

The relationship between discriminatory work environment and psychological distress in Italian organizations: Are lack of supervisor support and economic stress mediating factors?

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Abstract

Introduction: The construct of a discriminatory work environment is becoming increasingly significant in organizations due to its potential impact on corporate, health, and economic stress. Economic stress, in particular, can be viewed as a potential stressor, comprising both objective and subjective components. This research aims to demonstrate how the perception of a discriminatory

work environment can affect workers' perceived well-being, considering supervisor support and economic stress as potential mediators.

Methods: A parallel mediation analysis was conducted on 170 managers to examine the associations between a discriminatory work environment, psychological distress, supervisor support, and economic stress. Subsequently, a simple mediation model was tested on a second sample of 358 employees to explore the relationships between a discriminatory work environment, supervisor support, and psychological distress.

Results: The findings indicate that the total effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees' psychological well-being is significant. Additionally, there is a direct positive effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees' psychological distress, supervisor support, and economic stress. In the second sample, the results demonstrate that a discriminatory work environment significantly affects the lack of supervisor support, which, in turn, significantly impacts psychological distress.

Discussion: This research highlights the importance of promoting a non-discriminatory work environment to ensure greater psychological well-being and foster a positive organizational climate. Assessing and training managers to provide effective support may also be promising strategies for enhancing well-being and performance in the workplace.

Take home message: Promoting a non-discriminatory work environment is crucial for enhancing employees' psychological well-being and fostering a positive organizational climate, with effective supervisor support playing a key role in mitigating workplace stress.

Keywords: discriminatory work; economic stress; psychological distress; supervisor support; wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

The term "discrimination" refers to the unequal treatment people receive for being part of a specific group [1-4]. The literature on workplace discrimination [1,3-5] has developed relatively separately from other forms of negative acts, such as workplace violence, bullying, incivility, abusive supervision, and client verbal abuse. Scientific literature has shown how discrimination can be represented as a social network system that limits a specific group's economic, political, and social opportunities [6,7].

Therefore, prejudices and stereotypes, whether aesthetic, economic, social, religious, or cultural, endorse discrimination [8,9]. The prototype model suggests that discrimination is perceived when an event or incident does not conform to expectations [9,10]. This model also asserts that individual differences affect perceptions of discrimination. Those who strongly identify with a historically stigmatized and hateful ethnic or social subgroup have been found to perceive workplace discrimination than those who do not identify with such a subgroup [10-12].

Workplace discrimination is a stressor that can lead to various negative consequences, such as lower well-being and job satisfaction [10,13,14].

Furthermore, the studies of Di Marco et al. [15] explain how discrimination does not affect just victims but also those people who witness discriminatory acts or who perceive they are working in a discriminatory and stigmatized work environment. Workplaces where discriminatory behavior is frequent are strongly correlated to negative job attitudes, decreased positive and increased negative workplace behaviors, and reduced mental and physical health [16-18]. Various studies have demonstrated that receiving support in the workplace can lead to positive outcomes, such as

employee retention, organizational commitment, job performance, and psychological well-being [19-22].

Psychological well-being can be explained as the degree to which an individual effectively functions or the general effectiveness of a person's psychological functioning [23,24].

In this regard, the first two hypotheses investigated concern if perceiving a discriminatory work environment can significantly affect employees' psychological distress [22] and significantly positively affect the lack of supervisor support [25].

H1. A discriminatory work environment will have a significant positive effect on employees' psychological distress.

H2. A discriminatory work environment will have a significant positive effect on the lack of supervisor support.

Supervisor support

As mentioned above, workplace support can help an organization improve employee retention, organizational commitment, job performance, and psychological well-being [19,20,26,27].

Several studies have analyzed the effect of social support on workers' well-being [28,29]. In line with such studies, perceiving social support is essential for counteracting the adverse effects of stressful situations and decreasing the level of the perceived threat by an individual. The perception of support can decrease job tension, moderate the impact of stress on psychological well-being, and increase job satisfaction [28,30-32].

More precisely, evidence shows that three types of support have been shown to lead to positive work outcomes: perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, and social support [25,33-36]. Social support, in organizations and daily life, is a resource capable of counteracting the harmful effects of being a victim of discriminatory and stigmatizing behavior [37-39].

Showing the positive effect of social support on workers' Well-being and its role when they are discriminated against, it is possible to hypothesize that social support also reduces the adverse effects of the perception of a discriminatory work environment [15,40].

Conversely, Sinokki et al. studies have shown how low levels or total lack of supervisor support can increase the risk of mental health problems, particularly depressive and anxiety disorders [41] or severe depressive symptoms [41]. Indeed, lack of supervisor support could have a significant effect on employee psychological distress and could mediate the relationship between discriminatory work environment and psychological distress [25,41].

