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## The effect of high performance work systems utilization on firm performance: does human resource attribution of employees matter?

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### ABSTRACT

A large body of research suggests that high performance work systems (HPWSs) that enhance employees' competencies, and motivate them, leads to competitive advantage. HPWSs are radically not 'new practices'; they have been around for many years and have already been adopted by various organizations. However, the link between HPWS adoption & firm performance is yet blurred. The aim of this paper was to examine the moderating role of employees' HR attributions on the relationship between adoption of HPWSs and firm performance. The current paper argues that human resource (HR) attribution of employees moderates the relationship between HPWS and firm performance such that the effective adoption of high performance work systems in an organization partly depends on the type of employees' attributions (commitment versus control) of HR practices in the company. More specifically, it is proposed that adoption of HPWS can be more effective in organizations where employees' attributions of HR practices is commitment focus than in firms where employees' attributions of HR practice is control focus. The study contributes to understanding the 'black box' of HRM-performance link. Theoretical and practical implications and future research directions are discussed.

### KEY WORDS

HPWS, HRM, performance, HR attribution

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since recent years, scholars have been suggesting that organizations may implement innovative workplace practices such as high performance work system (HPWS) to ensure competitiveness & survival. The assumption is that such practices contribute to performance (Huselid, 1995) via desirable employee attitudes and behavior such as increased employee satisfaction (Guest, 2002), organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007), and organizational commitment (Hislop, 2003), among others. As a systemic approach to human resource management (HRM) practice (Jiang & Liu, 2015), HPWS practices involve, among other things, employee participation, intensive training and development, intensive selection, pay for performance, and flexible work schedule (Shin, 2014). The goal of adopting HPWS is to increase firm's dynamic capability through internal and external alignments of human resource management practices (Chew & Chan, 2008). However, In spite of a great deal of attention devoted by previous researchers, the question of how and under what conditions HPWS contribute to firm outcomes is not yet fully addressed (Fu, Flood, Bosak, Morris, & O'Regan, 2015; Hur & Simyongbo, 2013).

The main convention of implementing certain HRM practices is that such practices develop employees' skills, knowledge, and motivation such that employees behave in ways that are instrumental for the implementation of particular firm strategy (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The resource based view argues that a pool of firm's human capital provides a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate (J. Barney, 1991). The guiding logic is that HRM practices are socially complex and intractably linked such that competitors cannot copy. More specifically, this complex process of value creation by HRM practices leads to a source of competitive advantage that is rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (J. Barney, 1991). That is, HRM practices contribute to firm performance by leveraging value of human capital, discretionary effort, and desired attitudes and behavior.

Strategic human resource researchers, who take the contingency perspective (Delery & Doty, 1996), argue that the effectiveness of HRM system is the function of organization specific situations (Youndt, Snell, Dean, & Lepak, 1996). For instance, early social psychologists, Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), argue that different leadership styles

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created different climates, which, in turn, led to different behavioral reactions and attitudes of members in a group. The guiding logic in Lewin and colleagues' work of situationalism was that social contexts as a potent force either constrains or enhances behavior at workplace.

Organizational climate, which refers to shared perception at firm level, is an appropriate construct for understanding how HRM practices influence performance (Schneider, 2000). This is because organizational climate helps to understand how employees collectively perceive organizational practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards. Organizational situations evolve from individual psychological and cognitive perceptions. For instance, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argue that individual psychological climates may emerge as a shared organizational climate, which, in turn, ultimately relates to organizational performance. Similarly, previous studies suggest that the effect of HR practices is not likely to be automatic and always as expected; instead, their effect will reside in the meanings that employees attach to those practices (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008). Therefore, how employees collectively perceive HRM practices may have important implications for understanding the HRM- performance link.

Previous research indicates that employee's attribution of why organizations implement HR practices may emerge as HR attribution climate, which refers to employees' collective perception of why a firm adopts certain HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008). Attribution is fundamentally concerned with how people infer casual relations and the characteristics of other people in the environment (Fiske and Taylor, 2013, Kelley, 1967). In other words, attribution is about how people explain the causes of events and make sense of their environments thereof (Kelley, 1973, Kelley, 1987). Furthermore, attribution theory argues that how people attribute the cause of events significantly affects their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Fiske and Taylor, 2013). The implication here is that employees' attribution of HR practices may affect performance. Yet, there is limited research that examines how employee attributions of HR practices affect firm performance (Garcia-Chas, Neira-Fontela, & Castro-Casal, 2014).

