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The effect of moral intelligence on organizational trust and employee commitment within the framework of human resource management (Case study: Shiraz municipality)

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Abstract In today's public organizations, ethical competence of employees and managers is increasingly recognized as a driver of attitudinal outcomes, yet its role in strengthening trust and commitment especially in municipal settings remains underexplored. This study examines the effect of moral intelligence on organizational trust and employee commitment within a human resource management framework, and tests the mediating role of trust. Using an applied, descriptive–survey design, 380 valid questionnaires were collected from employees of Shiraz municipality and analyzed through structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Results revealed that moral intelligence significantly enhances organizational trust, which in turn fosters employee commitment; trust was found to partially mediate the relationship between moral intelligence and commitment. The findings suggest that investing in the ethical competencies of managers and employees is an effective human resource strategy for building trust and commitment in public institutions, offering practical guidance for recruitment, training, and performance-management policies in municipal organizations.

Keywords: Moral Intelligence, Organizational Trust, Employee Commitment, Human Resource Management, Shiraz Municipality.

1 Introduction

In contemporary public organizations particularly municipalities, which face a diversity of missions, stakeholders, and accountability pressures enhancing the moral capital of employees is of fundamental importance as a social driver of trust and a guarantor of the sustainability of employee commitment [1]. Moral intelligence, defined as the ability to distinguish right from

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wrong and to act in accordance with principles such as integrity, responsibility, respect, empathy, self-control, and forgiveness, reinforces the expectation that an actor is reliable, thereby nourishing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of organizational trust [2]. Trust, in turn, is one of the key mechanisms shaping the triad of affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment [3].

Despite the expansion of the literature on ethics and organizational behavior, the simultaneous and causal investigation of the chain linking moral intelligence, organizational trust, and employee commitment within the context of the Iranian public sector and urban management in particular remains limited and scattered, and has seldom been studied in the form of a testable hierarchical model. On this basis, the present study, drawing on survey data from the employees of the Shiraz municipality and within the framework of human resource management, seeks to explain and test the direct effect of moral intelligence on trust and commitment, as well as the mediating role of organizational trust. To this end, the constructs are conceptualized as reflective and at the second-order level, and their relationships are assessed through structural equation modeling with a partial least squares approach (PLS-SEM). On the one hand, this study attempts to fill the existing theoretical gap regarding the coherent linkage among ethics, trust, and commitment in the domain of urban governance; on the other, it aims to provide valid and reliable empirical evidence for designing interventions that invest in ethical competencies and trust-building mechanisms within the human resource management of municipalities.

The innovation of this research can be articulated at several levels theoretical, methodological, and applied. From a theoretical perspective, by integrating the three key constructs of moral intelligence, organizational trust, and employee commitment within a single causal hierarchical model, this study offers a coherent account of the mechanism through which ethics affects attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in organizations, thereby addressing the existing gap in the domestic literature concerning the simultaneous combination of these variables within the public sector. From a methodological perspective, the innovation of this research lies in the coherent application and reporting of up-to-date PLS-SEM indicators, going beyond traditional practices that rely solely on path coefficients and R^2. Specifically, discriminant validity assessment using the HTMT indicator alongside the classic Fornell–Larcker criterion, collinearity control through the VIF indicator at both the indicator and predictor-construct levels, reporting of the f^2 effect size for the strength of relationships, assessment of predictive evidence via Q^2, transparent specification of bootstrap settings with 5,000 resamples, and estimation of second-order constructs using the two-stage approach within a hierarchical model are all in line with current guidelines in the field. In Persian-language research within the domain of management, the reporting of predictor indicators such as Q^2 is observed in only a limited number of studies, and the critical details of bootstrapping are almost never explicated. This level of reporting constitutes an unprecedented and value-adding approach within the domestic context. Furthermore, focusing on the organizational context of the Shiraz municipality as an example of a public institution characterized by high occupational and structural diversity has created domestic value added for the field of human resource management within the Iranian public sector. Accordingly, while extending the theoretical boundaries at the intersection of ethics and organizational social capital, the present study offers an empirical, locally grounded model for explaining and improving employee trust and commitment through the development of moral intelligence.