In addition, lack of support from supervisors also influences workers' burnout, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depression, and this, in turn, can directly or indirectly affect their psychological well-being [30,41,42]. Other studies [43-50] found that supervisor support reduces the incidence of employee psychological health problems such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Furthermore, various research has analyzed the importance of the role of bystanders in other types of mistreatment, such as bullying: witnesses could offer valid support, although they cannot always intervene [51,52].

In this regard, the other two hypotheses concern:

H3. Lack of supervisor support will have a significant positive effect on employees' psychological distress.

H4. Lack of supervisor support mediates the relationship between a discriminatory work environment and psychological distress

Economic stress

Economic stress can be defined as "aspects of economic life that are potential stressors that consist of both objective and subjective components" [53]. Empirical studies have shown that the economic recession and related effects are linked to the increase in work-related stress and, in some cases, to the development of mental illness [54,55]. Therefore, we hypothesize that economic stress can significantly improve employees' psychological distress [54,55].

Various studies have demonstrated how the economic crisis negatively interferes with workers' psychological well-being through job insecurity, fear of non-employability, worry about the crisis, and fear of losing a job [56,57].

The study by Sanchez-Gomez et al. explains how the increase in unemployment and workload and the reduction of staff and wages are associated with the development of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, dysthymia, and suicide; such disorders have profoundly affected the overall health of workers [58].

A company facing an economic crisis can make its workers perceive it as a threat associated with potential losses, leading to psychological disorders [58]. Furthermore, the economic situation perceived at the national and international level can influence workers' behaviors and general well-being [21,59-61]. The inclusion of broader economic pressures in models of workplace stress coincides with the enormous changes in the labor market and nature of employment observed in recent decades. Permanent job security and careers within a single organization have been replaced with precarious employment and temporary work [62,63]. Choi et al. demonstrated that job insecurity was related to financial stress through financial well-being [64]. Job insecurity is negatively correlated with life satisfaction and feelings of happiness [57-67].

Therefore, our last hypothesis concern:

H5. A discriminatory work environment will have a significant positive effect on employees' economic stress.

H6. Economic stress will have a significant positive effect on employees' psychological distress.

H7. Economic stress mediates the relationship between a discriminatory work environment and psychological distress.

Theoretical model

Workplace discrimination may be considered as a whole set of hostile behaviors such as the systematic rejection and denial of people's rights based on their gender, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or other criteria [13,68]. Many studies have demonstrated and analyzed the negative consequences of discriminatory behaviors for victims (e.g., poorer health, lower job satisfaction, etc.) and organizations (e.g., monetary losses, higher job rotation, etc. [1,2,15,40,69-74].

Individuals who fit the prototype of a discrimination perpetrator are more likely to be perceived as discriminatory than individuals who do not fit the prototype [75,76]. To study the frequency of psychosocial exposure among workers and their association with psychosocial distress, we relied on the "job demands-resources" model (JD-R) [77]. According to the model, we can distinguish between job demands and resources within the working reality. Job demands refer to the psychological, social, and organizational aspects of work that require physical and/or psychological effort from the employee. A high level of job demands harms employee well-being [77].

On the other hand, job resources include all those physical, organizational, and psychosocial aspects of work that can counteract the effect of job demands [78]. They generally positively affect workers' well-being and stimulate learning and personal growth [76] and include, for example, job control and social support. In line with this theoretical framework, perceiving one's work environment as discriminatory is a demand the employee must cope with. As mentioned above, several studies have found that social support positively impacts workers' well-being [28,29]. In line with these studies, perceived social support could be an important resource for reducing the negative effects of stressful situations by decreasing the perceived threat level. Indeed, social support in the organizational context could be a resource that can counteract the effects of perceived discrimination [37,38,79]. Current research [80] has found that receiving support from the supervisor is positively correlated to both behavioral and cognitive engagement. In contrast, it negatively correlates to a sense of belonging, emotional engagement, and self-efficacy. A study conducted in Switzerland on a sample of 5,877 workers also showed that support from a supervisor plays a fundamental role even in comparison to social support [81]. In this regard, the study by Di Marco and colleagues explains how discrimination affects victims and those who testify to discriminatory acts or perceive that they work in a discriminatory work environment [15]. This phenomenon can be compared to the literature

on workplace bullying and bystanders since the actions of spectators contribute to the deterrence or maintenance of bullying [82]. The results of the study by Forsberg and colleagues [83,84] indicate how bystanders' reactions could be associated with moral disengagement, such as not perceiving a moral obligation to intervene if the victim is defined as not a friend, protecting the friendship with the bully, and hitting the victim [83,85].

Therefore, the perception of a discriminatory work environment can be a stressor, and the presence of job resources could counteract its adverse effects, as suggested by the Job Demand-Resources model [15,77]. Another stress factor concerns the economic pressure due to the tremendous changes in the labor market and the nature of employment over the last few decades [62,86]. Work provides certain resources such as employment, the opportunity to use professional skills or economic status. Distress occurs when the individual experiences a threat of loss of resources, an actual loss of resources, or a loss of earnings following a significant investment [87].