Given the research gap indicated in the preceding discussions, the present study, building on the extant literature, particularly drawing from attribution theory and social exchange theory, aims at formulating a theoretical framework to further understand the proverbial "black box" of HPWS- performance link (Nishii et al., 2008) focusing on the boundary conditions of HR attributions- employees' collective perceptions of why employers adopt HR practices. The researcher argues that the strength of the positive effect of HPWS adoption depends on the HRM climate as perceived by employees such that the more favorable (intended) the climate (e.g., commitment based HR attribution) the stronger the positive effect of HWPS implementation will be compared to the unfavorable (unintended) climate (control-focus HR practices) (Nishii et al., 2008).

The current study has a number of theoretical and practical contributions. First, it helps us to further understand the mysterious link between HR practices and organizational outcomes by exploring additional situational variables. More specifically, the present study makes a unique contribution to the literature in that it examines how organizational social settings, in this case HR attributions, influence the effective adoption of innovative workplace practices such as HPWS. Even though previous studies have examined several boundary conditions and causal mechanisms for the link between HR practices and performance, to my knowledge, none of those studies have explored the moderating role of HR attributions; however, a number of researchers have made a call for a study similar to this one (e.g., Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008).

Second, the application of attribution theory is limited in organizational research (Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, & Crook, 2014). This study, therefore, makes an addition to extant literature by exploring HR attribution as an organizational situation influencing organization performance by either inhabiting or enhancing successful implementation of HR practices, which, in turn, extends our understanding of attribution theory in organizational research endeavors.

Third, change is a constant phenomenon in organizations, and its successful implementation depends on the extent to which employees welcome the change and align their behavior with the firm's strategic goals. However, strategic HRM researchers argued that, collective employee perception that is either intended or unintended by the organization may emerge from individual perceptions of HR practices, which, in turn, depends on the extent of the strength of HR practices/systems. Hence, exploring how the link between HPWS and performance is affected by employee HR attributions, which refers to collective employee perceptions for the causes of HR practices adopted by the employer, is a vital information for HR practitioners and policy makers.

The present paper is organized as follows. First, I review and discuss the extant literature in pursuit of coming up with a theoretical framework and hypothesis. Subsequent to this section, I present, in detail, feature research direction, and theoretical and practical implications of the present paper. Lastly but not the least, summary and concluding remarks are presented.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### High Performance Work Systems and Firm Performance

The concept HPWS and its constituent practices have not been consistently and precisely defined in the literature (Patel, Messersmith, & Lepak, 2013). As described by Patel et al. (2013), HPWS refers to horizontally and vertically aligned HR practices aimed at influencing both the ability and motivation of employees. HPWS comprises bundle of HR practices with the goal of enhancing employee and organizational performance through human capital development and employee motivation (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Intensive training and development, performance based pay and benefits packages, merit based advancement, and extensive selection and staffing are commonly used in the literature to describe HPWSs (Arthur, 1992, Braekkan, 2012, Liu et al., 2009, Posthuma et al., 2013, Tregaskis et al., 2013). Utilization of HPWS practices has been believed to promote employee empowerment, participation, and autonomy in organizational decision making process (Arthur, 1992). As Patel et al. (2013) argued, the goal underlying HPWS involves attracting, retaining, and motivating human resources with the ultimate purpose of achieving organizational goals by establishing a fit between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of a person and the tasks duties and responsibilities required by a job. Scholars believe that employers, via HPWS, provide employees opportunity for training, promotion, involvement in decision making, compensation and job security, which enhances direct tangible benefits and socio emotional resources (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

According to strategic human research management view HRM practices develop employees' skills, knowledge, and motivation such that employees behave in ways that are instrumental to the implementation of particular strategy. For instance, resource based view (Jay Barney, 1991) argues that a pool of firm's human capital provides a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate (J. Barney, 1991). The guiding logic is that HRM practices are socially complex and intractably linked such that competitors cannot copy. More specifically, this complex process of value creation by HRM practices leads to a source of competitive advantage that is rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (J. Barney, 1991). Moreover, resource based view proposes that HRM practices contribute to firm performance by leveraging value of human capital, discretionary effort, and desired attitudes and behavior. In addition, it has been argued that HPWS increases firm value creation (Steigenberger, 2013). For similar studies see Gill and Meyer (2013), Godard (2004), Tregaskis et al. (2013), and White (2005).

At least over the last two decades, HPWS has attracted the attention of many researchers most of whom are interested in examining how HPWS affects performance. This line of research has led to the identification of several mechanisms and contexts which enabled us to understand how HPWS operates. For instance, Huselid (1995) acknowledged that HPWSs enhance company performance. Messersmith et al. (2011) examined how HPWSs influence performance and reported that HPWS practice is associated with enhanced levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, and organizational citizenship behaviors which ultimately cause improved performance. Furthermore, Tregaskis et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the performance effects of HPWSs and concluded that the implementation of HPWSs is associated with subsequent and sustained increases in productivity and safety performance. Similarly, recent studies have reported that HPWS adoption has positive effect on performance (Armstrong et al., 2010). The implication of these findings is that adopting HPWS practices would likely improve firm performance.

