "Motivational variation." This step resulted in a list of potential themes and provided an indication of thematic overlap and contrasts in line manager versus employee views. In the fourth step, analysis of themes, there was a challenging of each of the themes against coded data and full transcripts. This served to narrow and combine some of the candidate themes and confirm four themes with high internal coherence and external distinction. In phase five, naming and theme defining, all the themes were clearly conceptualized in terms of contribution to the aim of the research. Four themes—HRM Differentiation Strategies, Fairness Perceptions, Justification & Communication, and Line Manager Role—were finalized, with 14 sub-themes. Finally, in step 6 "producing the report," the themes were coded into a coherent narrative, using quotes from line managers and employees selected with care to ensure openness. The entire coding matrix and thematic outline can be found in Appendices 9.5 and are also visualized in the coding tree in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Coding Tree



3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the University of Twente ethical guidelines. Participation is voluntary, and informed consent obtained before each interview. Participants informed of their freedom to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data treated strictly confidentially: names and organisational identifiers anonymised, and audio recordings safely stored and deleted after transcription. Given the virtual infrastructure of the interviews, extra caution also exercised to uphold confidentiality during sessions and protect electronic files appropriately.

This research is exploratory and limited to two or three participants in one organisation. The results, as such, are not generalisable across all settings. However, the intention is to provide rich, situated insight into how HRM differentiation is being applied and accepted in teams. Possible constraints such as time conflicts or limited access to the participants have been anticipated and would be dealt with by maintaining open communication with the company and further accommodating the interview schedule.

In general, this chapter has outlined the qualitative research design that was applied to examine how line managers negotiate HRM practice in multidisciplinary teams without compromising fairness and equity perceptions. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed in a bid to sample from two organizations, thus achieving vivid contextualized understanding of both managerial decision-making and staff experience. The choice of qualitative methods—grounded in relevant literature—was prompted by the need to understand social processes, perceptions, and contextual dynamics in depth. Through focus on three MDTs and incorporation of several viewpoints in each, the research aims to yield enlightening understanding of the relational and practical dimensions of HRM differentiation. The following chapters will describe and discuss data collected through semi-structured interviews, and then an exposition of the findings relative to the theoretical framework.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the overall findings of the semi-structured interviews with three-line managers and four employees in three multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) across two organisations. The themes were developed through Braun and Clarke's (2016) thematic analysis approach, combining deductive codes according to HRM differentiation and organisational justice theory, and inductive interpretations from what the participants perceived. Outcomes are structured around four interrelated themes: Line Manager Role, HRM Differentiation Strategies, Justification and Communication, and Perceived Fairness. These themes were common to both groups and reflect how HRM decisions come to be implemented, experienced, and accounted for in multidisciplinary teams (MDTs).

The Results part begins with the Line Manager Role as it is the central theme of all the remaining themes. Line managers are the performers who implement HRM decisions and build the team climate. They describe managing multiple roles— as policy implementers, emotional supporters, and boundary setters. Which directly affecting their HRM Differentiation Strategies, such as offering customized rewards or training privileges. These strategies vary based on individual needs, roles, or personalities. The third pattern, Justification and Communication, addresses how line managers explain their or signal these differentiated

decisions. For example, while some use direct communication or personal praise, others prefer discretion or remain silent. These communication choices affect the interpretation of differentiation. Finally, Fairness Perceptions are how employees perceive the treatment they see or receive - not exactly in terms of equality, however, but of consistency, motive, and interpersonal respect.

This organization offers a logical sequence: line managers' actions shape HRM policies, which must be communicated (or justified), all of which shaped notions of fairness. Within every theme, line managers' perspective is first summarized, followed by the employees' views. Brief descriptions and illustrative quotes lead into sub-themes and illustrate how they reflect different yet connected elements of the HRM process. A detailed overview of the themes and sub-themes, together with representative quotes from both line managers and employees, can be seen in Appendices 9.5.

4.1 Line Manager Role

Line managers in MDTs play a complex and central role in determining the adoption and acceptance of HRM practices. In this section, the ways in which line managers described their jobs and the emotional, strategic, and interpersonal dimensions of the work are explored. Their experiences comprise a tension between holding things together and responding to team member needs-often requiring emotional awareness and situation judgment. These management roles directly inform how HRM differentiation and communication approaches are applied, discussed in later sections.

