

The Psychology of Colleague Trust and Job Satisfaction: A Study of South Indian Policing

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction among police officers in five South Indian states-Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana. It further examines whether gender and rank moderate this relationship within a demanding, hierarchical, and male-dominated occupational structure. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 622 officers representing lower, middle, and top ranks through a structured questionnaire. Colleague trust was assessed using the Workplace Trust Survey, and job satisfaction was measured with the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that colleague trust significantly and positively predicted job satisfaction ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). Gender and rank moderated this relationship, with the positive effect of trust being stronger among female officers and those in lower ranks. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed that trust enhances psychological safety, emotional security, and teamwork, while distrust contributes to dissatisfaction, stress, and reduced morale. The findings underscore that the dynamics of trust in policing are shaped by organizational hierarchy and gendered experiences. Enhancing trust among colleagues can therefore play a critical role in improving officer satisfaction and institutional performance. Policy recommendations include implementing peer-support initiatives, transparent promotion systems, and leadership programs that cultivate a culture of mutual respect and trust. Strengthening such interpersonal and organizational dimensions is vital to advancing well-being, motivation, and professionalism within South Indian police services.

Keywords: Indian Police, Colleague trust; Job satisfaction; Policing; Gender; Rank hierarchy; Organizational behaviour; South India; Police well-being; Trust-building.

1. Introduction

Policing is widely regarded as a prestigious and respected profession in India, central to the delivery of justice and the maintenance of security in the world's largest democracy. With over 1.3 billion citizens to serve, the Indian police system is one of the largest in the world, with more than two million personnel in active service as of 2022 (Press Information Bureau, 2022; Bureau of Police Research & Development [BPR&D], 2019). Yet, despite its reputation as an attractive career pathway, policing is also recognized as a high-strain occupation, characterized by long working hours, exposure to risk, and the emotional demands of managing conflict, crime, and public expectations (BPR&D, 2016; Lambert, Qureshi, Nalla, & Holbrook, 2021).

Job dissatisfaction in policing is often linked to these demanding work conditions. Studies in India have reported that officers frequently experience occupational stress, fatigue, and poor work-life balance (Kumar, 2015). Such challenges affect not only the health and morale of officers but also the efficiency and responsiveness of the police service. As policing directly shapes the quality of justice and security in India, identifying the factors that sustain job satisfaction among police personnel is of critical importance.

Among the interpersonal factors that influence satisfaction, trust between colleagues has received growing attention. Police work is inherently team-oriented: officers depend on one another for day-to-day discharge of duties, for information in investigations, and for emotional support in stressful circumstances. Trust in colleagues-confidence in their reliability, competence, and goodwill-provides psychological safety and encourages collaboration. This trust can ease the strain of policing, mitigate dissatisfaction, and enhance commitment to the job (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

However, the effects of trust may vary depending on who the officers are and where they stand in the hierarchy. The influence of patriarchy within India's police system is visible in its historically male-dominated culture, the limited presence of women in the ranks, and organizational norms that often sideline female officers. Similarly, rank defines authority, responsibility, and exposure to distinct forms of stress, meaning that the link between trust and satisfaction may differ for constables compared to inspectors. These dynamics remain underexplored in the Indian context, especially in South India.

Compared to North India, where policing continues to reflect colonial legacies of militarization, rigid hierarchy, and political patronage (Jauregui, 2016; Verma, 2010), South Indian forces have been characterized by comparatively stronger traditions of administrative professionalism, legalistic conduct, and reform-oriented practices. States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu have pioneered community policing initiatives like the *Janamaitthi Suraksha Project* and *Friends of Police*,

which emphasize citizen trust and participatory policing (Mawby & Raghavan, 2011). At the same time, South Indian departments have made more visible efforts toward gender inclusion and welfare-oriented reforms, though challenges remain (Basu, 2015; Press Information Bureau, 2022). Yet, despite these distinctive features, systematic studies of colleague trust and job satisfaction remain limited in this region, particularly in comparison with Northern states where politicization and paramilitary traditions dominate (Jauregui, 2016; Verma, 2010). By addressing this regional gap, the present study provides context-specific insights that extend the understanding of trust and satisfaction in Indian policing. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of colleague trust in shaping job satisfaction among police officers in South India, with particular attention to whether the effects of trust vary across gender and rank. By focusing on these interpersonal and demographic dimensions, the research seeks to provide context-specific insights that can inform both theory and practice in police organizations.

2. Review of Literature

This review examines prior research on job satisfaction in policing, the role of colleague trust, and the influence of gender and rank. Together, these strands provide the basis for identifying the gaps this study addresses in the South Indian context.

2.1 Job satisfaction in policing

Job satisfaction has long been identified as a critical determinant of employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. In policing, satisfaction influences not only retention and absenteeism but also ethical conduct, public interactions, and overall performance (Shane, 2010).