Research evidence also shows that the positive effect of HPWS utilization is robust across countries. For instance, Gimyunho (2015) found positive link between HPWS and performance in South Korean companies. The report has also indicated that strong HRM systems can strengthen the positive relationship between HPWS and performance. Similarly, Fu, Flood, Bosak, Morris, and O'Regan (2015), using data from 120 Irish accounting firms, concluded that HPWS enhance employee's innovative behavior, which, in turn, was found to improve professional service firms' innovation performance. In the same vain, Na (2014), using three years panel data in South Korea, found that implementation of HPWS enhances HR outcomes including employees' competencies, motivation, and retention, which, in turn positively enhances organizational outcomes such as labor productivity and sales per employee. Other studies have also demonstrated the positive effect of adopting HPWS on firm performance (e.g., annual sales, operating performance), and its negative effective on employee turnover (Hur & Simyongbo, 2013).

Strategic HRM researchers have also claimed that HPWS utilization is vital for firm competitive advantage. A seminal work by Patel et al. (2013) argued that HPWS enhances organizational ambidexterity, the ability of an organization to efficiently take advantage of existing market opportunities while creating and innovating to meet the challenges of future markets, which, in turn, leads to better HPWS utilization and firm growth. According to Pascual Ivars and Comeche Martinez (2015), HPWS has positive effect on performance of small businesses. HPWS utilizations is also associated with group level social capital (Jiang & Liu, 2015) that is enhances unit outcomes (Burt, 2009; Coleman, 1988). Using data from emerging firms, that is, high tech new ventures, Messersmith and Guthrie (2010), argued that sales growth and innovation are positively related to HPWS utilization by firms. In short, there is an evidence that adoption of HPWS facilitates innovation, growth, ambidexterity, and competitiveness.

According to previous recent studies, adoption of HPWS influences performance via its influence on employee attitudes and behavior. For example, Chiang, Shih, and Hsu (2014) claims that implementation of high commitment



work systems enhances new product development team's transactive memory system, which, in turn, is positively associated with new product performance. Other researchers also argued that HPWS exerts its positive influence on workplace outcomes via enhanced employees' attitudes and behavior (Pena, Sanchez de Pablo, Hernandez, & Villasalero, 2015). A study of 254 health professionals from large hospital in Australia evidenced strong positive effect of HPWS on clinician perceptions of quality of patient care through enhanced social identification, and psychological empowerment (Bartram, Karimi, Leggat, & Stanton, 2014). In the same vein, Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, and Gould-Williams (2011), using a large sample of Welsh public-sector employees, examined causal mechanism for the link between HPWS and performance and concluded that at department level utilization of HPWS is positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, and ultimately organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), which, in turn, enhances departmental performance. These studies reveal that the adoption of HPWS influences employee attitudes and behavior such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to stay, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which, in turn, positively influences individual and firm performance.

By the same token, survey of 155 engineers from 19 different companies and industries revealed that HPWS is positively associated with job satisfaction, procedural justice, and intrinsic motivation (Garcia-Chas et al., 2014). The same study evidenced that adoption of HPWS negatively influences intention to leave via increased job satisfaction.

In addition to examining the causal mechanisms by which HPWS influences workplace outcomes, previous empirical studies have examined contextual factors that may enhance or hinder effective utilization of HPWS practices. Those studies in general have evidenced that the strength of the relationship between HPWS and performance is contingent on several variables. For instance, Hur and Simyongbo (2013) have shown that cooperative industrial relations interact with HPWS to positively influence organizational outcomes. In other words, implementation of HPWS would be less effective in adversarial labor relations than in cooperative labor relations. Similarly, Choejangho (2012) examined the moderating role of the effectiveness of HRM practices in the HPWS-performance link and concluded that the association between HPWS and organizational performance depends on how effectively firms administer their HR practices. This is in line with Bowen and Ostroff (2004), who argued that strength of HR system plays a crucial role in the link between HR practices and performance. Recently, Simyongbo (2012) reported that the adoption of HPWS depends on the firm strategy and industrial relation features.