In light of this, economic stress could be interpreted as a threat of resource loss. Therefore, an individual who perceives his/her work environment as discriminatory may suffer a loss of resources, and the presence of economic stress can establish a cycle of resource loss, leading to psychological distress [87].

The paragraphs described above offer an overview of the hypotheses we will demonstrate. The role of work support in the workplace has demonstrated how it can increase work commitment and employee loyalty [27]. Secondly, it was noted that the economic impact, also due to events linked to the global crisis, generated a worsening of workers' well-being [88]. As a final point, we analyzed how discrimination in the workplace generates hostile behavior, increased stress, and worsened health [71]. Firstly, support in the workplace can increase work commitment and employee loyalty [27]. Secondly, the economic crisis, also due to events linked to the global crisis, can lead to lower levels of workers' well-being [88].

The hypotheses mentioned merge in two mediation models represented in the following figures.

Figure 1. The parallel mediation model proposed to test the associations between discriminatory work environment, psychological distress, lack of supervisor support, and economic stress in sample 1.

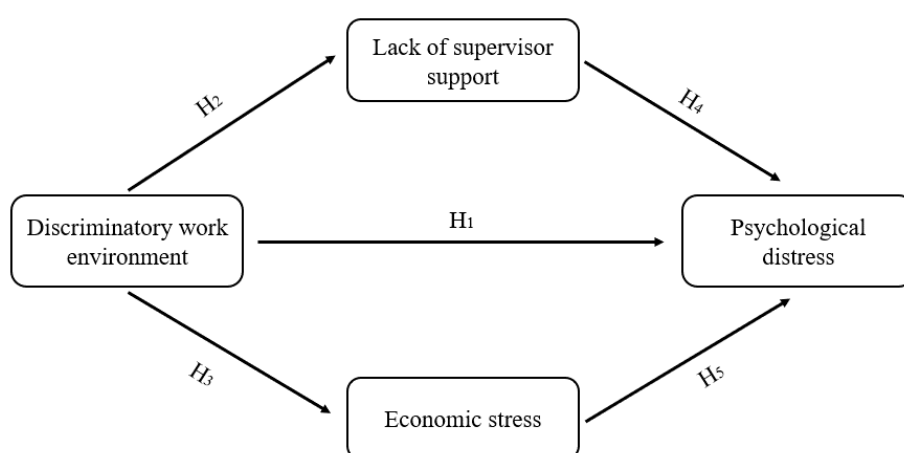
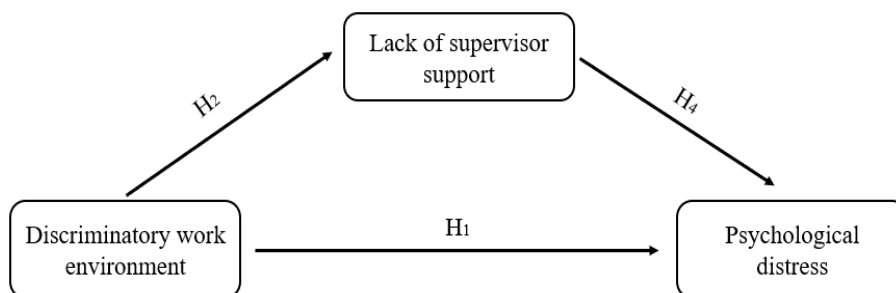


Figure 2. A simple mediation model was proposed to test the associations between discriminatory work environment, lack of supervisor support, and psychological distress in sample 2.



METHODS

Study design

This research was conducted in 2021 using a non-probability sampling approach following a cross-sectional design. Regarding sample 1, the questionnaires were administered online, while the questionnaires in sample 2 were administered through paper and pencils. In the present study, there are the two following samples from three different companies: sample 1 is from “Company 1” and consists of expatriate managers who work on-site but have remote supervisors, while sample 2 is from “Company 2” and “Company 3” and consists of blue collars in a classic management context.

The choice to analyze three different companies concerns the importance of analyzing different types of organizations, such as how the perception of a discriminatory work environment can affect workers' perceived well-being, considering, as mediators, supervisors' support and economic stress.

Ethical aspects

Every participant voluntarily consented to the study; a process meticulously aligned with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. A formal approval from the Institutional Review Board of the local Ethics Committee was obtained.

Sample 1: Company 1

Procedure and participants

“Company 1” is an energy multinational. Thanks to the company intranet, the administration took place online to facilitate information collection via questionnaire. Call conferences were held, and a video was created to raise employees' awareness of the importance of completing the survey.

The following table shows the socio-demographic variables of sample 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic variables in sample 1.