Studies worldwide have consistently reported comparatively lower job satisfaction among police personnel compared to other public service workers due to demanding work conditions, irregular hours, and exposure to trauma (Brough & Frame, 2004; Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2002). Building on this literature and focusing on colleague trust and its interaction with gender and rank, this study aims to provide context-specific evidence to inform leadership strategies

In India, similar patterns are evident. Research has highlighted that police personnel frequently experience occupational stress, poor work-life balance, and fatigue, all of which diminish satisfaction levels (Kumar, 2015). Lambert, Qureshi, Nalla, and Holbrook (2021) found that Indian officers reported significant stress associated with workloads and organizational demands, which in turn reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similar patterns have been observed in other high-strain professions in South India. For instance, Mellalli (2021) found that workload stress among university faculty in Karnataka significantly predicted adverse mental health outcomes, underscoring the broader impact of occupational stress on professional well-being. These findings emphasize the need to identify protective factors that can buffer stress and enhance satisfaction in the Indian police context.

2.2 Colleague trust and job satisfaction in policing

Trust has long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective organizational functioning. According to social exchange theory, trust fosters reciprocal support, cooperation, and a sense of obligation, thereby improving work attitudes and performance (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In policing, this principle takes on heightened importance because officers often rely on one another in unpredictable and high-risk environments. Unlike many professions where individual autonomy dominates, police work is inherently collective, making colleague trust a direct determinant of safety, efficiency, and morale.

Empirical studies in Western contexts have shown that interpersonal trust within police agencies reduces cynicism, strengthens motivation, and enhances willingness to engage in community policing (Wolfe & Lawson, 2020; Tyler, Callahan, & Frost, 2007). Trust among colleagues has been linked not only to higher job satisfaction but also to greater organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). When officers feel they can rely on their peers for support and competence, they are more likely to experience psychological safety and greater satisfaction with their roles.

In the Indian context, research on trust in policing remains limited but revealing. Lambert, Qureshi, Nalla, and Holbrook (2021) highlighted that workplace stress significantly predicted job dissatisfaction among Indian officers, suggesting that protective interpersonal resources like trust could play a vital role. However, specific studies directly testing colleague trust as a predictor of job satisfaction are scarce. Most existing work has focused on stress, organizational justice, or supervisory relations (Kumar, 2015; BPR&D, 2016). This lack of systematic investigation leaves an important gap: while trust is acknowledged in theory, its empirical role in shaping satisfaction among Indian police personnel-especially in South India-remains underexplored.

2.3 Gender and rank as moderators in police organizations

Demographic and structural factors may condition how trust relates to satisfaction. Globally, research shows that women officers often face distinct challenges, including gendered expectations, marginalization, and underrepresentation (Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013). These dynamics can shape reliance on colleague trust as a coping resource. In India, women constituted only about 10-12% of state police strength as of 2022 (Press Information Bureau, 2022), underscoring the

salience of gender in shaping workplace experience. Rank, too, influences officers' exposure to stress and their access to supportive networks. Constables often face heavy workloads and limited discretion, whereas inspectors experience administrative pressures and accountability demands. Studies indicate that satisfaction varies by rank, with lower ranks reporting higher dissatisfaction (Brough & Frame, 2004; Zhao et al., 2002).

2.4 Research Gap

Although policing is widely acknowledged as a stressful profession often associated with job dissatisfaction, and international studies have shown that trust enhances morale and organizational outcomes, there remains a significant gap in the Indian context. Existing Indian studies have highlighted occupational stress and dissatisfaction among police personnel but have not systematically examined colleague trust as a predictor of job satisfaction, particularly within South Indian police forces. Moreover, while gender and rank are central to shaping officers' experiences, virtually no research has tested their moderating roles in the trust-satisfaction relationship. This absence of context-specific evidence restricts both theoretical understanding and the development of practical strategies for police leadership. Addressing this gap is therefore essential to advance knowledge on interpersonal trust in policing and to design interventions that enhance officer well-being and organizational effectiveness.

3. Conceptual Framework

Building on the literature that emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in high-stress professions, this study proposes a framework to explain how colleague trust contributes to job satisfaction among police officers in South India. For the purpose of this study, colleague trust is conceptualized as the degree to which police officers perceive their peers as dependable, competent, and supportive in carrying out professional responsibilities (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Within such a high-pressure occupation, the presence of trust may reduce psychological strain and enhance motivation. Job satisfaction, in this context, refers to officers' evaluative judgments about the extent to which their professional roles fulfil personal and organizational expectations (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). When officers feel supported by trustworthy colleagues, their sense of satisfaction with their job is likely to improve.

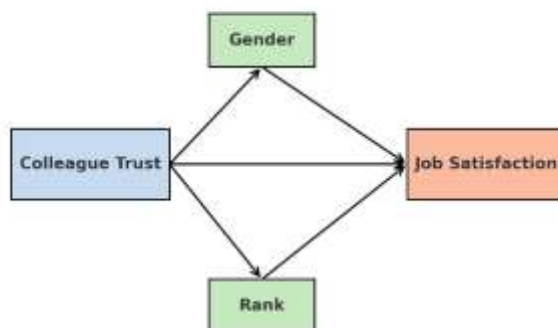


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The model further conceptualized that the trust-satisfaction relationship may vary across groups. Gender can influence how officers experience workplace trust, given documented differences in perceptions of fairness and collegiality in policing (Morash & Haarr, 2012). Similarly, rank is central to police organizational culture, with authority, autonomy, and role expectations varying significantly across levels (BPR&D, 2016). Accordingly, gender and rank are included as moderators in the conceptual framework.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Building on the gaps identified in the literature, the present study is guided by the following research questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1. How does colleague trust influence job satisfaction among South Indian police officers?