Despite the theoretical importance of moral intelligence, its practical implications remain obscured within the operational landscape of Iranian municipal organizations. In the specific

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context of Shiraz Municipality, there have been anecdotal observations of fluctuating levels of employee engagement and challenges in maintaining a robust culture of organizational trust, which can stem from the complexities of public-sector management. The lack of a structured understanding of how ethical competencies influence the psychological contract between the municipality and its employees creates a gap in effective human resource management. Therefore, this study seeks to address this localized problem by investigating whether moral intelligence can serve as a strategic lever to stabilize trust and enhance commitment within this specific urban governance framework.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review to identify the research gap. Section 3 introduces the research modeling based on structural equation modeling. Section 4 presents the results of the case study. Finally, Section 5 provides conclusions along with suggestions for future research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Moral intelligence

Moral intelligence is defined as the mental capacity to distinguish right from wrong and to remain practically committed to ethical principles [4]. In other words, moral intelligence is the capacity through which an individual aligns their values, goals, and behaviors with universal human principles. This conceptual construct has also been discussed by researchers such as Lennick and Kiel. For this purpose, identified four main components of moral intelligence: integrity, responsibility, compassion/empathy, and forgiveness [5] in Building Moral Intelligence, also identified respect and self-control as two of the seven core indicators of moral intelligence, alongside empathy, conscience, kindness, tolerance, and fairness [6].

2.2 Organizational trust

Organizational trust refers to the confidence and positive expectations that employees have regarding the honesty, competence, and goodwill of one another, their managers, and their organization. Theoretical and empirical evidence supports the formulation of two distinct dimensions: cognitive trust and affective trust. McAllister's classic study operationalized and validated this distinction in workplace settings, showing that the two dimensions have different antecedents and outcomes [7]. Likewise, some researcher demonstrated that cognitive and affective trust in managers' professional networks are linked to different types of relationships and functions cognitive trust to economic-resource ties and affective trust to friendship ties [8]. This supports the genuine multidimensionality of the construct. Webber's research also found that the longitudinal development of these two dimensions differs and reported their unequal consequences for teamwork [9].

2.3 Employee commitment

Commitment is a psychological state that describes the nature of the employee's relationship with the organization and determines the likelihood of continued membership. This state is based on a three-component model consisting of affective commitment (emotional attachment to and identification with the organization), continuance commitment (awareness of the costs

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associated with leaving the organization), and normative commitment (a sense of obligation to remain), as defined and operationalized by [10]. Through a systematic review of organizational commitment research over the past decade, showed that the triad of affective, continuance, and normative commitment continues to serve as a valid basis for empirical and theoretical analyses [11]. Other recent research evidence also confirms these dimensions of organizational commitment [12]. Furthermore, through causal modeling of employee commitment, confirmed the differential effects of these three components and emphasized the validity and usefulness of the three-component model [13].

2.4 The relationship among moral intelligence, trust, and commitment

Based on the theoretical and empirical literature, moral intelligence, by sending signals of integrity and benevolence on the part of the actor, strengthens perceptions of their trustworthiness, and in this way contributes to the formation of trust in both its cognitive and affective forms. In the integrative model of trust, ability, benevolence, and integrity constitute the principal bases of trust judgments; therefore, enhancing ethical competencies should lead to improved trust [14], while the dual distinction between cognitive and affective trust and their differentiated functions in organizational cooperation has been empirically demonstrated [15]. Furthermore, meta-analyses and reviews of major studies show that trust especially trust in the leader is positively and significantly associated with desirable work attitudes, including employee commitment, and that part of the effect of supervisors' ethical characteristics and behaviors is explained through the mechanism of trust [16]. Local evidence also reinforces this chain. A field study in Iranian executive organizations showed that increasing managers' moral intelligence is associated with a significant growth in their trust-building dimensions [17]. Likewise, domestic academic studies have reported a positive relationship between moral intelligence and organizational trust, as well as the prominent role of trust in explaining attitudinal outcomes such as commitment [16-17]. In addition, recent findings that have directly tested the link between moral intelligence and commitment in structural models suggest the plausibility of the pathway moral intelligence, organizational trust, employee commitment [14].