Each of the three line managers described themselves as doing more than administrative or managerial functions. One response said, "I feel like a manager, a psychologist, and a diplomat all at once." The quote well describes the multifaceted nature of the job. Managers identified not just as having responsibility for HR decision-making but also being responsible for motivating employees, solving problems, and adapting their communication style depending on the individual they were communicating with. Another manager said, "Some employees need technical instructions, others need emotional reassurance-it's part of the job." The answers demonstrate the degree to which MDTs, composed of individuals of different professional and personality types, require line managers to toggle adaptively between different roles.

Managers also spoke of the tension between closeness and fairness. On the one hand, they explained, their working closeness to team members enabled them to provide personal support and emotional insight. On the other, they were worried about keeping professional distance and not being accused of favoritism. One respondent said, "I know when someone is in trouble and I want to help, but I have to think about how others are going to perceive that too." This reflects the internal balancing between empathy and fairness that managers have to deal with. Participants identified several ways of managing this tension. For example, providing emotional support in confidence, explaining choices behind closed doors, or demonstrating flexibility within policy boundaries. These actions were upheld by shared interpersonal ideals, particularly respect, consistency, and care. Rather than strictly relying to rules, managers reported exercising discretion founded on team dynamics and personal judgment. As the following manager

informed us, "There's no manual for this. You have to read people and balance things out."

Employees also agreed with complexity of the line manager' role. One employee explained, "I need emotional support from the manager. I do not always believe in myself, so that makes a great difference." Another cited managerial presence as an inspirational force: "The director is always there and attentive. It makes us not feel so isolated, and they care about us." The importance of being treated individually was also cited: "She treats each of us differently.". Not everyone needs the same kind of pressure or support." While some workers sensed discomfort at seeing unequal treatment among the team members. "Sometimes it seems that a person gets more attention, and it is not that much explained why, but I believe it was needed" offered one respondent. These reflections suggest while many respondents enjoyed individualistic compliments, sensing inequality could be problematic- particularly when reasons were not provided.

These findings suggest that line managers actively interpret and adapt their own roles in MDTs, switching between organisational needs and people-oriented decision-making. Their distinction is not just technical but relational shepd by their understanding of employee needs, their emotional maturity, and the desire for justice without strict uniformity. The next section discusses how these roles manifest through differentiated HRM practices and how employees perceive such practices.

4.2 HRM Differentiation Strategies

Following from the varied functions of line managers in the previous section, this section addresses the precise strategies utilized to differentiate multidisciplinary team (MDT) HRM practices. In all teams, differentiation was observed at formal and informal levels. Formal practices, such as mandatory training and bonus, were differentiated by job position, e.g., only administrative staff and teachers participated in mandatory seminars, while the bonus was distinguished by job level. Informal practices were more relational in character - such as treating a high-performing teacher to lunch or offering spa coupons to marketing staff upon completing a difficult project - by exhibiting managers' judgment about personal needs and contributions. Those differences are two kinds of HRM differentiation: systematic practices instituted through policy, and discretionary action taking effect through relational judgment.

Differentiation was employed by line managers with the objective of promoting motivation and individual engagement. A few chose formal approaches, but others used more adaptable, personalised ones. One line manager said, "We use systematic grades of bonuses and systemised training schemes by job classes." Another, on the other hand, replied, "Money is a significant stimulant with some individuals; others need to be appreciated or given career direction. I attempt to mix it." One manager mentioned blending gestures and resources from observation: "If a person has had a tough week, I offer them some little encouragement-even if it's just a lunch snack." These not only represent variation in practice but also varying logics behind differentiation: some premised on equality of roles, others on sensitivity to effort or circumstance.

Employees also caught on to such differences, although their reasoning was not necessarily the same. Most employees understood that distinction occurred across roles or personalities and usually tolerated it as long as the approach seemed reasonable. One employee said, "In sales they get more extras, but we get appreciation too-it depends on the job." Another noted, "Some of us enjoy public recognition, but others like quiet feedback.". Our manager clearly knows that." Such examples illustrate that workers did not necessarily expect the same kind of treatment but appreciated when differentiation equated to perceived effort or individual needs. At the same time, some workers were unaware of decision reasons, which sometimes opened up room for speculation. However, this did not always result in negative perception. One employee noted, "Each person is different, and I think the manager understands that. It seems fair because it relates to who we are." Another stated, "There is no one-size-fits-all. Some need pressure, others need trust." These remarks illustrate that employees viewed differential treatment as fair when it entailed thoughtful consideration and not arbitrary or hidden choices.