RQ2. Do gender and rank of police officers moderate the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction in South India?

Hypotheses (Hs):

H1. Colleague trust is positively associated with job satisfaction.

H2a. Gender moderates the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction.

H2b. Rank moderates the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction among police personnel in South India. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, while secondary data were drawn from official sources such as the Bureau of Police Research and Development, government reports, and published literature to contextualise the findings. Table 1 presents the detailed distribution of participants by state, rank, and gender.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by state, rank category, and gender

State	Rank Category	Male	Female	Total
Andhra Pradesh	Lower	64	14	78
	Middle	34	5	39
	Top	12	1	13
Subtotal		110	20	130
Karnataka	Lower	71	16	87
	Middle	36	8	44
	Top	13	1	14
Subtotal		120	25	145
Kerala	Lower	65	12	77
	Middle	32	6	38
	Top	12	1	13
Subtotal		109	19	128
Tamil Nadu	Lower	55	11	66
	Middle	28	5	33
	Top	10	1	11
Subtotal		93	17	110
Telangana	Lower	55	10	65
	Middle	28	5	33
	Top	11	0	11
Subtotal		94	15	109
Grand Total		526	96	622

Using a stratified purposive sampling (non-probability) method to ensure representation of key subgroups, the study surveyed 622 sworn police personnel from the five South Indian states - Andhra Pradesh (130), Karnataka (145), Kerala (128), Tamil Nadu (110), and Telangana (109). Respondents were grouped into lower-rank (Constable-ASI), middle-rank (PSI-DySP), and top-rank (SP-DGP). In line with national police demographics, the gender distribution was predominantly male (84.6%, $n = 526$), with females representing 15.4% ($n = 96$). This sample size was considered adequate for the study. For multiple regression with up to five predictors, a minimum sample of around 92 would have been sufficient to detect a medium effect size at 80% power (Cohen, 1992; Kline, 2015).

The primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire that included both closed-ended and open-ended items for quantitative and qualitative insights. Closed-ended items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree/very dissatisfied, 5 = strongly agree/very satisfied). Colleague trust was measured using an eight-item scale adapted from the Workplace Trust Survey (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), while job satisfaction was measured using the ten-item short form of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). Demographic information, including gender, rank, age, years of service, marital status, district, and state, was collected to serve as moderators or control variables. To complement the quantitative data, four open-ended questions asked respondents to describe situations where trust influenced job satisfaction, whether male and female officers experienced trust differently, how rank shaped trust dynamics, and what measures could strengthen trust in the police force. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 25 officers from two states (Karnataka and Kerala) to assess clarity and cultural appropriateness, with minor revisions made following feedback. Reliability analysis demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for both scales. Cronbach's alpha for the Colleague Trust Scale was 0.83, and for the Job Satisfaction Scale was 0.87, indicating strong reliability exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70.

The data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, percentages and frequencies, were computed to profile the sample. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the internal consistency of scales,

while factor analysis confirmed construct validity. Hypothesis testing was conducted as follows: H1 (colleague trust positively influences job satisfaction) was tested using hierarchical multiple regression, controlling for demographic variables. H2a (gender moderates the trust-satisfaction relationship) was tested through an interaction term (colleague trust $\times$ gender). H2b (rank moderates the trust-satisfaction relationship) was tested using dummy-coded interaction terms (colleague trust $\times$ rank categories). Where significant moderation effects were identified, simple slope analysis was used to interpret the nature and direction of the findings. Robustness checks included subgroup analyses by state, gender, and rank. In addition to quantitative analysis, open-ended responses were examined using thematic content analysis. Responses were carefully read and coded to identify recurring patterns, which were then consolidated into broader themes related to colleague trust, job satisfaction, gendered experiences, and rank-based dynamics. The study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving human participants.

6. Results and Analysis

This section presents the study's findings, beginning with descriptive statistics of the sample, followed by hypothesis testing and qualitative insights from open-ended responses.

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

To provide a clear overview of the total 622 respondents, this section presents the state-wise distribution of gender, rank, and age.