2.5 Research gap

A review of the literature indicates that moral intelligence has a direct relationship with both organizational trust and employee commitment. In addition, organizational trust appears to play a mediating role in these relationships. However, although the importance of these variables has been acknowledged in prior Iranian studies, their simultaneous and integrated examination particularly in the public sector and especially in municipal organizations has received limited attention. Existing studies in municipal contexts have mainly focused on variables such as commitment and organizational justice, while the combined effects of moral intelligence and organizational trust on employee commitment have rarely been investigated within a unified framework. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the Shiraz Municipality. It aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how moral intelligence contributes to employee commitment through the mediating role of organizational trust. In doing so, the study offers a practical framework for strengthening

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ethical and social capital in urban human resource management. Based on the above mentioned, the hypothesis model is as follows:

H1: Moral intelligence has a positive and significant effect on organizational trust.

H2: Organizational trust has a positive and significant effect on employee commitment.

H3: Moral intelligence has a positive and significant indirect effect on employee commitment through organizational trust.

While existing literature has widely acknowledged the positive association between moral intelligence and employee commitment, the underlying psychological mechanism remains insufficiently explored. Most prior research treats these variables through simple direct-effect models, often overlooking the critical mediating role of organizational trust. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating how moral intelligence acts as a catalyst for trust which subsequently drives commitment within the complex, hierarchical environments of public municipal organizations. By employing a second-order hierarchical modeling approach, this study addresses this specific gap, providing a clearer understanding of the indirect path through which ethical competence translates into sustained employee commitment.

3 Methods

In terms of purpose, this study is applied in nature, and regarding its implementation, it adopts a descriptive-survey approach. Given the nature of the issue and the study's objective which is to examine the relationship between moral intelligence, organizational trust, and employee commitment within the context of urban management this research is classified as applied, as its findings can be utilized to enhance ethical and social capital within municipal organizations. Regarding data collection, the present study is a field research project where the necessary data were gathered through a questionnaire. Based on the study's data, the survey was conducted using a five-point Likert scale. The statistical population of the research comprised all employees of the Shiraz Municipality in 2024, totaling 7,000 individuals. The statistical population comprised all employees of Shiraz Municipality. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, a stratified random sampling approach was employed. The total population of 7,000 employees was categorized into different departments and administrative levels. Based on Cochran's formula, the minimum required sample size was calculated, and questionnaires were distributed proportionally across these strata to reflect the organizational structure accurately. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed to encourage honest responses. This sampling technique ensures better representation of the various strata of employees in the final sample. The data collection tools consisted of standard questionnaires for moral intelligence, organizational trust, and employee commitment. These tools were employed to measure the study's key variables, with respondents indicating their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale. For data analysis, the study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) approach. To test the significance of path coefficients as well as direct and indirect effects, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 iterations was utilized. Regarding the evaluation of model quality, reliability and validity indices were examined, including Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) for discriminant validity, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), as well as f^2 and Q^2 indices. This comprehensive approach enabled the simultaneous assessment of the relationships between the variables and the validity of the research model.