More generally, while differentiation was not consistently method or consistently recurrent, it was viewed as equitable when it was also seen as intended to be so, context-dependent, and respectful. Differentiations between line managers reflect a spectrum of practice-from formalized and policy-guided through to localized and relational. Employees' perceptions of fairness were less focused on similarity, and more in terms of individual contribution, desire, or challenge. The next section will discuss how these differentiation strategies were rationalized and justified, and how these justifications affected or determined conceptions of fairness.

4.3 Justification and Communication

This theme explores why and how line managers justify differentiated HRM decisions and what impact communication strategies have on employees' perceptions. In this research, "justification" is employed to refer to how reward, recognition, or opportunity decisions are framed (or not) to employees. Communication also includes how such explanations are provided, the tone employed, and when they occur. Which has significantly impact on perceived fairness. The findings indicate that communication style variations of managers and employees' differing expectations are contributors to a complex conception of fairness.

Difference in line managers' adaptation of communication based on the employee's level of education, communication style, or direction required was indicated. One replied, "I speak differently to teachers and assistant educators-not in terms of value, but in terms of how they understand things." Another replied, "There are some people who want explanations to be concise, while others care only about the result and do not require details." These responses show that managers were intentional in their communication manner but differed in the level of openness they felt they ought to be. While others preferred providing reasons for selection, others hid their reasons to avoid unnecessary comparison or conflict. One line manager stated, "Usually, we don't explain; we just try to be fair and consistent."

This imbalance was seen in how workers interpreted managerial intent. In some cases, communication was praised for being respectful and clear. One worker said, "We have shared discussions and morning briefings. Everything is open, so there's no guessing." Another appreciated the tone of communication and said, "She gives feedback in private, and it feels respectful.

That matters." Here, discretion and openness were both valued, as long as the tone showed thoughtfulness. But other employees did not believe decisions were ever clarified. One explained, "Sometimes individuals get something-like an honour or praise-and you don't know the reason. No one speaks of it." That openness was not always perceived as unfair, but it did create doubt. Another worker stated, "I don't think it's unfair, but I would have liked to have known how they came to those conclusions." These examples indicate that silence, while not necessarily aversive, can cause people to wonder-especially in contexts of visible differentiation.

Employees associate fairness not only with what was being decided on, but also with how the decision was being presented. Respectful tone, personal delivery, and message consistency were big considerations. As one of the respondents put it, "Even if you're not the one who's getting rewarded, if it's explained nicely, you feel okay about it." These narratives highlight that communication was more than a functional device-it was seen as a signal of intent, influencing managers' impressions of fairness and trustworthiness among employees.

Overall, this theme suggests that communication and justification played a key role in shaping employee perceptions of fairness, in the case of differentiated treatment in particular. While managers had different styles, employees consistently valued clarity, tone, and respect. The next section will examine how these communication practices, as well as differentiation itself, shaped overall fairness perceptions across the teams.

4.4 Fairness Perceptions

Both manager and employee fairness were affected by a variety of factors- not only outcomes of HRM decisions but also consistency of treatment, motivations for managerial actions, and interpersonal treatment of employees. These correspond to established fairness dimensions, namely distributive justice (who gets what), procedural justice (how decisions are made), and interactional justice (how people are treated in the course of the process). Even while line managers attempted to bring consistency and equity, worker responses discovered that equity was interpreted in numerous and often personalized ways.

Managers defined fairness as functioning as a guideline for their decision-making. One indicated, "We give the same raise to people in the same job-it's policy." Another noted offering personal support while remaining consistent: "Even if someone's not doing a good job, they're not left out. Support must be equal as well." These descriptions show that managers saw fairness as an intersection of same standards and personalized care.

Staff themselves defined formal and informal aspects of fairness. As one of them put it, "Even if somebody is not doing anything, still they are encouraged." This was not a sign of dissatisfaction but the perception that fairness could include supportiveness and not punishment. Another staff member indicated, "People get acknowledged - if they earn it, they are recognized." Recognition was seen as being earned and not arbitrary and hence an equity orientation towards fairness was strengthened. A common pattern was that fairness was not equated with strict equality. Many employees acknowledged and tolerated unequal treatment when it appeared to be in proportion to individual need or contribution. One replied, "Some people get more help, but it depends on the situation." Another replied, "It is fair when it is right for the individual - not everyone needs the same." These answers suggest that fairness was judged contextually: employees tolerated variation where it was sensible.