Similarly, a recent study in South Korea that used a dyadic survey data from 1,353 labor representatives and managers revealed that mutual trust worthiness, which refers to ability, integrity, and benevolence between employee representative and management moderates effective adoption of HPWS in companies (Kim, Kim, & Ali, 2015). In the same vein, using emerging research on the social mechanism that associates HRM and organizational effectiveness, and a sample of 229 British firms of different industries, recent studies argued that use of contingent labor diminishes the positive effective of HPWS on performance (Stirpe, Bonache, & Revilla, 2014). Another moderating variable reported in the literature is the job control. According to Jensen, Patel, and Messersmith (2013), HPWS may have a dark consequence on performance when not implemented with sufficient job control, or discretion given to employees in determining how to implement job responsibilities. According to this study results, when job control is insufficient, HPWS may lead to anxiety, role overload, and turnover intentions

Furthermore, other recent studies have underlined the situational nature of the strength of the association between HPWS and firm performance. Evidence includes studies of the effect of HPWS on firm performance in Taiwan demonstrated a diminishing returns of HPWS, which, in turn, implies that the effectiveness of HPWS adoption is the function of organizations specific situations (e.g., industry type) (Chi & Lin, 2011). More specifically, these scholars reported that the association of HPWS and performance is linear in traditional manufacturing firms, and inverted-U pattern in high technology firms. Likewise, Mao, Song, and Han (2013) examined employee perspective of HPWS and employee outcomes. Using signaling and psychological-contract theory, the authors indicated that employees' perception of HPWS strongly influenced employees' attitudes through behavioral scripts and autonomy. More specifically they found that job satisfaction and affective commitment of employees increase when employees' attitudes toward HPWS is positive (Mao et al., 2013). Another evidence is the study by Iverson and Zatzick (2011). The authors examined whether employers consideration for employees' morale and welfare during downsizing process related to adoption of HPWS increases productivity. Their study results showed that giving attention to employee morale and welfare is vital for effective adoption of HPWS since downsizing is related to loss of human capital for competitive advantage.

As the above discussions elucidate, previous researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to explore the causal mechanism through which HR practices influence performance and the contextual factors which either increase or decrease the strength of the relationship. In addition, previous studies have emphasized that the relationship between HPWS utilization and organizational outcomes is positive, notwithstanding the variation in the strength of the relationship. However, our understanding of how HRM practices influence performance is yet limited. For instance, there is limited theoretical and empirical evidence on whether employee attribution of HR practices

influence the link between HPWS and performance, especially at unit or firm level. In other words, our knowledge of the meanings employees attach to HR practices and how these shape employee outcomes is by far limited (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Building on the works of Bowen and Ostroff (2004), & Nishii et al. (2008), the current paper proposes a theoretical framework that explores how HR attribution moderates the positive association between HPWS and firm performance. It aims for firm level analysis because the link HPWS- performance is not well researched at firm level compared to the HPWS-employee outcomes link (Wei & Lau, 2010). Moreover, HR attribution as a moderating variable has, to my knowledge, not yet been examined adequately.

### 3 HR ATTRIBUTIONS

Earlier social psychologists define attribution as the process by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events (Kelley, 1967). In other words, casual attribution, the most common dimension of attribution, is concerned with how people make casual explanations about their own failures or successes, behavior of others, and events (Kelley, 1973). People make casual explanations in order to predict future possible outcomes and to behave in a way they can take control of it (Kelley, 1967, 1973, 1987; Kelley & Michela, 1980). Attribution theory proposes that how people interpret and make sense of the causes of behavior or event affects their subsequent attitudes and behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Kelley, 1973).

From Strategic HRM researchers' perspective, HR attribution is *an attributional process that refers to employees' casual explanations for HR practices* which their employers adopt on a continual basis (Nishii et al., 2008). In other words, employees attribute meaning to HR practices that are adopted in organizations (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Employees' HR attribution making process is the function of HR systems strength, which refers to the extent of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus of HR practices enacted by top management (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). HPWS practices are expected to be of high distinctiveness as wide range of practices are included affecting large number of employees, which, in turn, facilitates employees the opportunity for sense making (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). It has been argued that agreement among employees will rise when the distinctiveness of HR practices is high leading to high HPWS consensus (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Similarly, when coverage of HR practices is high, it is expected that such practices are consistently implemented across employees in a work unit. The implication is that HPWS practices facilitate employee sense making by satisfying distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus criteria (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). This, in turn, facilitates employees' collective perception of why organizations adopt HPWS practices to emerge as a macro level (unit, firm) construct.

In their scholarly work, Nishii et al. (2008) introduced typology of HR attributions, an attributional process that refers to employees' casual explanations for HR practices which their employers adopt on a continual basis, taking strategic HR perspective. They classified sources of HR attributions as internal, which refers to the perception that actions are due to factors for which the actor (management) is responsible, or over which the actor has control, and external, the perception that states management is a passive recipient of external environmental forces (Kelley, 1967). The source of internal attribution emanates from business/strategic goal underlying HR and top management's employee oriented philosophy. While union compliance is the source for external attribution, in which case employees perceive that employers adopt certain HR practices to comply with union requirements and pressure for other external environments (e.g., the pressure to conform to HR practices being offered by competing organizations) not because of the employers' voluntary intentions (Kelley, 1967; Nishii et al., 2008). Since external attributions are not related to employee attitude and behavior, this paper focuses on the internal attributions only.