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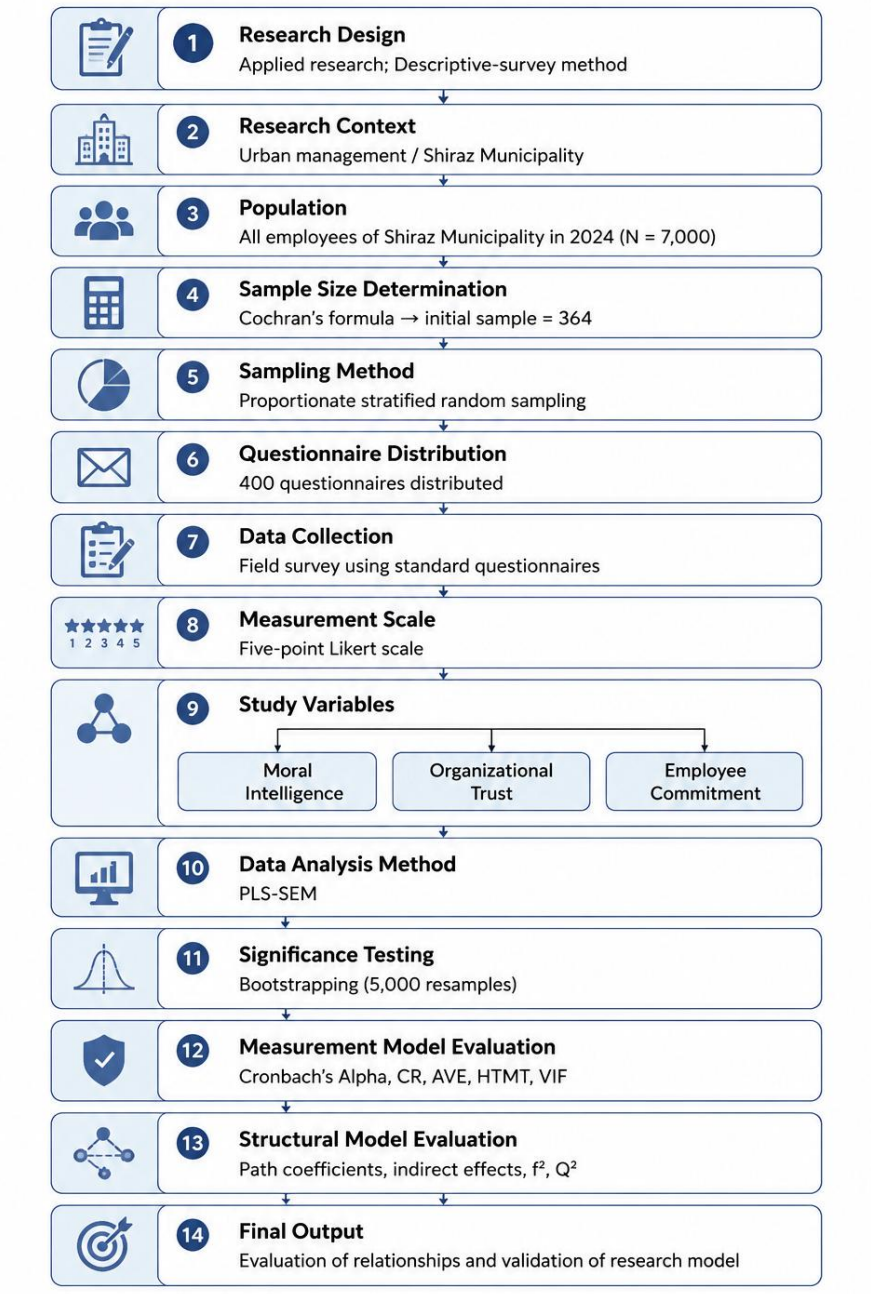

Fig. 1 Research methodology framework

4 Results

Out of the total sample size of 400 participants**,** 380 valid responses were obtained**.** 62% of the participants were male and 38% were female. The mean age of the respondents was 37.4 years. In terms of educational attainment, 49% held a bachelor's degree, 38% a master's degree, and 13% a Ph.D. degree. Regarding years of service, 41% had less than 10 years of work experience, 35% had between 10 and 20 years, and 24% had more than 20 years of service. This diversity provided an appropriate representation of the statistical population.