Variables	Frequency	%
Age		
20-30	13	7,6
31-40	71	41,8
41-50	63	37,1
>50	23	13,5
Organizational tenure		
< 1 years	-	-
1-5 years	25	14,7
6-10 years	38	22,4
11-20 years	51	30
>20 years	56	32,9
Family conditions		

Married with family in another country of assignment	88	51,8
Married with family in the same country of assignment	32	18,8
Single	50	29,4
Children		
Without children	65	38,2
With children <10 years	67	39,4
With children 10 n < 20 years	28	16,5
With children > 20 years	10	5,9
Shift: number of construction sites visited in 2019 (previous shift)		
< 5	85	50
05-10	67	39,4
> 10	18	10,6
Type of activity carried out in the last year		
Outage	120	70,6
Installation	43	25,3
Resident	7	4,1
Shift: number of construction sites visited in the last year (current year shifts)		
<5	44	25,9
05-10	71	41,8
>10	55	32,4
Number of quarantine period in the last year		
<5	92	58,2
05-10	62	36,5
>10	9	5,3
Weekly working hours in the last year		
40	14	8,2
50	19	11,2
51-60	44	25,9
>60	93	54,7
Daily time taken to reach the site		
<1 hour	130	76,5
1-2 hours	29	17,1
>2 hours	11	6,5
Country visited in the last year		
1	49	28,8
2-3	115	67,6
4-5	5	2,9
6-10	1	0,6
Developing countries		
Yes	136	80
No	34	20

Sample 2: Company 2 and Company 3

Procedure and participants

“Company 2” belongs to the mechanical engineering industry. During the first months of 2021, a monitoring survey was carried out to assess work-related stress risk factors. The total includes 294 employees, and all the surveys are complete and available for the research. “Company 3” belongs to the food industry. The final sample consists of 64 employees (response rate 95%). The average age of the enterprise population over the survey period is about 48 years; many personal data variables were excluded to preserve the anonymity of the participants. The questionnaire was administered to employees by the same interviewer within a 25-minute interval during their working hours. After a short briefing in which the subjects were informed about the purpose of the survey and the voluntary nature of their participation, they began to fill in the questionnaires, The 63 participants filled out questionnaires voluntarily on paper during their working hours; they were all administered by the same interviewer according to the indications of administration, to increase the validity. The following Table shows the socio-demographic variables of sample 2.

Table 2. Socio-demographic variables in sample 2.

Variables	Frequency	%
Working area (groups)*		
1	45	16,5
2	91	33,5
3	56	20,6
4	22	8,1
5	46	16,9
6	12	4,4
Missing	85	
Seniority of service		
< 4 years	57	20,7
4-9 years	109	39,6
10-19 years	62	22,5
> 20 years	47	17,1
Missing	82	
Contractual status		
Manager/executive	9	3,3
Employees	44	16
Apprentice	210	76,4
Worker	12	4,4
Missing	82	
Gender		
Male	221	74,7
Female	75	25,3
Missing	61	
Distance from workplace		
<10 Km	42	15,2
10 <n < 20 Km	82	29,7
>20 Km	152	55,1
Missing	81	

**Note:* Working area (groups): 1) CNC machine attendant, honeycombs attendant, shell line attendant, casings attendant; 2) quality attendant, vehicle cleaning attendant, restores department attendant, delivery clerk,

assembly line worker; 3) employees, executives, and managers; 4) warehouse clerk, forecourt; 5) line edge clerk, furniture preparatory worker 6) bodywork assistant, maintainer, prototype officer.

Instruments

The following instruments have been administered:

-The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12): this scale shows whether the interviewed subject has recently experienced symptoms or behaviors related to general psychological health. Each of the 12 items is rated on a four-point scale (less than usual, not more than usual, somewhat more than usual, or much more than usual) and gives a total score of 12 or 36, depending on the scoring method selected. A higher score indicates a greater degree of psychological distress. Specifically, the GHQ-12 allows us to investigate the presence of three elements of distress: loss of security, anxiety, and social dysfunction. The version of the GHQ-12 that was translated in Italy by Fraccaroli and colleagues was used in this investigation [89].

-Stress Questionnaire (SQ): The Stress Questionnaire was developed by Giorgi et al. (2013) and was used to evaluate the lack of supervisor support and the level of economic stress [90]. The supervisor support scale analyzes the extent to which employees experience difficulties in receiving support and understanding from their supervisors or leaders (4 items; e.g., "I can count on my supervisor when I have a problem at work."). The economic stress scale analyzes how employees perceive that the organization is suffering from the economic crisis (5 items e.g. "my company is stable although there is an economic crisis") [90].

