

REVIEW ARTICLE

FAVOURITISM IN THE WORKPLACE: A REVIEW OF ITS CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT - This review is a synthesis of contemporary literature between 2020 and 2024 to explore the causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies associated with workplace favouritism. It identifies key drivers of workplace favouritism, including interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and leadership styles, which contribute to inequitable resource distribution, discriminatory practices, and the formation of in-groups and out-groups within organisations. The findings highlight significant consequences, such as reduced job satisfaction, heightened employee cynicism, and diminished organisational citizenship, ultimately undermining organisational effectiveness. Some potential mitigations in addressing these issues include enhancing transparency, adopting merit-based systems, and leveraging emerging technologies, which can potentially help organisations foster fairness and trust. Future research should examine cultural and demographic variations in perceptions of favouritism and explore innovative frameworks for promoting equity in diverse workplaces.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Favouritism in the workplace refers to the practice whereby managers treat certain employees more favourably than others based on personal affinity rather than objective performance, which often undermines perceptions of fairness within the organisation (Bellow, 2003; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The recent interest in workplace favouritism stems from the growing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across organisations, which is received positively by the majority of a recently surveyed workforce by the Pew Research Center (Minkin, 2023). The rise of remote working post-COVID-19 has also altered perceptions on favouritism with instances of managers unintentionally favouring employees they interact with more frequently in person. Such a phenomenon is sometimes referred to as ‘hushed hybrid’ (Jackson, 2024), which also involves the selective enforcement of return-to-office policies. The manifestation of favouritism at the workplace is also seen to be increasingly subtle, taking shape in the forms of unfair task distribution or double standards in treatment (Boatman, 2023).

Considering these emerging trends on workplace favouritism, this review aims to synthesise existing knowledge on the topic, identify pertinent trends across the literature, and highlight potential contributions to both theory and practice. To achieve this objective, the review is guided by three questions: (1) What are the primary causes of workplace favouritism? (2) How does favouritism impact employee outcomes and organisational performance? (3) What strategies have been proposed or implemented to mitigate its effects? These questions shape the structure of this review, primarily focusing on research papers relevant to the topic. In addition to identifying causes, impact, and mitigation strategies, the findings of this review can also indicate significant gaps across the literature, which may shape future research directions of the continuously evolving subject.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Several theories form the theoretical foundation to discuss the causes of favouritism at the workplace. The equity theory (Adams, 1963) suggests that individuals seek fairness in social exchanges and compare their respective effort-reward ratios with others. In the context of workplace favouritism, inequity arises when employees perceive preferential treatments for certain individuals including decisions on promotions or assignments; especially when it is not based on merit (Hatfield et al., 2022; Inegbedion et al., 2024). This perception can lead to dissatisfaction, decreased morale, and reduced productivity as employees feel undervalued and unfairly treated (Davlembayeva et al., 2021; Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024; Pearce & Wang, 2024). The social exchange theory (Blau, 2017) posits that relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges of trust, support, or rewards. Workplace favouritism can disrupt these exchanges by creating imbalances through the favouring of one group or individual over others (Chen & Ren, 2023). When employees perceive that recognitions are distributed based on favouritism, it undermines trust, potentially leading to disengagement or resentment (Ali et al., 2022).

Power dynamics explains how the distribution and exercise of power in organisations can lead to preferential treatment to different parts or individuals within the workforce (French & Raven, 1959). Recent exploration on this linkage includes an observation of ‘microinequity’ within power dynamics, which comes to life in discrimination and aggression and negatively affects performance (Murugas & Maharaj, 2024). Power dynamics can also grow in complexity, especially when other factors come into the picture, such as a reporting line that involves more experienced subordinates within the control of a younger superior (Williams & Del Rio, 2024). It can also manifest in a gender-based form at the workplace as prevailing perceptions on the role of different genders set their expectations (Lee, 2023).

