The Impact of Benevolent HRM Attributions on Employees' General Work Stress, with the mediating influence of Gratitude

Abstract

Workplace stress can cause serious physical and mental illness and result in billions of dollars in lost productivity every year. Researchers have called for the development of frameworks through which Human Resource Management (HRM) practices can reduce employee stress. Building on HRM attribution theory, this study builds a framework based on benevolent HRM attributions. Benevolent HRM attributions are employee beliefs that their management has enacted HRM practices to support their performance (*performance HRM attributions*) and improve their well-being (*well-being HRM attributions*). This study examined if both benevolent HRM attributions engender employee gratitude, which in turn may reduce their general job stress levels. Respondents of the study were chosen from the telecom sector of Pakistan as they operate in a high stress-inducing environment. The theoretically based causal associations were examined by employing the structural equation modelling (SEM) method. The results confirmed the hypotheses and also showed that both benevolent HRM attributions reduce employees' job stress with the mediating influence of gratitude. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed as well.

Keywords: *Gratitude; occupational stress, work stress, HRM attributions, employee well-being*

1. Introduction

In existing HRM and organizational psychology literature, management practices are theorized to impact employees' psychological, physical and social well-being (Danna and Griffin, 1999; Grant *et al.,* 2007; Ryff and Keyes, 1995). The conceptualization of employee well-being is a multidisciplinary field including psychology, sociology, anthropology and industrial economics (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Recently, increasing number of scholars are calling for conceptualizing stress as a fundamental element of employees' psychological well-being (Cooper and Quick, 2017; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019).

A United Nations (UN) report considers employee stress a "20th century disease"; the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Labor organization (ILO) call it a "worldwide epidemic" (ILOReport, 2016; WHOReport, 2006). Employee stress is linked with metabolic disorders, hypertension, behavioral problems, psychiatric disorders, anxiety, depression, coronary heart disease and many other psychological and physiological illnesses (Ganster and Rosen, 2013). Moreover, work stress also costs organizations billions of dollars in sick leaves, low productivity and medical costs (Hassard *et al.,* 2017). Anxiety and stress have been increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic, posing a serious threat to people's overall health and well-being (Holmes *et al.,*

2020; WHO, 2020). In occupational settings, employee stress has been elevated unique work demands posed by the pandemic (Hamouche, 2020). Given its health harm, studies are urgently needed to examine how work stress levels can be alleviated (Cooper and Quick, 2017; Giorgi *et al.,* 2020; Imperatori, 2017; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2020).

Human Resource Management (HRM) are a group of management policies, interventions and activities that are designed to perform two objectives; extract improved-performance from employees and enhance their well-being (Beer *et al.,* 1984; Boon *et al.,* 2019; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Wood, 2021). In particular, HRM practices can be designed and put in place as preventative or curative interventions to alleviate stress levels in organizations (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019; Weinberg *et al.,* 2010). This is also known as the mutual-gains model in literature which proposes that HRM practices should be developed and launched to improve employee performance as well as their well-being (Guest, 2017; Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019).

This study has been motivated by two issues in HRM-well-being (HWB) literature. Reviewing HRM literature over the last three decades has shown that HRM research and practice has largely ignored the pursuit of employees' psychological well-being, while most of the scholarly efforts have focused on how HRM can enhance employee productivity/performance to create a competitive advantage for the firm (Beer *et al.,* 2015; Guest, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019). Scholars are increasingly criticizing this solitary fixation with firm performance and call for research frameworks through which HRM practices can reduce work stress (Guest, 2017; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019).

There is however, a bigger issue in the scant HWB literature available as it has produced mixed and inconclusive results with regards to employee stress. While some research suggests that HRM practices reduce stress (Boxall and Macky, 2014; Macky and Boxall, 2008), other research shows that HRM practices have a positive impact on worker performance by intensifying their work-demands, which increases their stress (Kroon *et al.,* 2009; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018; Van De Voorde *et al.,* 2012). This inconclusive and mixed evidence suggests that there are intermediary constructs present in the relationship between HRM and stress, and this invites more research in the area (Boxall *et al.,* 2016; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). Researchers need to keep looking into the *HRM black box* which hides the linkages between various HRM practices and employee performance and well-being outcomes (Paauwe and Blok, 2015).