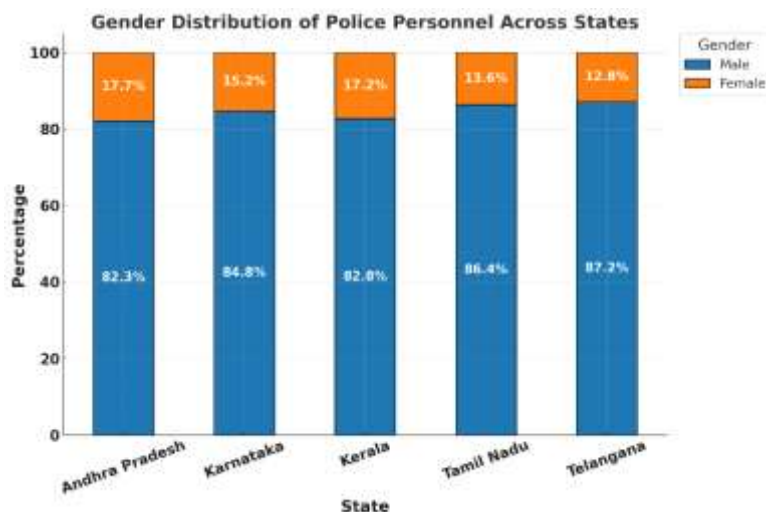


Figure 2. State-wise Gender Distribution of Respondents

In terms of gender composition, the overall sample consisted of 526 male officers (84.6%) and 96 female officers (15.4%). State-wise distributions followed similar patterns, with males consistently ranging between 82% and 87% of respondents across all five states, and females accounting for 12-18%. This reflects the structural gender imbalance commonly reported in Indian policing. The state-wise percentages are shown in Figure 2.

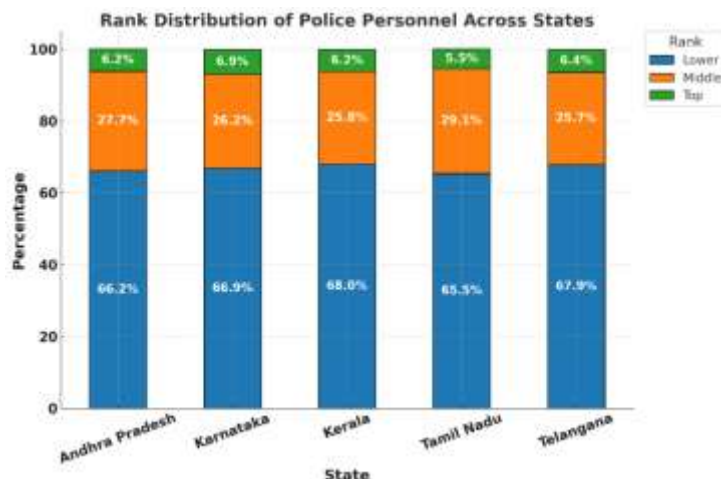


Figure 3. State-wise Distribution of Official Ranks of Respondents

With respect to rank, the majority of officers belonged to the lower-rank category (Constable to ASI, 66.9%), followed by middle-rank officers (PSI to DySP, 26.9%), and a small proportion of top-rank officers (SP to DGP, 6.2%). State-level variation was modest, with the share of lower-rank officers ranging between 65% and 68%, middle-rank officers between 25% and 29%, and top-rank officers around 5-7%. The distribution is illustrated through a stacked bar chart in Figure 3, where the width of each column corresponds to the number of respondents from that state, and the height of each block indicates the percentage of officers in each rank category.

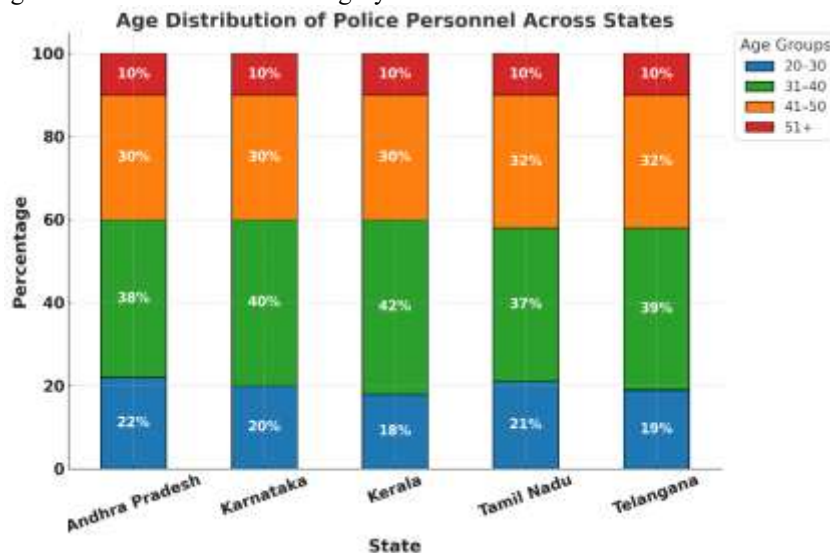


Figure 4. State-wise Age Distribution of Respondents

Age distributions revealed a workforce concentrated in the 31-40 and 41-50 year groups, with relatively fewer officers in the youngest (20-30) and oldest (51+) categories. The mean age across the sample was 39.1 years ($SD = 7.2$), with a range of 22 to 58 years. While the age structure was broadly consistent across states, minor variations were observed in the proportion of younger officers. A 100% stacked area chart depicting these patterns is presented in Figure 4. Together, these descriptive statistics confirm that the sample reflects the demographic structure of South Indian policing, with dominance of lower-rank male officers in their late thirties and forties, and relatively smaller representation of women and top-rank officers.