Following the assumption that organizations adopt HR practices to align employee attitudes and behavior with business strategy, Nishii et al. (2008) framed HR attribution to reflect the "service quality enhancement" & "cost reduction" strategic foci as indicated in their HR attribution typology. Management's philosophy toward employees is also another dimension of internal attribution of HR practices (Lepak, Taylor, Tekleab, & Marrone, 2002). The researchers distinguished employee oriented philosophy held by management as either aimed at maximizing employee well-being or maximizing employee efficiency, each of which are distinct concepts. Employee well-being attribution reflects the management's motivation to invest in employees to enhance employee welfare. But the maximizing efficiency attribution is formed when management's motive of investing in employees is to improve organizational performance than employee welfare.

Based on whether they signify positive or negative implications for employees, internal attributions are classified as commitment or control focus. In their seminal work, Nishii et al. (2008), using early attribution theory perspective, argues that the "hedonic relevance" of a behavior (i.e., HR practice) for an observer (i.e., employee) influences the attributions that are made, such that behaviors that are perceived to benefit the perceiver result in favorable attributions, whereas behaviors that have adverse effects for the perceiver lead to unfavorable attributions. Using social exchange theory, the authors also argue that commitment based HR attributions that signify positive consequences for employees (i.e., service quality and employee well-being) are likely to engender a felt obligation to

reciprocate in positive and beneficial ways. While when employees perceive that the intended goals of HR practices signal lower level of concern for employees and a more cost-oriented control focus (cost reduction and exploiting employees attributions) lower levels of satisfaction and commitment are likely to follow.

This paper's argument is that employees' HR attribution, as reflection of management's motives of adopting HR practices, may hinder or facilitate the implementation of HPWS. Employees may positively or negatively perceive management incentives of adopting HR practices. When employees perceive that management adopts new HR practices mainly to enhance employee well-being, and customer service quality (optimistic view) it is named as *commitment focus HR attribution*. While when employees perceive that new HR practices mainly reflect management's intention to exploit employees or increase efficiency (pessimistic view), it is termed as *control focus HR attributions*. The assumption here is that, due to the social interaction among employees at workplace, employees interact and share their individual perceptions regarding HR practices in their organization, which, in turn, facilitates HR attribution to emerge as a unit or firm level construct, even when the HR system is not strong (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Kelley, 1973). This is a notion in line with social influence and social cognition theories, which state that social interaction among people may create a strong situation and shared meaning among individuals (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Hereunder, I explain how HR attribution climate may moderate the relationship between HPWS practices and firm performance.

#### 4 THE MODERATING ROLE OF HR ATTRIBUTIONS

Employers influence employee attitudes and behavior by using either commitment or control oriented HRM systems (Arthur, 1992, 1994; Godard, 2007). Control oriented HRM system is an approach where employers give more focus for the task than employee relations (Verheul, 2007). Under this approach, where the employee-employer relations is based on direct control and strict supervision, the goal is mainly to reduce direct labor cost or increase efficiency (Verheul, 2007; Walton, 1999). On the other hand, in commitment based HRM systems approach, much focus goes to employee relations, and the role of the manager is limited to facilitation that requires trust from both sides (Verheul, 2007; Walton, 1999). The main goal of commitment oriented HRM systems is to invest in employees, which, in turn increases organizational commitment, individual's attachment to the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990), and employee job satisfaction (Arthur, 1994).

Unambiguous and shared perceptions of climate, the behaviors that management expects, supports, and rewards, is vital for successful implementation of HRM systems, especially in facilitating the link between HRM practices and performance the way it was inspired (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008). That is, the role of employee perceptions is vital in determining effectiveness of HRM practices. It has been suggested that employees' perceptions of HR practices are crucial in explaining the link between HRM practices and unit performance. While the former focused on employees' perceptions about what HR practices signify with regard to the behaviors that are expected, supported, and rewarded by management, the latter examined the effect of employees' attributions of why the HR practices are adopted by a company on unit level attitudes, behavior and outcomes. These works have made groundbreaking contribution in their acknowledgment of the importance of employee perceptions and attributions to understand how HR practices influence organizational outcomes. For instance, Bowen and Ostroff (2004), argued that strength of HR practices may trigger intended or unintended organizational climates to emerge which in turn may affect successful adoption of HR practices in certain way. The implication is that when organizational climates fit with what has been intended by managers, the likelihood of influencing employee attitudes and behavior in the desired way would increase.

On the other hand, if unintended organizational climates emerge, in cases such as weak HR systems, managers face difficulty of influencing workers attitudes in the preferred direction. Hence, depending on whether organizational climate is as anticipated by the top management or not, the influence of HR practices on workplace outcomes may vary across units or firms. Previous studies (e.g., Nishii et al., 2008), for instance, anticipated that employees' attribution of what caused a certain HRM system to exist, may moderate the link between HR practices and workplace outcomes. However, despite frequent calls for research, previous scholars failed to adequately investigate how employees' perception of HRM practices affect the effective utilization of HPWS practices, especially at unit level. The current paper uses social exchange theory perspective to explain how HR attribution influences the effective adoption of HPWS in organizations.