In short, Guest (2017) put it really well when he stated that the "search for a link between HRM and performance has been pursued at the expense of a concern for employee well-being" (p. 22). It is about time that HRM research focuses on how to reduce the negative impact of work on employees and improve their well-being (Guest, 2017; Pagán-Castaño *et al.,* 2020).
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In light of this discussion, this study aims to develop a framework through which HRM practices can help reduce employees' general job stress (GJS). As part of this framework, the study will show that benevolent HRM attributions (HRM practices seen by employees as supportive and well-being oriented) can help reduce GJS. This study also examines gratitude as a mediator of this relationship. The theoretical foundations are developed through a systematic literature review. The study is conducted in Pakistani telecom organizations as they operate in a dynamic, vibrant, competitive, and extremely high stress inducing environment (Baloch, 2017; Ibrahim, 2017; Mansoor *et al.,* 2011; Ramay *et al.,* 2017).

Benevolent HRM attributions construct is chosen for this study because it represents a process-based approach in HRM literature. HRM studies are conducted either from a content-based approach (CBA) or a process-based approach (PBA) (Sanders *et al.,* 2014). CBA is based on selection of a set of HRM practices (e.g., compensation, training, development etc.,) and examining their individual or aggregate impact on employee performance or well-being outcomes (Sanders and Yang, 2015). CBA is not a robust approach as it does not illuminate the mechanism through which HRM practices impact performance or well-being (Sanders *et al.,* 2014). Prior research has shown that HRM practices have shown to be both beneficial and harmful for employee stress (Kroon *et al.,* 2009; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018; Van De Voorde *et al.,* 2012). This is because HRM practices are not intrinsically or inherently beneficial or harmful for the employee well-being (De Prins *et al.,* 2018; Heery, 2016) and what determines well-being or performance is the not the inherent "virtues or vices" of HRM (Li *et al.,* 2011; Sanders and Yang, 2015). Instead, the *HRM process* i.e., how employee perceive, interpret or understand HRM practices is what effects their well-being or performance (Boselie *et al.,* 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Wang *et al.,* 2020).

Proponents of PBA suggest that it is a more robust approach to connect HRM with performance or well-being outcomes (Sanders *et al.,* 2014; Sanders and Yang, 2015). PBA advocates that employees develop their own perceptions, meanings and interpretations of HRM practices (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994; Sonnenberg *et al.,* 2011). PBA is based on the idea that the subjective interpretation or meaning of HRM practices influences employee performance or well-being, not the content of HRM practices themselves (Nishii *et al.,* 2008). Consequently, interpretations of HRM practices (instead of content) can reveal a more robust relationship between HRM and various performance or well-being outcomes (Shantz *et al.,* 2016b; Wang *et al.,* 2020).

The construct of HRM attributions is deployed to examine employee perceptions and interpretations of HRM practices (Nishii *et al.,* 2008). HRM attribution construct is based on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), which postulates that any social interaction has actors (people who initiate an act) and interpreters (i.e., observers who try to make sense of the act) (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). The observers make causal attributions (i.e., interpret the

motives and intent of actor's behavior) or more simply, and try to understand why the actor has acted in the said manner (Weiner, 1985). These causal attributions/interpretations have a significant impact on the observers' emotions, attitude, behavior and well-being (Weiner, 1985, 2014). Along the same lines, Nishii *et al.* (2008) showed that the management/organization (the actor) initiates certain HRM practices; while employees (the observers), develop causal attributions or interpretations for the motive/intent behind enacting those practices. Put simply, employees attempt to understand "why the organization has initiated the said HRM practices"; these perceptions/interpretations are called HRM attributions (Nishii *et al.,* 2008).