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Based on Table 1, the factor loadings of the items for all first-order dimensions ranged approximately from 0.75 to 0.90, and most loadings were above 0.70. Therefore, the indicators adequately represent their respective constructs, and initial convergent validity is confirmed.

Table 1 Factor loadings for first-order dimensions

Construct	Dimension	Factor Loading
Moral Intelligence	Integrity, Responsibility, Respect, Empathy, Self-Control, Forgiveness	0.75 – 0.90
Organizational Trust	Cognitive Trust, Affective Trust	0.75 – 0.90
Employee Commitment	Affective, Continuance, Normative Commitment	0.75 – 0.90

According to Table 2, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the first-order constructs ranged from approximately 0.89 to 0.94, while composite reliability (CR) ranged from approximately 0.92 to 0.95. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all dimensions was greater than 0.50, ranging from approximately 0.66 to 0.72. Accordingly, strong internal reliability and acceptable convergent validity were established for all first-order dimensions.

Table 2 Reliability and convergent validity (First-Order)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
First-Order Dimensions	0.89 – 0.94	0.92 – 0.95	0.66 – 0.72

Based on Table 3, for the three second-order constructs, Cronbach's alpha ranged from approximately 0.71 to 0.90, composite reliability (CR) ranged from approximately 0.87 to 0.92, and average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from approximately 0.67 to 0.78. This pattern supports measurement stability and adequate convergence at the second-order level.

Table 3 Reliability and convergent validity (Second-Order)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Moral Intelligence	0.71 – 0.90	0.87 – 0.92	0.67 – 0.78
Organizational Trust	0.71 – 0.90	0.87 – 0.92	0.67 – 0.78
Employee Commitment	0.71 – 0.90	0.87 – 0.92	0.67 – 0.78

The results of the Fornell–Larcker test in Table 4 show that the diagonal values for each construct (approximately ranging from 0.82 to 0.88) were greater than the inter-construct correlations (approximately ranging from 0.41 to 0.57). Therefore, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was satisfied.

Table 4 Fornell–Larcker criterion

Construct	Moral Intelligence	Organizational Trust	Employee Commitment
Moral Intelligence	0.82–0.88	-	-
Organizational Trust	0.41–0.57	0.82–0.88	-
Employee Commitment	0.41–0.57	0.41–0.57	0.82–0.88

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Furthermore, the HTMT criterion reported in Table 5 was below 0.85 for all construct pairs, ranging approximately from 0.49 to 0.71. Thus, discriminant validity was confirmed using both criteria.

Table 5 Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

Construct Pair	HTMT values
Moral Intelligence ↔ Organizational Trust	0.82–0.88
Moral Intelligence ↔ Employee Commitment	0.41–0.57
Organizational Trust ↔ Employee Commitment	0.41–0.57

4.1 Structural model assessment and hypothesis testing

According to Table 6, all three structural paths were positive and significant. The number of bootstrapping resamples was set at 5,000. The effect of moral intelligence on organizational trust was stronger in magnitude than the other paths. The effect of organizational trust on employee commitment was evaluated as moderate to relatively strong. The direct effect of moral intelligence on employee commitment was small to moderate, yet statistically significant. Therefore, the hypotheses regarding the direct effect of moral intelligence on organizational trust and the effect of organizational trust on employee commitment are supported. Moreover, given the simultaneous significance of the direct effect of moral intelligence on employee commitment, a partial mediation model for organizational trust is established.

Table 6 Structural model and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Moral Intelligence	Results	Interpretation
H1	Moral Intelligence → Organizational Trust	Supported	Strongest positive path
H2	Organizational Trust → Employee Commitment	Supported	Moderate to relatively strong positive path
H3	Moral Intelligence → Employee Commitment	Supported	Small to moderate but significant positive path
Mediation	Organizational Trust mediates the effect of Moral Intelligence on Employee Commitment	Partial mediation	Significant indirect effect alongside direct effect

According to Table 7, the coefficients of determination for the endogenous constructs ranged approximately from 0.29 to 0.32, indicating a moderate explanatory power of the model for both organizational trust and employee commitment.