6.2 Hypothesis Testing

To examine the hypothesised relationships, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with job satisfaction as the dependent variable. Control variables (age, state, and years of service) were entered in the first block, followed by colleague trust in the second block. Importantly, gender and rank were not entered as controls, as they were explicitly tested as moderators in subsequent models. Interaction terms were then introduced to assess the moderating effects of gender and rank.

H1: Direct Effect of Colleague Trust on Job Satisfaction

As shown in Table 3, colleague trust emerged as a significant positive predictor of job satisfaction. The inclusion of colleague trust substantially increased the explained variance, supporting H1.

Table 3. Regression results for H1

Model	Predictor	β	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2
1	Controls (Age, State, Years of Service)	-	-	-	.09	-
2	Colleague Trust	.46	9.87	<.001	.28	.19

Note. β = standardised regression coefficient; ΔR^2 = change in explained variance from previous model.

H2a: Moderation by Gender

The interaction term between colleague trust and gender was positive and significant ($\beta = .12$, $p = .019$; see Table 4), indicating that gender moderated the trust-satisfaction relationship. As illustrated in Figure 5, the association between colleague trust and job satisfaction was stronger for female officers than for male officers, supporting H2a.

Table 4. Moderated regression results for H2a and H2b

Model	Predictor	B	t	p	R ²	ΔR ²
1	Controls (Age, State, Years of Service)	-	-	-	.09	-
2	Colleague Trust	.46	9.87	<.001	.28	.19
3	Colleague Trust × Gender	.12	2.35	.019	.30	.02
4	Colleague Trust × Rank	-.15	- 3.12	.002	.32	.02

Note. Gender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female. Rank was coded 1 = Lower, 2 = Middle, 3 = Top.

A positive interaction coefficient indicates that the trust-satisfaction relationship is stronger for females than for males.

A simple slopes analysis further revealed that the positive relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction was more pronounced among female officers ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) than among male officers ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$). This indicates that while trust enhances satisfaction for both genders, the effect is amplified for women, likely due to their greater reliance on supportive peer relationships in a male-dominated profession.

H2b: Moderation by Rank

The interaction between colleague trust and rank was significant and negative ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .002$; see Table 4), indicating that the strength of the trust-satisfaction relationship diminished as rank increased. As illustrated in Figure 6, trust had the strongest positive association with job satisfaction among lower-rank officers, a weaker association among middle-rank officers, and the weakest association among top-rank officers. These results provide support for H2b.

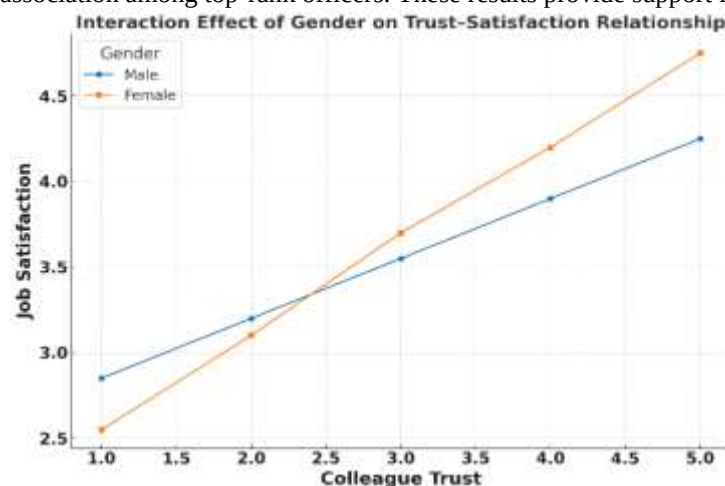


Figure 5. Interaction Effect of Gender on Trust-Satisfaction Relationship

A simple slopes analysis: For lower-rank officers, colleague trust showed a strong and significant positive association with job satisfaction ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$). For middle-rank officers, the relationship was weaker but remained significant ($\beta \approx .31$, $p < .01$). For top-rank officers, the association was weakest, though still positive ($\beta \approx .18$, $p < .05$).