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS® Statistics version 20 and the PROCESS macro version 3.3 for SPSS. Pearson correlations were computed to probe the associations among the variables. Subsequently, a parallel mediation model and a simple mediation model (PROCESS Model 4) were performed for sample 1 and sample 2, respectively [91]. To examine mediating effects, we used a bootstrapping technique employing PROCESS macro [91]. Following a bootstrap method with 5,000 data samples that generated 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, it was possible to examine conditional models to predict direct and indirect effects between the variables. A path is statistically significant if the associated 95% confidence interval (CI; bias-corrected) does not include zero.

RESULTS

Analysis

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were used to analyze the reliability of scales. The reliability scores in sample 1 range from 0.78 to 0.90, and those in sample 2 range from 0.71 to 0.8. Table 3 shows the correlations, means, standard deviations, and reliability values concerning sample 1, and Table 4 shows the correlations, means, standard deviations, and reliability values concerning sample 2.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations between the study variables in sample 1.

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Discriminatory work environment				
2. Psychological distress	0,315**			
3. Lack of supervisor support	0,295**	0,361**		
4. Economic stress	0,228**	0,369**	0,248**	
Mean	2,71	12,58	2,52	2,91
Standard deviation	0,71	6,45	0,83	0,6
⊙	0,8	0,9	0,84	0,78

Note: N = 170. ** p < 0.01. * p < 0.05. α = Cronbach’s alpha.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations between the study variables in sample 2.

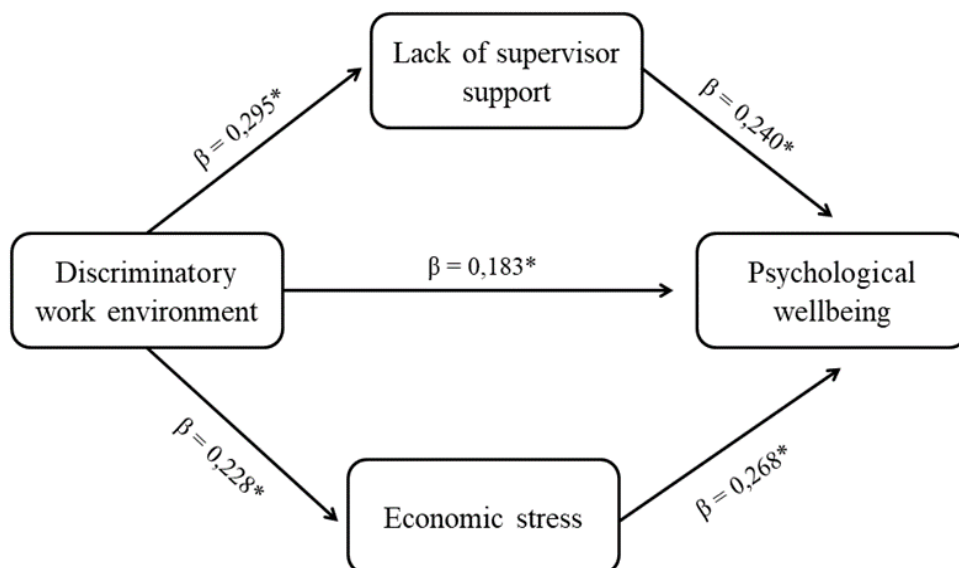
Variables	1	2	3
1. Discriminatory work environment			
2. Psychological wellbeing	0,244**		
3. Lack of supervisor support	0,382**	0,299**	
Mean	2,27	11,95	2,59
Standard deviation	0,71	6,22	0,99
⊙	0,71	0,88	0,79

Note: N = 358. ** p < 0.01. * p < 0.05. α = Cronbach’s alpha.

Mediation analysis

For sample 1, the results displayed in Figure 1 revealed that the total effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological well-being was significant ($\beta = 0,315$; 95% CI = 1,539, 4,152). The findings in Figure 2 highlight a direct positive effect of the discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress ($\beta = 0,183$; 95% CI = 0,376, 2,933), lack of supervisor support ($\beta = 0,295$; 95% CI = 0,175, 0,517) and economic stress ($\beta = 0,228$; 95% CI = 0,0674, 0,319). Thus, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported. Regarding the effect of lack of supervisor support on the psychological well-being of employees, the results presented in Figure 2b show a direct positive effect ($\beta = 0,240$; 95% CI = 0,752, 2,940). Economic stress has a positive direct effect on psychological well-being ($\beta = 0,268$, 95% CI = 1,367, 4,337). Hence, also hypotheses 4 and 5 were confirmed. Table 5 displays the indirect effects. The indirect effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress via lack of supervisor support was statistically significant (Effect = 0,070, CI = 0,016, 0,143). The indirect effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological well-being via economic stress was statistically significant (Effect = 0,061, CI = 0,013, 0,124). So, hypotheses 6 and 7 were confirmed too.

Figure 3. Parallel mediation model in sample 1(a) the total effect of discriminatory work environment on psychological Wellbeing; (b) the direct and indirect effects of discriminatory work environment on psychological distress through lack of supervisor support and economic stress. The path weights in the graph were standardized.