Another theory relevant to workplace favouritism is leader-member exchange (LMX), which focuses on the differentiated relationships between leaders and their subordinates (Dansereau et al., 1975). Within the LMX model, favouritism occurs when in-groups (i.e., favoured employees) enjoy higher levels of trust, support, and access to resources, while out-groups (i.e., unfavoured employees) receive less attention and fewer opportunities (Yang et al., 2021). Favouritism is said to develop over time, stemming from a leader-subordinate encounter that evolves into eventual receipt of partial treatment (Chou et al., 2024). The presence of favouritism can also undermine the positive outcomes that emerge in an organisation, undoing the favourable impacts of authentic leadership (Lianidou, 2021). Furthermore, leader favouritism can indirectly drive employee ostracism through jealousy, with organisation-based self-esteem moderating the impact within complex organisational dynamics (Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024). Table 1 presents the key theories relevant to workplace favouritism that are discussed in this section.

Table 1. Overview of theories relevant to workplace favouritism

Theory	Description	Relevance to Workplace Favouritism
Equity Theory	Individuals compare their input-output ratios with others to determine equity or inequity (Adams, 1963).	Favouritism disrupts fairness, leading to dissatisfaction, decreased morale, and organisational conflict.
Social Exchange Theory	Relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges of resources like trust, rewards, or support, emphasising mutual benefit (Blau, 2017).	Favouritism undermines trust and reciprocal relationships, fostering disengagement and resentment in the workplace.
Power Dynamics	Power is distributed and exercised in organisations, influencing relationships and decision-making processes (French & Raven, 1959).	Power imbalance enables favouritism, with leaders leveraging authority to favour specific employees and marginalise others.
Leader-Member Exchange	The quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates can differ between in-groups (favoured) and out-groups (Dansereau et al., 1975).	Preferential treatment by leaders creates inequities, affecting team dynamics, morale, and perceptions of fairness.

3. METHODOLOGY

This review adopts a thematic analysis approach to synthesise, assess, and evaluate contemporary literature on workplace favouritism. The method aims to identify and analyse patterns within the literature, focusing on over 60 studies published between 2020 and 2024. The analysis is structured around the guiding research questions to explore the causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies of favouritism in organisational settings. The literature search involved a systematic process using electronic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar with keywords including ‘favouritism’, ‘workplace bias’, and ‘meritocracy’. To ensure its relevance, the selected literature was limited to studies addressing favouritism in workplace settings, articles examining its causes, impacts or mitigation strategies, and review studies offering significant insights into the topic.

The thematic analysis followed a multi-step process to ensure a rigorous synthesis of the findings. Figure 1 illustrates the thematic analysis process and provides an overview of the analytical stages, from literature selection to theme identification and synthesis. While this thematic review provides meaningful insights, it is limited by the reliance on secondary data and a focus on recent literature. Future studies may benefit from incorporating longitudinal data and primary research to explore evolving trends and validate the findings further.

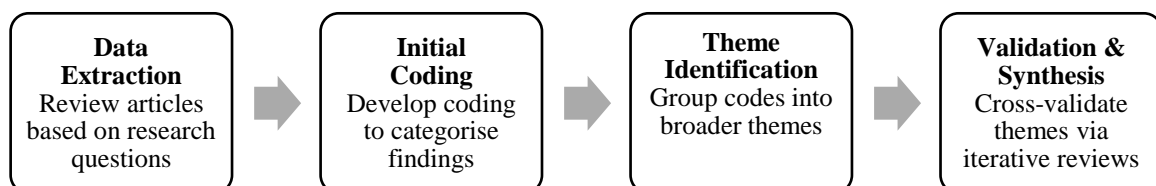


Figure 2. Thematic analysis approach to literature review

4. FINDINGS

4.1 *Causes of Workplace Favouritism*

Previous literature has suggested a diverse range of factors causing workplace favouritism. Friendship can be a reason for favouritism to fester at the workplace and serves as a source of bias, negatively impacting trust, satisfaction, and commitment among employees (Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024; Pearce & Wang, 2024). While workplace friendship can foster collaboration, psychological safety, and creative output, there are also real risks of favouritism, gossip, and nepotism (Ghosh, 2021). Therefore, careful management is required by leaders to ensure equitable benefits among teams (Hamilton et al., 2023). Furthermore, friendship can act as a stressor due to its conflicting roles, leading to negative emotions and withdrawal behaviours (Wang et al., 2023). Social connections are another cause of workplace favouritism as it can lead to leaders showing preferential treatment to employees whom they are socially connected with, leading to potential discrimination against other groups of employees (Mohamad Yusof & Puteh, 2020).