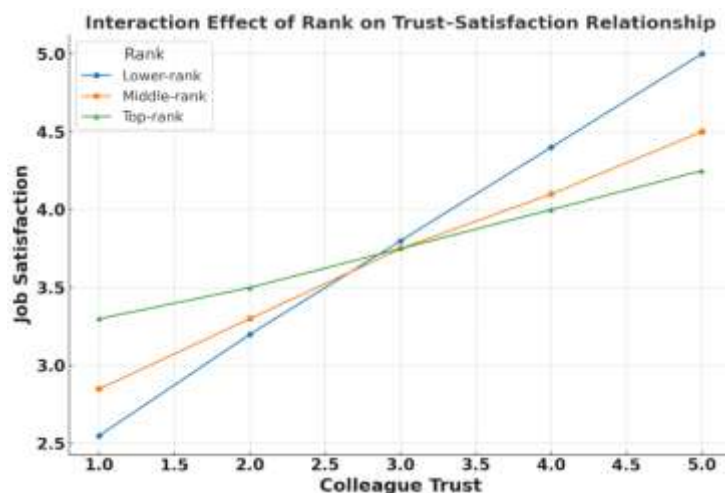


Figure 6. Interaction Effect of Rank on Trust-Satisfaction Relationship

6.3 Qualitative Insights from Open-ended Questions

The open-ended responses enriched the quantitative findings by revealing how officers perceived the role of trust in their everyday work. Thematic analysis identified three dominant themes: (a) trust as a basis for cooperation and emotional security, (b) gendered experiences of trust, and (c) rank-related barriers to trust.

Trust as a basis for cooperation and emotional security: Approximately 40% of respondents emphasized that trust among colleagues was central to their day-to-day duties and functions, shaping both performance and well-being. Officers described trust not only as instrumental for completing tasks but also as a source of emotional security, where personal concerns could be shared without fear of judgment. One officer noted, *"Knowing my partner has my back makes me feel more confident and satisfied with my duty."* Another explained, *"I can share everything with trusted colleagues-stress, mistakes, even family issues-and it reduces my pressure."* A third remarked, *"Trust reduces my stress more than any formal reward or recognition."*

Gendered experiences of trust: About 22% of respondents (mostly women) emphasized that gender shaped how trust was formed and sustained. Female officers often reported greater ease in trusting other women than men, citing empathy and mutual understanding as drivers of stronger bonds. One female officer commented, *"I trust my female colleagues more; they understand the challenges I face."* Another stated, *"It takes double the effort for me to prove to men that I can be trusted in fieldwork."* A male officer acknowledged this pattern, noting, *"Female officers tend to support each other more, while men sometimes hesitate to rely on them."* These insights complement the quantitative finding that the trust-satisfaction link was stronger among women.

Rank-related barriers to trust: Approximately 38% of respondents associated trust with hierarchical relationships, with many noting that rank barriers often inhibited open trust. Lower-rank officers stressed the importance of colleague trust for their daily survival and teamwork, whereas middle- and top-rank officers described trust as filtered through rules and responsibilities rather than personal connections. A constable stated, *"I depend on my colleagues every day, not just for support but for my safety."* In contrast, a middle-rank officer explained, *"Trust matters, but procedures and supervision often overshadow personal bonds."* A senior officer added, *"At my level, trust is shaped by responsibility and delegation rather than friendship."* These reflections mirror the regression results showing stronger effects of trust on satisfaction among lower-rank officers.

Illustrative Case Example 1 (Trust and Satisfaction): One female constable from Kerala offered a particularly telling account of how trust was experienced at the intersection of gender and rank. She described strong bonds with female colleagues, explaining, *"With female colleagues, I feel particularly at ease discussing both personal and professional challenges without fear, and I frequently receive their support."* However, she also noted that gender differences and hierarchical distance with male colleagues constrained openness with superiors and made it harder to build trust. *"When it comes to senior officers, I hesitate. Rank always creates a barrier; I feel they will not understand."* This vignette illustrates how trust can simultaneously provide satisfaction and emotional security in daily policing while being constrained by gendered perceptions and hierarchical boundaries.

Illustrative Case Example 2 (Trust and Dissatisfaction): In contrast, a male head constable from Tamil Nadu described how lack of trust generated frustration and dissatisfaction. He explained that in his unit, colleagues frequently withheld information or shifted blame, which eroded teamwork: *"When I cannot rely on my peers to be open or take responsibility, it makes my work twice as hard."* He further noted, *"Sometimes I feel that seniors do not trust us, and that makes me question why I should go the extra mile."* This account highlights how the absence of trust can undermine motivation and foster job dissatisfaction, particularly when combined with perceived mistrust from higher ranks.

Overall, the qualitative findings complement the statistical results by showing that while trust consistently enhances job satisfaction, its role is amplified for women and lower-rank officers. At the same time, lack of trust-whether between peers or across ranks-emerges as a potent source of dissatisfaction, underscoring the dual role of trust as both a buffer and a risk factor in South Indian policing.

7. Discussion

This study demonstrated that colleague trust is a strong predictor of job satisfaction among police officers in South India, with gender and rank significantly moderating the relationship. The qualitative insights further underscored how trust and distrust shape officers' psychological, social, and professional experiences. Together, the findings extend prior research by situating trust within the cultural, gendered, and hierarchical realities of Indian policing.

7.1 Trust and Job Satisfaction (H1)

The first hypothesis (H1), which predicted a positive association between colleague trust and job satisfaction, was supported. Officers who reported higher levels of trust also demonstrated higher satisfaction scores, consistent with prior organizational research (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2007).