Table 7 Coefficient of determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Organizational Trust	0.29–0.32	Moderate explanatory power
Employee Commitment	0.29–0.32	Moderate explanatory power

Based on Table 8, the effect size of the path from moral intelligence to organizational trust is classified as strong, while the effect of organizational trust on employee commitment is classified as moderate. Therefore, moral intelligence can be regarded as the primary driver of the formation of organizational trust, and trust itself is a significant driver of employee commitment.

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Table 8 Effect size (f^2)

Path	f^2	Interpretation
Moral Intelligence → Organizational Trust	Strong	Strong effect size
Organizational Trust → Employee Commitment	Moderate	Strong effect size

According to Table 9, the Q^2 values for both endogenous constructs were positive and ranged approximately from 0.27 to 0.31. Hence, the model demonstrates adequate predictive relevance and, beyond in-sample fit, shows acceptable out-of-sample predictive power. It should be noted that the purpose of the study was to explain the relationships among the indicators, and the examination of predictive power was beyond the scope of the research. From a practical perspective, this model suggests that enhancing the components of moral intelligence especially those with higher factor loadings strengthens the process of trust-building and, through this mechanism, reliably improves employee commitment.

Table 9 Predictive relevance of the model (Q^2)

Endogenous Construct	Q^2	Interpretation
Organizational Trust	0.27 to 0.31	Positive; indicates adequate predictive relevance
Employee Commitment	0.27 to 0.31	Positive; indicates adequate predictive relevance

The partial (rather than full) mediation suggests that while organizational trust is a key psychological channel through which moral intelligence fosters commitment, moral intelligence also retains a direct, independent influence on commitment. This coexistence of both pathways underscores the dual role of ethical competence as both a trust-builder and a direct driver of employee attachment offering a more nuanced picture than models positing full mediation.

5 Conclusion

The conclusions presented below should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study's design: they derive from cross-sectional, self-report data collected from employees of a single public organization (Shiraz municipality). Accordingly, they are best understood as evidence-based propositions about the moral intelligence–trust–commitment linkage in this specific context, rather than as definitive or universally transferable conclusions.

The findings of this study show that moral intelligence is the main driver of strengthening organizational trust and, through this path, enhancing employee commitment in Shiraz Municipality. The path coefficient from moral intelligence to organizational trust was estimated at 0.544, with a strong effect size of 0.469; the path coefficient from organizational trust to employee commitment was 0.419, with a moderate effect size of 0.158. The direct effect of moral intelligence on employee commitment was 0.184, and the indirect effect through organizational trust was 0.228 and significant, indicating partial mediation by organizational trust. The measurement model was evaluated as valid and reliable, and the structural model showed adequate explanatory and predictive power. In addition, according to the VIF index, there was no collinearity in the model. The findings suggest that investing in the development of moral intelligence dimensions particularly those with stronger empirical loadings may serve as a promising avenue for strengthening organizational trust and, in turn, employee commitment. However, given the cross-sectional and single-organization design, this proposition should be treated as a context-sensitive indication rather than a prescriptive,

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universally applicable recommendation, and warrants confirmation through longitudinal and multi-organizational studies. Accordingly, the results of the PLS-SEM analysis indicate that:

1. Moral intelligence has a positive and significant effect on organizational trust (β = 0.544).
2. Organizational trust has a positive and significant effect on employee commitment (γ = 0.419).
3. The indirect effect of moral intelligence on employee commitment through trust is significant (0.228), while the direct effect also remains significant (0.184); therefore, the results provide empirical support for a partial mediation pattern, although the coexistence of direct and indirect paths suggests that other unexamined mediators may also be at play.
4. All reliability and validity indices are within acceptable ranges, and the VIF results also show that the model is free from problematic collinearity.
5. The model has acceptable explanatory and predictive power, and the effect size of moral intelligence on organizational trust confirms the prominent role of ethics in generating social capital, namely trust.