Social exchange theory which suggests that social behavior is the result of an exchange process, has increasingly become one of the predominant theories that researchers draw on to understand exchange relationships between individuals and organizations (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Richard M Emerson, 1976). The underlying norm in social exchange theory is reciprocity, individuals' obligation to respond positively to favorable treatment received by others (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). The parties in social exchange want to maximize benefits and minimize costs, which implies that people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. For instance, when cost



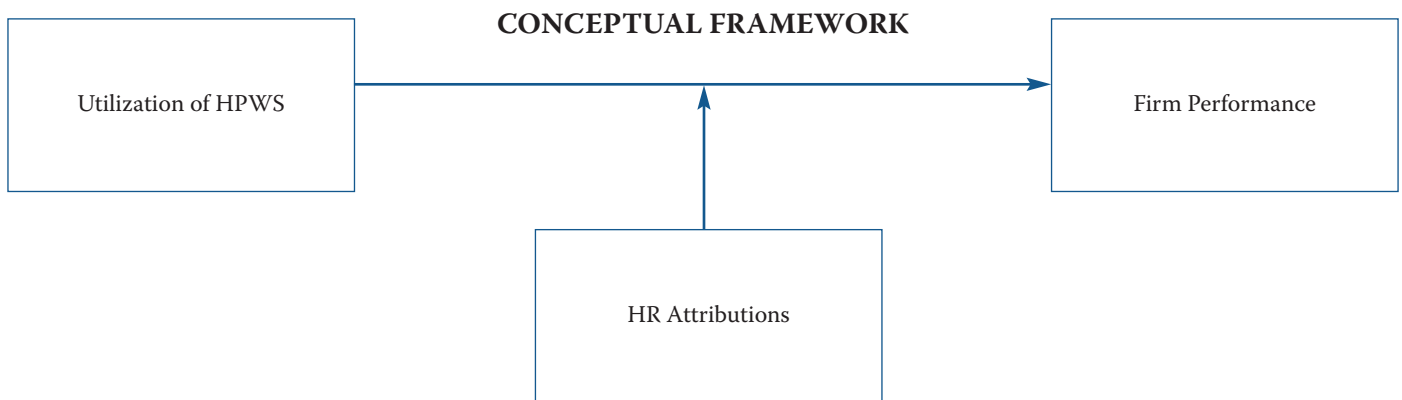
of exchange is higher than its benefit people will terminate or abandon that relationship (Blau, 1964). Hence, social exchange theory suggests that parties to an exchange usually take the benefits and minus the costs in order to determine how much a relationship is worth. Similarly, perceived organizational support theory hypothesizes that employees reciprocate based on the perceived level of organizational support, which refers to an individual's perception regarding the degree to which an organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005)

Employee HR attribution reflects employees' perspective of the exchange relations between employer and employees with respect to HR practices. That is, if the perception is that an employer adopts HR practices motivated by the need to enhance employee well-being, employees will reciprocate by engaging themselves in extra role behavior such as social citizenship behavior and organization commitment. On the contrary, employees may perceive less organizational support, where they notice that the employer failed to fulfill expectations of psychological contract. In this situation where the cost of social exchange is expected to be high, employees reciprocate by withholding their involvement in extra role activities, which, in turn reduces job satisfaction, OCB and organizational commitment (R. M. Emerson, 1976). The question is therefore how HR attribution interacts with the adoption of HPWS to influence firm performance. From the previous discussions it has been clear that, based on strategic HRM perspective, employers' motive to adopt HR practices can be attributed as commitment focus (employee well-being, & service quality enhancement) or control focus (employee exploitation & efficiency enhancement). Therefore, in organizations where the HR attribution is more of commitment focus, employees would reciprocate by taking part in extra role activities, and cooperating with management in every single change process. In such situations, HPWS will be adopted broadly and effectively. However, in situations where the HR attribution is more of control focus, the adoption of HPWS practices would be less effective. Therefore, based on aforementioned premises, it seems plausible to forward at least two propositions as indicated hereunder.