** p < 0.01. * p < 0.05

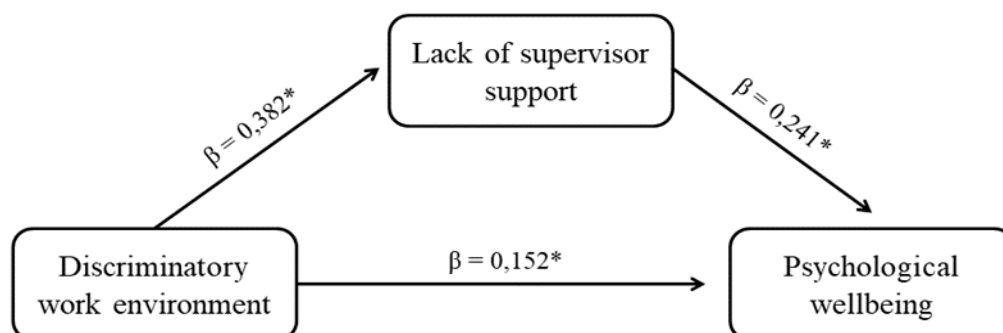
Table 5. The indirect effects of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological well-being via lack of supervisor support and economic stress in sample 1. The coefficients in the table were standardized.

Indirect effect	Effect	SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
DWE @ LOSS @PWB	0,07	0,032	0,016	0,143
POD @ ES @PWB	0,061	0,028	0,013	0,124

Note: CI=confidence; LL=lower limit, UL= upper limit; Model 1 = Discriminatory work environment → Lack of supervisor support → Psychological distress; Model 2 = Discriminatory work environment → Economic stress → Psychological distress.

With respect to sample 2, a simple mediation analysis was conducted to identify the role of lack of supervisor support between the perception of a discriminatory workplace and employee’s psychological distress. As far as it concerns the indirect effect, the discriminatory work environment has a significant effect on the lack of supervisor support ($\beta = 0,382$; 95% CI = 0,399, 0,669), which, in turn, shows a significant effect on psychological distress ($\beta = 0,241$; 95% CI = 0,842, 2,178). As can be seen in Figure 4, there is a significant direct effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress ($\beta = 0,152$; 95% CI = 0,396, 2,265). In conclusion, the lack of supervisor support partly mediated the relationship between the discriminatory work environment and the psychological well-being of employees. Table 6 shows the indirect effects. The indirect effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress via lack of supervisor support was statistically significant (Effect = 0,092; CI = 0,049, 0,145).

Figure 4. Simple mediation model between variables in sample 2. The path weights in the graph were standardized.



** p < 0.01. * p < 0.05

Table 6. The indirect effects of a discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress via lack of supervisor support in sample 2. The coefficients in the table were standardized.

Indirect effect	Effect	SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
DWE ⊗ LOSS ⊗ PWB	0,092	0,024	0,049	0,145

Note: CI =confidence; LL=lower limit, UL= upper limit; Model 1 = Discriminatory work environment → Lack of supervisor support → Psychological Wellbeing; Model 2 = Discriminatory work environment → Economic stress → Psychological Wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the role of supervisor support and economic stress in the relationship between the perception of a discriminatory work environment and employee psychological distress in three different Italian organizations. All hypotheses were supported, presenting the importance of the perception of work discrimination on psychological distress, in line with previous studies [15,40]. Parallel mediation analysis (for sample 1) revealed that supervisor support and economic stress separately mediated the relationship between discriminatory work environment and mental health

Regarding sample 2, the simple mediation analysis showed that supervisor support mediates the relationship between a discriminatory work environment and worker mental health problems. Consequently, for both samples, our results showed that the lack of support from supervisors generates greater stress for workers. The results provided support for all seven hypothesized relationships. A more in-depth discussion of our findings is provided below.

Impact of discriminatory work environment on employees’ psychological distress, lack of support from supervisors, and economic stress.

Regarding sample 1, the study results indicated that a discriminatory work environment played a crucial role in influencing employee mental health, lack of support from supervisors, and economic stress. Instead, for sample 2, the results indicated that a discriminatory work environment played a crucial role in influencing employee mental health and lack of supervisor support.

Regarding the direct effect of a discriminatory work environment on employees' mental health problems and economic stress (sample 1), the results of this study confirmed that a discriminatory work environment had a significant direct influence and positive on the mental health problems and economic stress of employees. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 3 were supported (for sample 1 only). The findings of this study are in line with several studies that have highlighted how a discriminatory work environment can have a significant and positive direct effect on mental health problems [15,40,72-74,92-96] and economic stress [97].