While the impact of workplace friendship on favouritism is evident, its influence often varies across cultural and organisational settings. In collectivist cultures, workplace friendship often aligns with social norms that emphasise group harmony and loyalty, potentially leading to increased tolerance for favouritism based on personal ties (Bedi, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Masuda et al., 2020). In contrast, individualistic cultures prioritise personal achievements and autonomy, resulting in stronger negative perceptions of favouritism stemming from such relationships (Narayanan & Moon, 2023; Xu et al., 2020). Exploring these differences provides an understanding of how workplace friendship influences favouritism, enabling organisations to tailor mitigation strategies effectively to their unique cultural and structural contexts. By acknowledging the impact of cultural dimensions, organisations can also develop more effective DEI strategies (Bernstein et al., 2020; Stanford, 2020).

Further to friendship and social ties, family connections or nepotism can also drive favouritism at the workplace, both in the public and private sectors, especially by disregarding merit and qualifications that leads to perceptions of unfairness (Akbari et al., 2020; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020; Lasisi et al., 2022). While organisational climate is shaped by diverse factors such as leadership behaviour, communication, and relationships, nepotism and favouritism are more narrowly linked to insecurity and tolerance of shared interests, which might stem from kinship (Vveinhardt & Bendaraviciene, 2022; Vveinhardt & Sroka, 2020). Extending upon relationship factors, leadership style can mediate the effects of favouritism whereby autocratic leaders may amplify favouritism while democratic ones are able to manage the negative aspects arising from it (Mohamad Yusof & Puteh, 2020). Favouritism is also seen to evolve with other leadership traits like marginalisation, nepotism, and cronyism, which can impact overall employee performance (Arici et al., 2020; Saeed, 2023).

The factors discussed above are indicators of how personal relationships can influence professional judgement and decision-making, especially when friendship or family relationships are involved. These factors are compounded by specific leadership styles adopted by leaders at the workplace, specifically on how autocratic and democratic leaders might react to these conflict situations differently. These findings from recent literature on how prevailing relationships impact favouritism at the workplace appear to be consistent with those reported in earlier decades (Dickie, 2009; Lasisi et al., 2022).

4.2 *Consequences of Workplace Favouritism*

One immediate impact of workplace favouritism is decreased trust and commitment (Pearce & Wang, 2024). The feeling of being ostracised leads to employees distancing themselves from the firm further, which can also stem from the feeling of being unfavoured resulting from power dynamics, personal interests, and incompetence (Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024; Sakçak et al., 2023). Concurrently, employee trust levels are also moderated by factors such as high-involvement work practices and organisational politics (Mehmood et al., 2023). In this regard, there is a strong emphasis for managers to address nepotism perceptions to improve trust within the workforce, ultimately improving overall organisational performance (Topsakal et al., 2024). Consequentially, the morale and overall job satisfaction of employees are also affected, which can demotivate and lead them towards decreased job performance and the feeling of alienation (Pearce & Wang, 2024). While authentic leadership can enhance job satisfaction, positional favouritism poses the risk of undermining these effects, increasing turnover intentions, and hindering staff performance (Akuffo & Kivipöld, 2021; Arubayi, & Eruvbedede (2022). As favouritism can lead to discrimination, there is also potential for gender or religion prejudices that negatively correlate with job satisfaction, particularly in areas like supervision; conversely, audits can enhance job satisfaction (Thapa & Niraula, 2024; Yavuz et al., 2020).