The results reaffirm that colleague trust strongly predicts job satisfaction. Trust enhances satisfaction not merely by ensuring reliability in task performance, but through multiple psychological and practical mechanisms. A central pathway is the creation of psychological safety: officers who trust their colleagues worry less about judgment or betrayal, feel freer

to admit mistakes, and are more willing to share innovative ideas. This sense of safety lowers chronic stress and burnout, while fostering learning and growth-both of which are intrinsically rewarding. Trust also creates a stronger sense of belonging, allowing officers to feel supported and socially integrated in an otherwise demanding environment.

Equally important, trust underpins collaboration and team performance. Officers with high trust in colleagues communicate more openly and coordinate more effectively, reducing the need for micromanagement and allowing teams to operate with greater autonomy. This leads to smoother workflows and successful achievement of shared goals, which officers described as deeply satisfying. For example, officers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where community policing programs like *Janamaithri* and *Friends of Police* encourage peer cooperation, may particularly experience this link between trust and satisfaction in their daily functions. Trust operates within the logic of Social Exchange Theory (SET): when colleagues extend reliability and support, officers feel obligated to reciprocate with loyalty and commitment, reinforcing a cycle of positive relations and morale. In the Indian policing context-where formal institutional supports are often insufficient-trust effectively transforms the workplace from a guarded, high-stress environment into a supportive professional community, thereby fostering satisfaction.

Theoretically, this finding strengthens the claim that trust functions not only as an instrumental predictor of performance but also as a psychosocial buffer against dissatisfaction in high-stress occupations. By showing that trust provides both operational reliability and emotional security, this study extends organizational psychology models of trust into the policing context, where its role is amplified by chronic stress and institutional gaps.

7.2 Gender as Moderator: Trust as Emotional and Social Security (H2a)

The second hypothesis (H2a), which proposed that gender would moderate the trust-satisfaction relationship, was supported. Trust had a significantly stronger positive effect on job satisfaction for female officers compared to male officers. Figure 5 revealed a crossover interaction: at low levels of trust, female officers reported lower satisfaction than male officers, but as trust increased, their satisfaction rose more sharply, eventually surpassing that of their male counterparts. This indicates that female officers are more adversely affected by low-trust environments yet gain disproportionately greater satisfaction when trust is high.

The finding highlights the gendered dimensions of workplace trust in Indian policing. Women in policing often face role incongruity - a mismatch between societal expectations of femininity and the authoritative demands of policing (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Female officers reported greater ease in trusting other women, citing empathy, mutual understanding, and shared challenges as bases for strong bonds. In contrast, building trust with male colleagues was described as requiring “double the effort,” reflecting the persistence of patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, and gender inequality in Indian institutions (Rai & Srivastava, 2020).

Trust for female officers thus functions as both emotional security and social security. Emotionally, it provides a safe space to confide stressors without fear of dismissal, reducing psychological strain. Socially, it compensates for exclusion from male-dominated informal networks by creating peer alliances that offer support and validation. Officers emphasized that trust from female peers enhanced their confidence, morale, and satisfaction. This finding resonates with international research on gendered trust in policing (Morash & Haarr, 2012) but adds an Indian perspective: trust for women not only facilitates teamwork, it also acts as a lifeline in navigating patriarchal organizational cultures, explaining why its impact on satisfaction is disproportionately stronger among female officers.

Theoretically, this suggests that trust cannot be treated as a gender-neutral construct. Instead, it must be understood as socially embedded and gender-contingent, with amplified consequences for women working in male-dominated environments. This extends both trust theory and feminist organizational scholarship by illustrating how patriarchal structures mediate the meaning and outcomes of trust.

7.3 Rank and Hierarchical Barriers to Trust (H2b)

The third hypothesis (H2b), which predicted that rank would moderate the trust-satisfaction relationship, was also supported. The association between trust and satisfaction was strongest for lower-rank officers and weakest for top-rank officers.

This reflects the collective solidarity of frontline policing. Lower-rank officers, often from modest educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, work in teams where survival, safety, and daily effectiveness depend heavily on peer support. Their constant proximity and interdependence foster stronger bonds of trust, which directly enhance job satisfaction.

By contrast, middle-rank officers occupy ambiguous positions, caught between directives from seniors and demands from subordinates. Their roles often involve supervision, evaluation, and conflict management, which strain peer relations and reduce trust. For top-rank officers, trust plays a diminished role because their authority is derived from formal hierarchy and bureaucratic processes rather than interpersonal bonds (Jauregui, 2016). These officers, who are generally better educated and socially privileged, operate within institutional structures that substitute for relational trust. In states such as Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, where political interference in postings is common, hierarchical barriers may be even sharper, limiting open colleague trust. The moderation effect, therefore, illustrates how hierarchical stratification

shapes trust, with the strongest reliance and value placed at the lower ranks where officers are most vulnerable and dependent on colleagues.

Theoretically, these findings advance trust research by showing that its effects are not uniform across organizations but vary by positional authority and structural location. Trust at lower ranks functions as a vital resource, while at higher ranks its salience diminishes due to reliance on bureaucratic authority. This suggests that theories of trust must incorporate organizational hierarchy and stratification to fully capture its dynamics.