The method of delivery also mattered. Polite and private communication was more likely to lead employees to feel treated

with respect even when results went against them. "She tells you things straight but nicely -that's what makes it feel just," one said. Another thought, "It's not about receiving something. It's about being treated with respect." These quotes confirm that interactive factors- tone, respect, and discretion- were the channel through which fairness was measured. But not all was well. Some workers were uncertain about decision-making or why some other colleagues received certain perks. As one explained, "You sometimes don't understand why someone gets something. There's no explanation." Although this did not always lead to dissatisfaction, it generated uncertainty. Perceived lack of explanation or reward visibility sometimes made people uncomfortable, particularly in smaller groups.

In general, fairness was affected by a set of overlapping factors. Employees did value consistency and respect but also embraced different treatment when managers employed explanation and tone. Differentiated treatment was received as much as tolerated when tone was appropriate and explanations were given.

All four themes- Line Manager Role, HRM Differentiation Strategies, Justification and Communication, and Fairness Perceptions- collectively portray the way that HRM differentiation functions in multidisciplinary teams. Line managers hold complex roles that are both practical and emotionally intelligent. The way that they communicate and the impression of their intentions greatly determine whether employees will see them as fair. In this research, fairness was not about treating everyone similar, but being respectful, listening, and balance the way that people were treated.

These relationships are summarised in Figure 2, which illustrates how the four themes are related and shape fairness perceptions in MDTs.

Figure 2 Thematic Relationship



5. DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research findings against the central research question: How do line managers differentiate human resource management practices in multidisciplinary teams without compromising employees' perceptions of equity and fairness? Based on an analysis of the voice of the line managers and the employees' voice in three multidisciplinary teams in two organisations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how HRM differentiation can be successfully deployed in practice. By placing the findings within the frameworks of organisational justice and relational HRM, the discussion determines where this study confirms or contributes to the body of research. The discussion also addresses the practical and theoretical implications of the findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, and provides recommendations for further research.

5.1 Interpretation of the Results

The findings showed that HRM differentiation is a prevalent practice by line managers in multidisciplinary team settings. Managers continued to tailor HRM practices to specific employees' roles, performances, needs, or personal traits on a day-to-day basis. Rather than adopting a one-fits-all solution, line managers used varying combinations of rewards, training, feedback, and emotional support to manage different team members. Staff were likely to tolerate these practices as long as the underlying rationale was felt to be fair and understandable. These findings support and extend prior empirical work on HRM differentiation (e.g., Marescaux et al., 2021), suggesting that differentiation is most acceptable when the motivation is seen as based on merit and communicated transparently.

This approach alligns with the distributive justice model, which focuses on fairness rather than equality in distributive outcomes. Colquitt et al. (2001) argue that fairness is primarily decided based on whether the perceived ratio between input and reward is believed to be fair. This research builds on this idea by showing that fairness is also highly determined by the quality and stability of interpersonal treatment in shared work contexts, specifically involving frequent collaboration and visibility. In such contexts, employees are highly oriented to not just outcomes but also the extent to which others are treated consistently and with respect. A few employees noted that even if the other members of their teams received more help or favor, they still were not threatened. As long as that the help appeared to be appropriate on the basis of effort or need of the individual. When individuals treated others with respectfulness, and decision justifications were delivered in a compassionate manner, employees tended to perceive differential treatment as fair. At the heart of the concern was not that everyone was treated the same but that different treatment was equitable and justified. In this case, "equitable and justified" treatment was interpreted as managers responding to unique needs or achievements and explaining their actions in terms that maintained trust within the group. This extends prior research on distributive justice by illustrating that in close and cooperative teams, fairness is not only evaluated by what people get, but also by the degree to which those decisions are explained. It also depends on whether people are treated in a consistent and respectful way. Fairness, in this case, is not merely a question of following rules but also of how people perceive and interpret decisions through daily interactions.

While distributive justice shaped the interpretation of outcome, elements of procedural justice also appeared. Some participants drew attention to consistent treatment and transparency in assigning benefits or support. Again, however, it was interpersonal treatment and tone of communication- key to interactional justice- that appeared most influential in shaping impressions of fairness. Employees were more responsive to managers' tone of communication than to managers' decisions.