Workplace favouritism will also increase cynicism and withdrawal, which is believed to be more pronounced in women as they experience a stronger impact of such a situation (Abubakar et al., 2017). These experiences can culminate into both psychological and emotional distress, including feelings of jealousy and bitterness (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023; Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024). One unfortunate impact of these negative feelings is how it can undermine the positive effects of authentic leaders who allude positivity at the workplace, leading to reduced organisational citizenship or sense of belonging and disidentification with the firm (De Clercq et al., 2024; Rusinowska & Vergopoulos, 2020). As a significant emotional consequence of favouritism, jealousy often varies depending on employees' roles or levels within the workplace. For instance, junior employees may feel heightened jealousy when observing preferential treatment in promotions as these outcomes directly impact their career progression and financial stability (Andiappan & Dufour, 2020;

Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024). Mid-level managers, in contrast, may experience jealousy tied to perceived inequities in resource allocation or opportunities for visibility with senior leadership (Andiappan & Dufour, 2020; Bani-Melhem et al., 2023). At the executive level, jealousy might stem from peer comparisons, particularly when leaders compete for strategic influence or recognition (Liu et al., 2021). Understanding these role-specific dynamics provides deeper insights into how favouritism impacts employees differently and highlights the importance of tailored interventions to address such emotions.

The diverse impacts of workplace favouritism discussed above appear to cover a wide range of aspects regarding workplace dynamics, including trust and emotional well-being. These occurrences might be amplified in recent years due to better awareness across the workforce on the need to be inclusive as a result of the COVID-19 experience (Ignatowski et al., 2021; Lasisi et al., 2022). Further, the influence of favouritism on the positive environment created by authentic leadership is also a risk imposed by the phenomenon. As such, the benefits of favourable organisational culture can also be at risk of eroding should favouritism is not curbed in a timely manner (Çakır & Doğan, 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The prevalence of favouritism in the workplace remains a pressing issue that significantly impacts employee trust, morale, and organisational effectiveness. Addressing favouritism is crucial not only for fostering a fair and inclusive work environment but also for ensuring the sustainability of organisations. By tackling this pervasive issue, companies can enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover, and build strong and resilient teams. This review has highlighted several key findings on how favouritism undermines employee trust and organisational commitment, leading to decreased job satisfaction and productivity. Specific factors, such as leadership styles, organisational culture, and the lack of transparent policies, have been identified as key contributors to workplace favouritism. To combat favouritism, organisations must prioritise fair and equitable practices. This includes establishing clear policies for recruitment, promotions, and appraisals. Further, there is room to explore opportunities to leverage technology to reduce bias and implement regular training on ethical leadership. Fostering an open and inclusive organisational culture where employees feel valued and heard is paramount. Leaders must recognise the long-term benefits of fairness and equity as these not only enhance employee well-being but also drive organisational success.

While favouritism at the workplace can significantly impact the overall workforce harmony, several strategies can be adopted to address the situation. Increased transparency, especially in key processes such as promotion or mobility can reduce the negative perceptions of favouritism; which also includes clearer communication on decision-making criteria (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023; Martins et al., 2023; Pearce & Wang, 2024). Another relevant strategy is periodic review and audit of these processes to enhance fairness and transparency continuously (Martins et al., 2023; Pearce & Wang, 2024). In addition to increased transparency, accountability reinforcements are also critical to mitigate favouritism. This can come in the form of rigorous appraisal process, which requires evidence and proof of deliverables to mitigate biased assessment (Bauch & Weissenberger, 2020). To address potential favouritism in appraisals, action items that can be taken include enforcing clear and observable tasks and targets to ensure fairness and genuine motivation, including clear benchmarks for fair and motivational rewards (Etalong et al., 2022; Khosrowtaj et al., 2024; Opute, 2020).

These practices can also be coupled with anti-favouritism policies that can be implemented groupwide (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). Similarly, merit-based systems (e.g., recruitment or promotion) can enhance fairness and trust while upholding objectivity across the relevant processes (Bauch & Weissenberger, 2020; Joseph & Alhassan, 2023; Martins et al., 2023). It needs to be acknowledged, however, that policy changes can be challenging given its interdependencies with cultural and common practices (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2021). To strengthen these effort, training and awareness are several interventions that can be introduced to raise awareness on the importance of meritocracy, shape the culture, and discourage favouritism, ultimately strengthening collaboration between management and employees (De Clercq et al., 2024; Joseph & Alhassan, 2023; Pearce & Wang, 2024). With these efforts, there is a higher likelihood of avoiding unfavoured practices, such as biased interviews or merit-based recruitment (Çelik & Razi, 2023).