7.4 Consequences of Distrust: Dissatisfaction and Well-being

Although not part of the formal hypotheses, qualitative insights revealed that distrust among colleagues actively generates job dissatisfaction. Officers described experiences of withheld information, blame-shifting, inter-personal friction or lack of support, all of which eroded confidence and morale. Distrust intersected with gender and rank: female officers feared betrayal or exclusion from male colleagues, while lower-rank officers expressed disillusionment when seniors failed to support them.

The consequences of distrust extended beyond dissatisfaction to psychological, social, and health outcomes. Officers linked distrust to heightened stress, isolation, and resentment. Over time, this undermined team cohesion, produced defensive work cultures, and increased vulnerability to burnout and mental health issues such as anxiety and fatigue. These findings echo Cook and Wall's (1980) argument that distrust is not merely the absence of trust but an organizational toxin that corrodes satisfaction and cohesion. In South India, distrust takes different forms across states: in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, officers pointed to strained gender dynamics in male-dominated units, while in Telangana and Karnataka, distrust was often linked to rank hierarchies and favouritism in postings. By compounding external pressures like political interference and public criticism, distrust undermines both individual well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Job dissatisfaction among officers in South India produces cascading effects across the individual, professional, and organizational levels. At the individual level, dissatisfaction manifests in heightened stress, fatigue, and reduced resilience-issues particularly pronounced among constables who carry the heaviest workload. Professionally, dissatisfied officers may disengage, show irritability toward the public, or reduce their initiative in law-and-order duties, weakening service delivery. At the organizational level, dissatisfaction erodes morale within stations, increases attrition intentions, and can amplify public mistrust of the police. Unlike in several North Indian states, where police presence is more visible and politically reinforced, South Indian forces operate with greater public expectation of professionalism and responsiveness; dissatisfaction, therefore, risks more immediate reputational consequences for the institution.

Theoretically, this underscores that distrust must be studied as a distinct construct with unique consequences, not simply as the inverse of trust. By showing how distrust compounds the systemic stressors of Indian policing, this study contributes to trust scholarship by highlighting the dual poles of trust and distrust as separate yet equally influential in shaping satisfaction and well-being.

7.5 Policy Reforms

To strengthen trust and satisfaction within South Indian police organizations, reforms must address both structural and cultural barriers. First, moving away from colonial-era policing traditions is crucial. Hierarchical and command-driven approaches should be replaced with collegiality, procedural fairness, and service orientation, which can enhance esprit de corps and professionalism. Second, structured training and peer-support mechanisms are essential. Modules on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, job contentment, and stress management should be integrated into police academies, alongside mentoring and debriefing programs, particularly to support women and frontline officers. These interventions can normalize vulnerability, encourage solidarity, and improve resilience. Third, cultivating a culture of trust requires transparent promotions, fair postings, and recognition of teamwork. Encouraging collaboration across ranks and reducing unnecessary competition can embed trust as a core organizational value, especially in linguistically and culturally diverse states. Finally, policy-level measures should reinforce welfare, inclusivity, and accountability. Expanding duty-hour regulations, family-friendly practices, and anti-harassment mechanisms will support officer well-being. At a structural level, flattening excessive hierarchies and reducing politicization of postings are critical to building both internal trust and public confidence. By consolidating these reforms, South Indian police forces can enhance officer satisfaction while strengthening institutional legitimacy.

7.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, its cross-sectional design prevents causal claims; longitudinal studies are needed to test whether trust consistently leads to greater job satisfaction over time. Second, the use of a non-probability sample across the five South Indian states limits generalizability. Future studies should employ probability-based designs and extend comparisons to North India and the North-East, where policing contexts differ significantly. Third, reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias; mixed-method approaches combining surveys, interviews, and observational data would provide stronger validity. Fourth, the study focused only on colleague trust, while other forms of trust (in supervisors, institutions, or the community) may also shape satisfaction-an

avenue for future research. Finally, other salient variables in South India, such as caste, religion, and language diversity, were not explored and warrant systematic attention in future studies.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between colleague trust and job satisfaction among police officers in the five South Indian states-Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana. The findings confirmed that trust significantly enhances satisfaction, while distrust contributes to dissatisfaction, stress, conflicts and disengagement. Importantly, the effects of trust were strongest for female officers, reflecting gendered vulnerabilities in a patriarchal profession, and for lower-rank officers, whose daily tasks demand close peer reliance.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative insights highlighted trust not only as an operational necessity but also as a form of emotional and social security, particularly for those at the margins of rank and gender hierarchies. Conversely, distrust emerged as a corrosive force, eroding morale and amplifying dissatisfaction. Theoretically, the study extends organizational psychology by showing that trust in policing must be understood as context-dependent, gender-contingent, and stratified by hierarchy. Practically, it underscores the need for South Indian police policy intervention and policymakers to invest in trust-building strategies through peer networks, transparent practices, and reforms that dismantle colonial hierarchical legacies. By situating trust within the everyday realities of South Indian policing, the study demonstrates that improving officer satisfaction is not only a matter of welfare but also of strengthening institutional effectiveness and legitimacy.

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