The use of communication as a legitimation of HRM differentiation was one of the strongest threads throughout the interviews. Managers reported adapting their communication based on the employees' education, job title, or personality to ensure that their decisions would be understood. For example, many of the interviewees gave as an example how decisions were explained to them in private, respectful language, particularly when communicating with them about issues with performance. Both employees and managers experienced communication as something that can both defend or harm fairness. If decisions were explained in an open and clear manner, then decisions were

accepted more willingly. However, if communication was confusing, it resulted in ambiguity. This shows that communication was not just about giving information- it also reflected whether treatment was fair and respectful. But managers were not all the same when communicating. Others gave one-to-one explanation of decisions, and others admitted they never explained them. These differences were received in different ways according to the closeness of the relationship. Sometimes trust in the manager softened the absence of explanation. Occasionally, silence created confusion or misinterpretation- especially in close teams where informal signals were easily questioned. This suggests that procedural uncertainty, without robust interactional fairness, can contribute to undermining perceptions of fairness.

A further dimension which affected fairness perceptions was the emotional labor that managers performed in MDTs. Emotional labor in this context refers to the effort exerted by managers to regulate their own emotions and attend to other people's emotional needs to create team harmony and fairness. Managers self-categorized as diplomats, mentors, and emotional support figures alongside their HR function. They were not simply implementing policy, but interpreting it, translating it, and negotiating it to fit real situations. This aligns with relational HRM (Ratcheva, 2009), where management is not treated as a purely administrative function, but a set of relational activities embedded in everyday human interaction. Emotional intelligence was always required of employees- particularly the way feedback was delivered, how personal needs were addressed, and how support was distributed. Managers' ability to read and respond to emotional signals were generally the deciding factor between differentiation accepted and feeling of discrimination.

This role complexity produced tensions that best explain Fu et al.'s (2018) fairness-consistency paradox. Practicing managers must be resilient enough to accommodate different individuals' needs, yet at the same time implement consistent principles without perceived unfairness. The findings show that breaking this paradox involved something more than the balancing of regulation- it was a matter of emotional judgment and situational interpretation. For example, being close to employees enabled individualized attention from managers but also made inconsistencies in treatment more noticeable. Employees compared how others were treated, especially when social rewards like thank-you notes, lunches, or compliments were involved. Employees enjoyed such gestures- but only if they were in line with the group's informal expectations. This study extends Fu et al.'s research by showing that the resolution of the fairness-consistency paradox wasn't simply procedural. Fairness was preserved not by formal rules, but by managers' moment-by-moment judgment, emotional awareness, and understanding of team-specific social processes.

Overall, fairness was a complex and dynamic notion. None of the participants thought of fairness as sameness, but instead emphasized legitimacy, coherence, and respect among individuals. Trust in management motivation was dominant: when managers explained clearly their decisions and expressed empathy, even differential treatment was acceptable. But when communication was absent, or when informal decisions seemed unpredictable, fairness perceptions broke down- even when intentions were benign.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study presents several contributions to organisational justice theory and HRM. First, it confirms earlier findings concerning

HRM differentiation (Marescaux et al., 2021) by suggesting that employees will tolerate unequal treatment if it is explained and justified. Evidence reaffirms the importance of distributive justice and also suggests the degree to which it correlates with other forms of justice- especially interactional justice- in MDT environments.

Second, the research advances distributive justice theory by showing that fairness is not just a matter of what is given but how and why it is given. When outcomes were explained with empathy and respect, employees were more likely to see them as fair. This confirms and develops Colquitt et al.'s (2001) multidimensional model of justice by illustrating how these forms of justice work together in everyday team life.

Third, it is a contribution to relational HRM theory (Ratcheva, 2009) in that it shows emotional labour far from being "additional", is centrally involved in the fair application of HRM practice. The relational work managers undertook to modify feedback, interpret team dynamics, and sustain trust was central to the way that fairness was experienced. The study proves that workers do not evaluate fairness solely by means of a procedure perspective, but also by emotional tone as well as consistency in engagement with managers.

Lastly, this study enhances Fu et al.'s (2018) fairness-consistency paradox by proving how exactly this tension plays out in practice. The findings reveal that fairness in MDTs is not controlled by rules but by situational awareness, discretion, and emotional intelligence. By showing how managers manage this paradox in tight teams, the study enriches our understanding of fairness in high-contact environments. It shows that fairness is a socially constructed, moment-by-moment experience that requires more than frequent processes- it requires managers to act with transparency, empathy, and flexibility.

Such theoretical contributions also have significant implications for real-world management, particularly in multidisciplinary environments. The subsequent section discusses how these findings can be used to inform practical application in HRM and organisational leadership.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for organisations that run MDTs, especially where fairness and flexibility are organisational priorities. The research clarifies that HRM differentiation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon but can be positive when handled with openness and sensitivity. However, the way HRM practices are communicated and explained determines whether or not such differentiation will be accepted or resisted by team members.