There is a wide array of solutions that can be adopted and implemented by organisations in mitigating workplace favouritism. The interventions of policies, processes, and systems, while practical, require the critical influence of proper employee adoption to ensure full success. In this regard, change management strategies must be properly shaped so that all angles are taken into consideration, namely employee expectations, leader-follower dynamics, and leadership by example from top management (Bachmann et al., 2024; Harikkala-Laihin, 2022). Table 2 presents five potential opportunities on how different sources and impacts of workplace favouritism can be potentially mitigated. In conclusion, addressing favouritism is not merely an ethical imperative but a strategic necessity for organisations striving to achieve excellence in today's competitive and diverse work environment. By committing to transparency and equity, organisations can create workplaces where every employee has the opportunity to thrive.

Table 2. Potential mitigations of different sources of workplace favouritism

Source	Impact	Mitigation
Friendship and social connection	Decreased employee trust and commitment	Transparent policies for work practices
Family ties / nepotism	Reduced morale and job dissatisfaction	Regular reviews of process to enforce fairness
Leadership style	Increased cynicism and feeling ostracised	Training on ethics and unconscious biases
Organisational culture	Undermining of organisational citizenship	Adoption of a merit-based system for key decisions
Power dynamics	Marginalisation of employees	Usage of AI-driven tools to ensure objectivity

5.1 Practical Implications

There appears to be strong demand for better transparency across organisations on processes that are prone to risk of favouritism (Chaudhary, 2023; Theodorsson et al., 2024). In this regard, there is a requirement for clear and standardised policies relating to hiring, promotion, and task allocation or mobility (Akuffo & Kivipöld, 2021). One desired outcome arising from this effort is enhanced perception towards fairness and improvement of trust level across the workforce. These elements are also critical to ensure long-term employee retention by the organisation.

Based on the sources highlighted, there is a significant need to reinforce how favouritism happens at the workplace, either consciously or otherwise (Mohd Shamsudin et al., 2024; Vveinhardt & Bendaraviciene, 2022). There is an opportunity to conduct training that facilitates upskilling on unconscious bias and ethical decision-making (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). Effective implementation of these interventions can equip leaders with the skills required to identify and mitigate favouritism towards a more inclusive workplace. The danger, however, is when training is done merely as a box-ticking exercise instead of a result-oriented intervention to ensure upskilling and real business impact does materialise.

With the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) at the workplace, there is also a good prospect of exploring how AI-driven human resource tools can ensure objectivity in business practices, such as recruitment, appraisals, and promotions (Capuano, 2023; Gull et al., 2023). The implementation of these frameworks offers a clear opportunity to reduce subjective biases and increase workforce confidence on organisational processes (Cao et al., 2023; Robert et al., 2021). While it is lauded for eliminating bias, recent adoption of AI in hiring has also been criticised for missing out talents due to full dependency on algorithmic decision-making, which is devoid of human assessment (Kelan, 2024; Peng et al., 2022).

5.2 Opportunities for Further Research

Several opportunities for further research were identified based on the gaps in the literature reviewed. In terms of sources of favouritism, there is potential for further investigation on how different underrepresented or multicultural groups perceive various sources of favouritism like friendship and social connections and how these perceptions differ across organisational levels (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020; Pearce & Wang, 2024). As for the impacts of favouritism, there is opportunity to conduct further study on the negative association between favouritism with employee trust and organisational commitment, especially as this factor influences their individual well-being and overall workforce sustainability (Lasisi et al., 2022; Pearce & Wang, 2024).

Concerning mitigations strategies, the proposition on effectiveness of transparency and merit-based practices at the workplace can always be refreshed and tracked across regions and industries (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023; Pearce & Wang, 2024). Within the same perspective, there are also limited research outputs relating to how policies can be the tool to mitigate favouritism while promoting fairness at the workplace (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020; Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). To extend further, there is also potential for research on how political ideology influences employee reactions towards favouritism, specifically on how group status moderates intergroup evaluations and favouritism (Essien et al., 2021; Palmeira & Sharifi, 2020).

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

The conceptualisation, design, and execution of this review, including data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation, is the sole work of the author.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

This study is based on the review of published literature. All data supporting the findings are available in publicly accessible academic journals and repositories as cited in the references.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with general ethical practices as guided by the ethical framework of Durham University.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest relevant to this study.

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