Regarding the first hypothesis, a possible explanation can be attributed to the fact that a discriminatory work environment can be considered a stressor by people who do not directly experience discrimination [15,40,74] and this poses a threat to mental health and psychological well-being [94]. Many studies have considered perceived discrimination as a stressor or as a job demand (JD-R model) [77], displaying its negative effect on the victim's health [72,95]. Therefore, since discrimination is considered a stressful condition that reduces the level of mental and physical health, it can also contribute to chronic pain perception and reduced self-esteem [92,93]. Furthermore, as stated above, the negative effect of discrimination is also suffered by observers, even if they are not directly threatened. Workers who perceive the work context as hostile and iniquitous may be afraid of becoming the next victim and this can negatively affect the health of bystanders [15,40,74,98].

Therefore, in sample 1, for expatriate workers, there may be a stronger connection between discrimination at work and economic stress since job insecurity combined with ethnic discrimination has been reported to be the most common combination of psychosocial job stressors among migrant workers [97] who can be afraid and worried about their financial situation, developing fear of economic crisis [54].

Concerning the direct effect of discriminatory work environment on lack of supervisor support, the results of this analysis revealed that a discriminatory work environment had a significant and positive direct effect on lack of supervisor support as expected, therefore hypothesis 2 was supported (for both samples). The findings extend previous studies highlighting that supervisor support attenuates the relationship with being a victim of discrimination, e.g. [37,38].

A possible explanation for these results may be related to the perception of a discriminatory work environment and that being a victim of exclusion can be considered the opposite of receiving social support. The similarity attraction paradigm [99] explains that dissimilar employees will perceive lower levels of social support from their leaders. Since supervisor support (SVS) facilitates changes in employees' levels of affective commitment [100], a lack of this support can act as an obstacle to interpersonal attraction.

For both samples, the results confirmed hypothesis 4 which supports the positive direct effect of the supervisor's lack of support on the employee's mental health problems. These findings are in line with past research [30,101-103], which showed that social support, such as supervisor support, has direct positive effects on the psychological well-being of employees. In fact, supervisor support in the workplace stimulates employee retention, organizational commitment, improved job performance, and psychological well-being [20,26,27,104]. Not having support from the professional network and from your direct supervisor, in particular in the event of work-related issues, is the biggest risk factor affecting occupational health and well-being. As for sample 1, the results align with previous studies regarding the effects of e-leadership on psychological discomfort. Unfortunately, when work is performed in locations other than where the supervisor is located, the supervisor will be less inclined to offer support and supervision [27,105]. Regarding the direct effect of economic stress on employees' mental health problems (in sample 1), the results of the present research highlighted that employees' economic stress had a significant and positive direct effect on their mental health issues.

Thus, hypothesis 5 (in sample 1) was supported. The results of this study are consistent with other studies [10,106] that reported that economic stress was positively correlated to employees' mental health problems. Our results are in line with the results of previous researchers who have shown that the economic crisis adversely affects the psychological well-being of workers through negative outcomes such as the fear of non-employability, fear of crisis, job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, and job loss [56,87, 107,108]. Economic stress has been incorporated into work-related stress models as one of the key factors that can influence workers' well-being and many work outcomes. On the other hand, the changing economic environment is forcing organizations into growing competition while pushing them toward wider contexts [109,110]. Working globally (as we analyzed in the expatriates' sample), involves changes in occupational dynamics and job complexity, also requiring great skills of adaptation and adjustment [111]. Working abroad influences employees'

well-being and mental health through a spiral of fear that includes fear of crisis, fear of non-employability, staff reduction, job insecurity, and job loss [54,112,113].

The indirect effects of discriminatory work environment on employees' psychological distress via lack of supervisor support or economic stress

First, considering the mediating effect of a lack of supervisor support, a discriminatory work environment tends to be linked with this [114,115]. Low supervisor support has been shown to increase the risk of mental health problems like depression and anxiety disorders [41,116,117]. On the contrary, past research has shown that perceptions of organizational and supervisor support positively affect employees' psychological well-being [41,116] measured by the GHQ test. Some studies [77,117] have shown how consideration of supervisor support is seen as a fundamental element in promoting health in the workplace; it also highlighted how supportive supervisors had a significant influence on the well-being of their employees [81,118]. Furthermore, it has been noted that workers feel more appreciated and respected when their supervisors are more supportive of them, which increases their psychological well-being and job satisfaction [118].

Thus, hypothesis 6 was confirmed. Considering the last hypothesis, previous research has demonstrated that experiencing job insecurity is one of the major stress factors for expatriates, which causes burnout and frustration [81,119].

The concern about expatriation may have developed a cycle in which people, feeling more anxious, may feel less involved in the workplace, thus developing the idea that money and extrinsic reward are the most critical factors in employment [120]. Likewise, worrying about the economic crisis could lead to greater concern about one's economic situation and one's ability to keep a job [54,58]. Several other studies have also reported that economic aspects and job insecurity play a crucial role in employees' psychological well-being and mental health [118,121,122]. Therefore, our last hypothesis was also confirmed.