Firstly, line managers must be not only familiar with HRM policies but also equipped with communication skills and emotional intelligence. The evidence showed that employees were more accepting of differential treatment if managers explained the rationale for it. For example, used polite language, and modulated their tone on a case-by-case basis. Managers who failed to present their decisions convincingly or in a consistent way risked undermining the legitimacy of even well-intentioned actions. To this aim, organisations can send line managers- especially those who operate in diverse or functionally diverse teams- through communication training and fairness framing workshops.

Second, emotional labour was found to be an essential part of the line manager's role. Managers were not merely doing tasks but were also managing relationships, boosting morale, and balancing individual demands within the team. These sorts of informal, people-oriented practices often determined how fair employees found the environment to be. Pragmatic HRM

policies must thus seek to give line managers greater autonomy to enact relational practices- such as role-sensitive motivation strategies, emotional support, or individualised feedback- while also supporting them with ethical guidelines and peer-learning opportunities.

Third, HR practitioners should collaborate with line managers in the co-design of differentiation schemes that are flexible, yet fair. This involves placing limits on discretionary rewards (e.g., informal gifts, personal compliments) and informing team members of the rules underlying such actions. Making informal practices slightly more visible or standardized- without rendering them rigid- could reduce misunderstandings and comparison-driven tensions.

Finally, organisations should consider setting up feedback systems, such as anonymous team surveys or periodic reflection sessions, to assess how differentiation practices are being perceived over time. The study showed that fairness was usually determined not on whether one received more, but on whether the reasons for such treatment were perceived as legitimate. Such mechanisms could help line managers stay attuned to evolving team dynamics and modify their behaviour accordingly.

Together, these implications suggest that successful HRM differentiation in MDTs requires both relational sensitivity and technical competence. The next section will discuss the limitations of this research and provide suggestions for future research.

5.4 Limitations

While the research is informative about line managers' strategies for HRM differentiation within multidisciplinary teams, several limitations must be highlighted.

First, the sample was small and consisted of just seven participants (three line managers and four staff members) from three MDTs across two organisations in Kyrgyzstan. While it was appropriate for qualitative studies that aim for depth and meaning, this means that findings have limited generalisability. Larger and more diverse samples- more sectors, teams, or countries- can generate more conflicting opinions and varied patterns across sites. For example, MDTs in public organizations, technology companies, or healthcare can have different fairness expectations or differentiation mechanisms.

Second, all participants were from one national context, and this may have affected how fairness and communication were culturally constructed. Kyrgyzstan's hierarchical work culture, respect and leadership norms, and transparency expectations may have affected the reported practices and their interpretations. Future studies in other cultures can tackle how context affects fairness perceptions and acceptability of HRM differentiation.

Third, the study did not include interviews with HR practitioners, who might have told us more about the alignment- or absence of alignment- between organisational-level practices and the way line managers implement them at the grassroots level. Including HR officers or top management in the next studies might enable us to better see if differentiation practices are strategic choices, adaptive responses, or informal variations.

Finally, social desirability bias may have impacted some of the interview replies, particularly where line managers have answered how they intended things to appear as good as possible and staff members avoided direct criticism. Although steps were taken to reduce this threat- e.g., by keeping the interviews

confidential and building rapport- the threat cannot be completely overcome. AS Braun and Clarke (2016) noted, participants will produce socially desirable accounts when interviewed, especially for questions regarding fairness or leadership.

Despite these limitations, this research provides an important contribution in the sense that it provides an in-depth understanding of the experience, negotiation, and articulation of fairness in everyday team interactions. The concluding part of the discussion will include future research imperatives.

5.5 Future Research

This study provides several avenues for future research. First, the sample can be expanded to include more multidisciplinary teams within various industries and countries to enhance the generalisability of the results. Cross-cultural comparisons would help to establish how fairness perceptions and HRM differentiation practices vary across organisational and national levels.

Second, involvement of HR professionals and senior leadership in future studies could offer a more comprehensive view of the way strategic HR intentions are converted into line-level practices. It will help identify gaps or complementarities between formal policy and everyday practice.

Third, longitudinal studies or diary studies can possibly capture the evolution of fairness perceptions with the passage of time, especially following team changes or leadership transition. These approaches would give immediate feedback on the communication dynamics, trust, and differentiation.