**Proposition 1:** *Utilization of HPWS practices is positively related to performance.*

**Proposition 2:** *HR attribution moderates the positive relationship between HPWS practices and firm performance such that the relationship is stronger when the HR attribution is commitment focus and weaker when the HR attribution is control focus.*

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the moderating role of employees' attributions of HR practices on the link between HPWSs-performance



## 5 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The main aim was to establish a theoretical framework to further understand the proverbial 'black box' of the HRM practices- performance linkage. Using attribution theory and social exchange theory, the current study proposed that employee HR attributions can be a vital contextual variable to appreciate why the performance effects of HPWS practices remains dissimilar across organizations. More specifically, it contends that when the HR attribution in an organization is of commitment focus (i.e.; when employees perceive that HR practices are reflections of management's need to enhance employee well-being), utilization of HPWS practices may lead to better firm performance than their counter parts where HR attribution is control focus (i.e.; when employees sense that management adopts HR practices in order to exploit employees and reduce cost). Even though the argument has got strong theoretical foundations, the need for empirical test using real data cannot be undermined. Hence, it can be suggested that future research may take advantage by empirically testing the theoretical framework proposed in this paper. In other words future research may empirically examine if HR attribution of employees moderates the relationship between HPWS practices and firm performance.

Measurement issue can be of concern to test the proposed model empirically. The main variables of the model include HPWS practices, HR attribution, and firm performance. HPWS has been widely but inconsistently measured by previous studies due to the difference among scholars regarding the contents of the system. However, the most common dimensions used to measure HPWS practices include the five functional areas such as selectivity in hiring, employee development and career opportunities, rewards, performance evaluation, and participation and communication (Shin, 2014; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Following the work of Shin (2014), one can use a Likert scale of five points to observe the extent of the presence of each component, and compute z-scores for each sub-item of HPWS and sum up the standardized scores of each component. The summed up values may be divided by the number of sub-items of each component to indicate the presence of HPWS practices. The higher score of the HPWS variable presents a more comprehensive adoption of the HPWS practices (Shin, 2014).

The second variable one needs to measure is the employees' HR attribution. HR attribution was first conceptualized and introduced to the literature by Nishii et al. (2008) who also developed measurement scale for the construct. These scholars proposed that for each of the HR practices included in the study, employees (respondents) may be asked to rate or indicate the degree to which each of the HR practice was designed in order to (1) enhance (service) quality; (2) keep costs down; (3) promote employee well-being; and (4) get the most work out of employees, on a five point Likert scale (where 1= not at all, and 5= to a great extent). As reported by the researchers, the Cronbach's alpha was  $>0.82$  for both commitment focus and control focus measures. The suggestion is therefore to measure HR attribution, one could adopt the instrument developed and used by Nishii et al. (2008) and aggregate the result to unit level. Recent studies also have adopted same instrument in their empirical research (e.g., Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

Another concern is the possibility of aggregation bias while measuring HR as unit level construct. Hence, the researcher suggests that future research may check within group agreement before aggregating individual level data to unit or firm level single value (mean) (Nishii et al., 2008). It has been suggested in the literature that agreement among employees about their perceptions must be demonstrated before aggregated measures of psychological climate perceptions can be used to represent a unit level organizational level climate construct (James, 1982). James et al. (1988) suggested that intra-class correlation statistics such as ICC1, ICC2 and rWG can be computed in order to assess within unit agreement. For instance, if  $rWG > 0.7$ , one can safely aggregate individual level responses to group level measures (see James, 1982). The crux of the matter is that researchers should be cautious when analyzing HR attribution at unit level.

Firm performance outcomes of HRM can be captured in various ways. Dyer and Reeves (1995) drew a three-fold distinction regarding performance outcomes: financial outcomes (e.g. return on assets, return on equity, profits, Tobin's Q, and GRATE), organizational (e.g. productivity and quality), and HR related (e.g. attitudinal and behavioral effects among employees such as satisfaction, commitment, turnover intentions). Based on data availability future researchers may measure one or more of these organizational outcome categories towards testing the proposed theoretical model (Choi & Lee, 2013).

Another fertile area of research, in addition to testing the moderating role of HR attribution on the relationship between HPWS and firm performance, is to explore the main effect of HR attribution on the extent of HPWS utilization in a company. Previous studies which examined HR attribution only focused on the main effect of HR attribution on both individual and unit level attitudes, and performance (Nishii et al., 2008) or the mediation effect of HR attribution between HPWS and performance (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Hence, one can benefit from examining whether and how HR attributions influence the extent of HPWS implementation in an organization. In general, as only few organizational researchers have so far attempted to examine HR attribution (Harvey et al., 2014), the researcher calls for more research to this area so that we can further and better understand the contribution of attribution theory in organizational and personnel studies.

Lastly but not the least, future research may examine how the relationship between HPWS practices and unionism varies with HR attribution of employees. Industrial relations researchers have been examining the effect of HPWS adoption on workplace unionism, and they argued that implementation of HPWS substitutes unions because such systems of HRM practices provide individualized voice mechanisms and equitable treatment for workers without the need for collective arrangements (Liu, Guthrie, Flood, & MacCurtain, 2009, p. 112). Other researchers argue that managers use HPWS practices to avoid unionization at workplaces (Gill, 2009; Gill & Meyer, 2013). In short, there are equivocal findings regarding the relationship between HPWS adoption and Unionization at workplace. Primarily, employees join unions to get protection against adversarial employer practices (Shin, 2014). That is, employees are more likely to join unions when they perceive that HRM practices are control focus than when they perceive that it is commitment focus. Hence, one may argue that the effect of HPWS practices utilization in a company on employee unionization is the function of HR attribution of employees in that organization. In other words, future researchers may examine the moderating role of HR attribution on the effect of the extent of HPWS practices adoption and unionization.