Theoretical and practical implications

The present study, beyond its limitations, offers important insights for organizational research and human resource management, expanding the knowledge of the effects of discriminatory work environments on employees' mental health problems through lack of supervisor support and economic stress.

Theoretically, the study findings offer several contributions to academic literature in this field. Previous studies [40,72-74,95,123] suggested that a perceived discriminatory work environment has a significant influence on employees' mental health. This research contributes to advancing the field of discriminatory behaviors at work by explaining some mechanisms and factors that might alter the negative effects of discrimination on workers' well-being. More specifically, the study highlighted the importance of the mediating role of lack of supervisor support between discriminatory work environments and employees' mental health problems. The research seems to be consistent with academic literature [41,114] underlining that PSS attenuates the relationship between being a victim of discrimination and well-being [37,38] and highlighting that supervisor support widely influences employees' psychological well-being, affecting burnout, strain, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and depression [124]. Lastly, the study findings further provide support for the mediating role of economic stress between discriminatory work environments and employees' mental health problems. The research is in line with previous results [58,84,107,122].

Furthermore, the results of this study have significant implications for organizational management. The study findings may help organizations understand the importance of promoting a non-discriminatory work environment in several ways. First, the findings will help organizations interested in improving their employees' well-being to invest in their supervisors' training. Leaders should be more aware of the prolific role of their support (PSS), and consequently the perceived support from organization (POS), as key mechanisms that reflect a positive relationship between organizations and their workforce [125]. This is true not only for employees in traditional working environments but also for those working remotely and workers who can only receive support electronically, like expatriates. Implementing corporate inclusion programs is essential to promote

psychological well-being and mental health within organizations and avoid the creation of a discriminatory work environment. Leaders should be supportive and inclusive in line with the research stream on servant leadership, as servant leaders are more likely to transfer caring and supportive behaviors [126], which are considered one of the key elements in workplace health promotion and psychological well-being [81] avoiding burnout, strain, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depression, etc. [82,124].

Particular attention must be paid to economic stress and job insecurity. The fear of the economic crisis appears to be an important predictor of an employee's psychological well-being. Consequently, enhancing efforts to prevent and address economic stress would promote personal well-being and worker satisfaction, as well as the effective functioning of organizations.

Indeed, the demands-resources model highlights the importance of a person's available resources to meet job demands and cope effectively with job stressors. Organizational strategies and resources might be more appropriate to cope with economic stressors. Many authors underline the importance of human resource (HR) practices to enhance security and employability (i.e., extensive training) e.g. [122]. All these aspects may facilitate the exchange and dissemination of best practices between companies and institutions, which will be especially important if working from home becomes a typical condition for a growing group of employees [127].

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limits that should be addressed, which could be useful as starting points for future research. First, although a solid theoretical framework, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences [128-130]. Therefore, future studies should consider this and conduct longitudinal studies to bring to light in-depth information on the stability and changes of study variables over time. Another limitation concerns the sampling method. Indeed, for this research, a non-probabilistic sampling technique was used in which the sample is obtained by selecting individuals without considering their probability of being included in the sample; while being quicker to obtain and at lower costs, this methodology has the disadvantage of not being accurate, due to the presence of a selection bias in the sampling. The consequence is that this method does not allow to generalize the results [129]. In addition, the sample consisted of Italian workers, further limiting generalizability to other populations. Future studies could analyze different organizational realities and sectors. A third limitation concerns the self-report method, which could increase the risk of common method variance. Therefore, to overcome these limitations, future studies could use other forms of data collection methods, such as interviews or longitudinal surveys. Another limitation concerns that we did not consider the supervisors' point of view; therefore, future research may include a multi-group level in their design. Despite these limitations, the results of this study support our theoretical assumptions and provide interesting insights into the relationship between discriminatory work environments and mental health issues.

CONCLUSIONS

If not well observed, evaluated, and managed, psychosocial risks adversely affect the psychophysical health of workers, resulting in stress and complications at the organic, psychological, behavioral, organizational, and performance levels [131-134]. Based on solid frameworks, this study aimed to explore the role of lack of supervisor support and economic stress in the relationship between a discriminatory working environment and employees' mental health problems. The results are theoretically supported by the literature on discrimination and workers' well-being [123,135]. Practically, the results of the present study have significant implications for organizational management. This research emphasizes the importance of promoting a non-discriminatory working environment to ensure greater psychological well-being, fueling a positive organizational climate [136,137]. It has been shown that organizations can promote workers' well-being by investing in supportive management training [138-148]. The results of this study support our theoretical assumptions and provide interesting insights into the relationship between the discriminatory working environment and its influence on the mental health and psychological well-being of

employees through the lack of support from supervisors and economic stress. A recommendation for future research could be to conduct a similar study in different samples and organizations.

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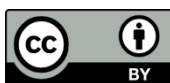
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