Finally, informal team norms and their effects on perceptions of fairness should be investigated in future studies. Since much of the perceived justice within this study was linked to unwritten norms and affective tone, understanding more about these team-level processes can enhance theory as well as managerial training.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This research investigated line managers' mechanisms for differentiating HRM practice in multidisciplinary teams without compromising perceptions of fairness. By conducting interviews with employees and line managers, the findings indicate that HRM differentiation is widespread and readily accepted where it is clearly explained, delivered respectfully, and relevant to team norms. Fairness was not to treat all people alike but to be honest, be consistent, and be emotionally attuned to specific needs.

By synthesizing HRM differentiation and organisational justice theory, the study foregrounds the pivotal role of communication and relational management in achieving fairness perceptions. It extends existing literature through the illumination of how fairness is negotiated in everyday interaction. Not simply by policy decree, but by minute-by-minute managerial choice. Ultimately, fairness in MDTs is not a destination, but an interdependent, dynamic process built on trust, explanation, and professional empathy.

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9. APPENDICIES

9.1 Literature Matrix

Author(s)	Year	Topic / Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Research Question
Colquitt et al.	2001	Organizational Justice Theory	Introduced distributive, procedural, and interactional justice as key dimensions of fairness.	Provides the theoretical basis for evaluating fairness perceptions in HRM differentiation.
Fu et al.	2018	Fairness-Consistency Paradox	Described the tension between adapting to individual needs and treating all employees fairly.	Supports the analysis of how line managers balance flexibility with fairness.
Marescaux et al.	2021	HRM Differentiation	Explored how line managers personalize HR practices and the implications for perceived fairness.	Core study supporting the idea of differentiated HRM in team settings.
Ratcheva	2009	Relational HRM	Emphasized emotional labor and informal relationships in managing team dynamics.	Used to understand line managers' informal support and relational role in fairness.
Rofcanin et al.	2018	Justice and HRM Communication	Showed how communication of HR practices influences fairness perceptions.	Directly supports findings on the importance of clear justification in HRM decisions.

Oborn & Dawson	2010	MDTs and Identity Work	Examined challenges in fairness across multidisciplinary teams in healthcare settings.	Relevant for contextualizing fairness tensions within MDTs.
Liu et al.	2019	Informal HR Practices and Justice	Analyses how non-standard HR activities shape justice perceptions.	Strengthens the case for informal and relational differentiation strategies.
Schmidt et al.	2017	Performance-Based HRM	Argued that differentiation aligned with effort can increase perceptions of fairness.	Supports idea that perceived intent behind differentiation matters more than uniformity.
Kehoe & Han	2019	Line Manager HRM Agency	Emphasized the influence of line managers in delivering HRM and shaping outcomes.	Grounds the thesis focus on line managers as fairness agents.

9.2 Interview Questions for Line Managers

Section A: General Background

1. To begin, could you briefly introduce yourself and describe your current position within this organization?
2. How long have you been working in this role?
3. What types of teams have you managed so far (were they multidisciplinary or not?)

Section B: Team Composition and Collaboration

4. How would you describe your current team's composition in terms of roles, disciplines, or professional backgrounds?
5. How do these team members with different professional backgrounds typically collaborate or interact in daily work?
6. How do you manage the employees with different professional backgrounds in your team?
7. In what ways do you manage these people differently? Please explain.
8. What do the employees from different backgrounds need from you as a manager? (How is this different per discipline?)

Section C: HRM Practices in MDTs

9. Which HRM practices (e.g., training, performance appraisal, promotions) do you typically use to support your team?
10. How do you consider the varying roles or needs of your team members when applying these practices?
11. Can you share an example where you adjusted an HRM practice to better suit an individual's role or background?
12. In your experience, are there specific roles or functions that tend to require more support or different approaches?
13. How do you make decisions about applying certain HRM practices differently for certain individuals or roles?
14. In what ways- if any- do you communicate or explain those HR decisions to your employees?

Section D: Fairness and Reactions

15. In what ways do you think employees are aware of differences in how HRM practices are applied within the team?
16. How do your employees typically respond when HRM practices differ between roles or individuals?
17. How do you make sure that your team members feel they are being treated fairly, even when HRM decisions differ?
18. Have you ever experienced a situation where employees questioned or challenged a differentiated HRM decision? If so, how did you handle it?
19. Which role does fairness play in making HR decisions?
20. What makes HRM differentiation successful or problematic in your experience, especially in terms of team cohesion and trust?

Section E: Final Reflection

21. What challenges do you face when balancing team-level fairness with individual needs?

22. How has your approach to HRM differentiation evolved over time?
23. What advice would you give to other line or HR managers working with MDTs?