## 6 THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

### Theoretical Implications

The current study attempted to establish a theoretical framework that enables the understanding of the effect of organizational climate on effective adoption of innovative work practices taking the employees' perspective. The theoretical framework depicts that employees' HR attribution at unit/firm level is a potential moderating variable which may hinder or enhance the positive effect of HPWS practices on firm performance. The current paper contributes to the literature in a number of ways.

First of all, the 'black box' of HRM practices and performance link remains obscure regardless of a great deal of devoted scholarly work by previous researchers in the area of strategic human resource management. Most importantly, despite the increasing need to implement HPWS practices by firms to enhance productivity and competitiveness, previous researchers noted that implementation of HPWS practices continued to result in unstable outcomes. Taking the contingency perspective, the paper further explains the HRM practices- performance link by arguing that successful adoption of HPWS practices may depend on organization specific factors such as HR attribution climate. As far as my knowledge is concerned, this is the only research which attempted to explore the moderating role of HR attribution in the relationship between HPWS practices and performance, especially at organizational/unit level. Previous studies attentions seem to have been inclined toward examining the HR attribution as antecedents of employees' attitudes and behavior (Nishii et al., 2008), and a mediating variable between HPWS and performance link (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). In short, the argument in this study supports the line of research that contends that effectiveness of HRM practices is contingent on organizational settings (contexts) (Jackson & Schuler, 1995).

Second, recent studies noted that attribution theory is useful in understanding organizational phenomenon, however, only few organizational researchers, so far, have attempted to apply attributional theories to organizational studies (Harvey et al., 2014). More specifically, the role of attribution theory in strategic human resource management received a neglected attention from previous researchers. Exceptions include Van De Voorde and Beijer (2015), Nishii et al. (2008), & Bowen and Ostroff (2004), who, one way or the other, attempted to demonstrate the need for and importance of using attribution theory to understand the 'black box' of HRM practices and performance. Hence, the current study does not only enhance our understanding of the cloudy link between HRM and performance, but also denotes that attribution theory can be a vital tool in understanding all sorts of workplace outcomes. The main implication is that attribution theory can be a vital tool to understand organizational phenomena.

Third, the current study implies that employees' understanding of HRM practices may be different from employer's understanding of same practices. As a result, when collecting information about organization's HRM practices, researchers need to get data from both sides to enhance the reliability of their findings.

### Practical Implications

Genuine acceptance of HRM practices by employees is vital for achieving the intended goals of adopting HPWS practices. In turn, employees' are more likely to cooperate with management in the process of HPWS implementation when they believe that such practices are driven by employer's need to invest in them is to enhance their (employees') well-being. Hence, it is noted that managers may be able to develop positive employee attitudes toward HRM practices in their organizations via appropriate communication channel that conveys the intended goal of HRM practices, in a way that such practices reflect care and support for employees. Previous researchers underlined the significance of effective communication in portraying the desired goal of HRM practices, which, in turn, leads to strong HRM systems (strong climate) to emerge. Ineffective communication in an organization may lead to unintended HRM climate, which, in turn, adversely influences consequent organizational outcomes. Managers' effective communication with employees about HPWS practices is vital in conveying appropriate information in a clear and consistent manner, which, in turn, will influence the attribution making process of employees in the way intended by the organization. This is in line with the suggestions given by Van De Voorde and Beijer (2015) & Nishii et al. (2008).

## 7 CONCLUSION

The current study is mainly intended to explore firm specific situational factors that may influence the 'black box' of HRM and performance linkage. To this end, the study proposed that HR attribution of employees as one contextual factor that may influence the strength of the relationship between utilization of HPWS practices and firm performance. Most importantly, using the extant literature, the researcher argues that utilization of HPWS practices is more likely to strongly influence performance when employees' HR attribution is skewed toward commitment focus than when it's biased toward control focus HR attribution. In addition to extending our understanding of how HRM practices influence performance, the present study acknowledges the practical applicability of attribution

theory in strategic HRM research, which have had a little attention thus far. Hence, notwithstanding the necessity for empirical tests of current study's propositions, based on review of previous works and theories, I contend that HR attribution of employees does matter. Generally speaking, my argument is in line with the contingency view of strategic HRM, which contends that organizational situations affect the extent of HRM practices effectiveness.

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