From a theoretical perspective, integrating these three key constructs into a flexible hierarchical model provides a coherent picture of the mechanism through which ethics influences behavioral outcomes. From a scientific perspective, the findings indicate that organizational investment in developing the moral competencies of employees and managers is a lower-cost path to improving organizational trust and, consequently, employee commitment. The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research in the field of ethics and organizational behavior, while also showing some meaningful distinctions [10, 13, 15]. First, confirming the positive and relatively strong effect of moral intelligence on organizational trust in Shiraz Municipality is consistent with the mechanism proposed in [14] integrated model and with reports emphasizing the role of integrity, benevolence, and accountability in shaping beliefs about an actor's trustworthiness. In this way, it supports the generalizability of the theoretical foundations proposed by [10] and by [16] to the context of the Iranian public sector. On the other hand, the positive effect of organizational trust on employee commitment is consistent with [6] and with later research [15, 16], which identify trust as one of the main predictors of attachment to and retention in organizations. A comparison with indigenous studies also shows that the model obtained in this research is aligned with the findings of Nazaripour et al. [11] and Todorović et al. [15] in which the moral intelligence or ethical behavior of managers led to increased perceived trust and, subsequently, improved employee attitudinal indicators. However, the main distinction of the present study lies in the simultaneous measurement of all three constructs in a hierarchical structural model, the separation of the direct and indirect paths from moral intelligence to commitment, and testing this relationship in the municipal context. Thus, it can be regarded as a step toward localizing the relationships among moral intelligence, organizational trust, and employee commitment in Iranian public organizations.

Despite the theoretical and validity strength of the research model, the results of this study, like any empirical research, are subject to limitations that should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings. The data were collected at a single point in time and through self-report questionnaires. Therefore, causal inference and the determination of temporal precedence are not possible, and the risk of method bias and common source bias remains. Although PLS-SEM is useful for hierarchical models, there are serious debates regarding the estimation of reflective constructs and its interpretation as a latent-variable method [14]. Although the reported Q^2 index was positive, advanced out-of-sample prediction

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procedures such as PLSpredict based on holdout data were not used. The reason for not using this procedure was the research objective, which was explanatory rather than predictive. Therefore, this point should be kept in mind when interpreting the Q^2 results. The study was conducted in a public organization, namely Shiraz Municipality. Thus, generalizing the findings to other cities, levels of governance, or the private sector should be done with caution and with attention to contextual similarities.

The practical recommendations for municipal managers include designing and implementing competency-based training programs for the six dimensions of moral intelligence especially respect, integrity, and responsibility with pre- and post-assessment and individual feedback; incorporating ethical behavioral indicators into recruitment, performance appraisal, and promotion processes; developing key ethics indicators alongside key performance indicators; ensuring information transparency, accountability, and procedural justice, together with secure reporting channels for misconduct and clear codes of conduct for stakeholders; and developing training and coaching programs for middle managers with emphasis on cognitive and affective trust-building, as well as targeted interventions on affective commitment (such as job meaningfulness), continuance commitment (such as career advancement paths and retention benefits), and normative commitment (such as strengthening organizational identity and shared values). Finally, for future research, methodological suggestions include adding contextual variables such as organizational justice, identity, job attachment, and ethical leadership, and conducting multi-group analysis (MGA) to compare units and job levels; collecting data at multiple time points and from multiple sources (self-assessment, supervisor ratings, and peer ratings) to reduce common method bias and test the dynamics of organizational trust and employee commitment; retesting the dimensions of moral intelligence in different cultural contexts and assessing temporal reliability over six-month periods; and using PLS predict and comparing prediction errors with benchmark linear models to assess predictive performance in human resource decisions.

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