9.3 Interview Questions for Employees

Section A: General Background

1. To start, could you briefly introduce yourself and describe your current position in this organisation?
2. How long have you worked in this position?
3. Have you worked in other teams before this one? (were they multidisciplinary or not?)
4. How would you describe the composition of your current team in terms of roles, disciplines, or professional backgrounds?
5. How do team members with different backgrounds typically work together in your team?

Section B: Experience with HRM Practices

6. What kinds of HR-related practices have you experienced in your team, such as training, performance evaluation, or promotion?
7. How are these HR practices applied to you?
8. How are these practices applied to other employees in your team, based on your observation?
9. Can you recall a moment when someone in your team received a different treatment - either more or less support?
10. How did you experience this situation?

Section C: Perceptions of Fairness

11. How do you feel about the way HR decisions are made and implemented in your team?
12. How do you react if you manager used different ways of applying HR practices to different employees?
13. How would you react if another team member would be offered different HR practices (opportunities)?
14. In your opinion, what makes HR practices feel fair or unfair in your team?
15. What kind of impact do these differences have on collaboration or morale in your team?

Section D: Communication and Understanding

16. How are HR-related decisions typically communicated to team members?
17. How do you interpret the reasons behind differences in HR practices between employees?
18. What do you think are some of the reasons managers might have to treat team members differently (in terms of HR practices)?
19. What would you expect from your manager regarding fairness and transparency when it comes to HR decisions?

Section E: Final Reflection

18. What advice would you give to managers to ensure HR practices feel fair to everyone in multidisciplinary teams?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with HR practices or teamwork in your organisation?

9.4 Overview of participants

Participant Code	Role	Organisation Type	Job Title	Work of the experience in current MDT.
LM1	Line Manager	Private Kindergarten Branch A	Director of Branch A	10 years
LM2	Line Manager	Private Retail Company	Owner, Director of the company	3 years
LM3	Line Manager	Private Kindergarten Branch B	Director of Branch B	7 years
E1	Employee	Private Retail Company	Sales Specialist	1 year
E2	Employee	Private Kindergarten Branch A	Kindergarten Teacher	6 years
E3	Employee	Private Kindergarten Branch B	SMM & Marketing specialist	6 months
E4	Employee	Private Retail Company	Physiologists	5 years

9.5 Thematic Coding Matrix

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Example Quote (Code)
HRM Differentiation Strategies	Motivation variation	Managers use a mix of financial and non-financial motivators tailored to individual preferences.	"Some are motivated by training, others by money." – LM1
HRM Differentiation Strategies	Role-specific training access	Training and seminars are provided selectively based on position or role in the organisation.	"Only pedagogical staff attend mandatory training." – LM3
HRM Differentiation Strategies	Personalised rewards	Managers give different types of recognition like certificates, praise, or bonuses based on context.	"We gave her a thank-you note for planning weekend activities." – LM1
HRM Differentiation Strategies	Support based on personality	Differentiated support strategies are used depending on whether staff are introverts or extroverts.	"Support varies by personality – introverts vs extroverts." – E3
Justification and Communication	Adaptive communication	Managers adjust their language and style depending on staff background and comprehension levels.	"I speak more formally with educated staff, casually with others." – LM1
Justification and Communication	Information channels	Daily briefings, shared chats, and team meetings are used to communicate updates and decisions.	"We have shared chats and daily briefings." – E1
Justification and Communication	Unspoken differentiation	Sometimes managers do not explicitly explain individualised practices, relying on discretion.	"Generally, we don't explain." – LM2
Fairness Perceptions	Support despite performance	Employees report being supported even when their output is below expectations.	"Even if someone isn't performing, they are still supported." – E1
Fairness Perceptions	Private recognition	Praise is often given privately to avoid public comparisons among staff.	"Raises are equal, but praise is private." – LM1
Fairness Perceptions	Recognition seen as fair	Employees feel recognition is deserved and linked to effort, not favouritism.	"People earn recognition." – E2
Fairness Perceptions	Transparency and respect	Trust in management is tied to respectful and consistent communication.	"Private feedback builds accountability." – E3
Line Manager Role	Balancing roles	Managers take on multiple interpersonal roles to maintain harmony and fairness.	"I'm a manager, diplomat, and psychologist." – LM3
Line Manager Role	Emotional intelligence	Employees expect leaders to respond to emotional and motivational needs.	"Managers should act like psychologists." – E4
Line Manager Role	Managing closeness and fairness	Close relationships can create challenges in maintaining perceived fairness.	"I try to treat everyone fairly but must work with people differently." – LM1