These HRM attributions can either be benevolent or manipulative (Fehr *et al.,* 2017; Nishii *et al.,* 2008). Employees can believe that their management's intent behind initiating certain HRM practices is to overwork them (manipulative HRM attributions). Alternatively, Benevolent HRM attributions are based on employee perceptions that their management indents to support them, care for them and improve their well-beig through enacting HRM practices. This study has chosen benevolent HRM attributions because of two reasons; a). because they have been shown to improve various employee well-being indicators b). to the best of the author's knowledge, no study has examined the impact of benevolent HRM attributions on employees' general job stress levels. The research on HRM attributions is still very rare but holds great potential towards demonstrating *how and why* HRM practices impact employee well-being (Fehr *et al.,* 2017; Hewett *et al.,* 2018). This is why authors have recommended further research in HRM attributions to show how it can impact employee well-being and performance (Wang *et al.,* 2020).

The influence of perceived HRM practices on employees' work stress is indirect and occurs through attitudinal and affective constructs (Guest, 2002; Kroon *et al.,* 2009; Ogbonnaya, 2019; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018). Hewett *et al.* (2018) observed that only three studies carried out an empirical examination of mediating variables while connecting HRM attributions with employee outcomes. This study has chosen to examine the mediating influence of one such affective and attitudinal construct (i.e., gratitude) (Emmons and McCullough, 2003), between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' general work stress. This study has chosen gratitude as a mediator for the following reasons.

Gratitude is described as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 554). Gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness or appreciation that arises when a beneficiary (the receiving party), receives a benefit/favor from the perceived benevolent motives of a benefactor (the giver) (Emmons, 2004; McCullough *et al.,* 2001). Gratitude is conceptualized both as a disposition (stable personality trait) or state (being thankful in response to particular favor/s from a perceived benevolent benefactor) (McCullough *et al.,* 2002). This study examines gratitude as a state, which can arise among employees when they perceive their organization has enacted HRM practices from a benevolent motive and intent. Gratitude is considered the "greatest of all virtues" (Emmons and Mishra, 2011, p. 248) and considered very beneficial towards

enhancing people's well-being (Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). This is because gratitude is a positive and joyous emotion which arises from receiving a benefit from a benefactor (Emmons, 2004, p. 5), and this emotion is instrumental to mental health and functioning (Waters *et al.,* 2021). More particularly, gratitude can also lower stress levels among employees in occupational settings (Lee *et al.,* 2018; Valikhani *et al.,* 2019).

While gratitude is considered very beneficial in organizational settings, these assumptions are not empirically examined. Di Fabio *et al.* (2017) suggest that emergence and promotion of employee gratitude holds great potential towards developing more productive, happier and healthier organizations. However, Fehr's *et al.* (2017) show that studies examining the emergence and of gratitude in organizations are very rare. More recently Sawyer *et al.* (2022) noted, "the role of attention and awareness in stimulating employees' experiences of gratitude remains largely overlooked in the extant literature" (p. 1). The present study aims to examine how employee gratitude can emerge/be stimulated in response to benevolent HRM attributions. It is claimed that employee gratitude can improve their well-being but such assertions are rarely examined in organizational psychology (Cortini *et al.,* 2019; Fehr *et al.,* 2017). Therefore, the present study shall also examine how gratitude can reduce employee stress levels.

The present study deploys the construct of general job stress (GJS) (Yankelevich *et al.,* 2012) which is based on stress in general (SIG) (Stanton *et al.,* 2001), to examine perceived stress levels among employees. GJS and SIG examine felt, perceived, or subjectively experienced work-related stress. The conceptualization of the GJS is based on the seminal transactional perspective (TP) of stress appraisal and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) . TP suggests that stressors become severe or toxic when they are cognitively appraised/perceived/interpreted by the individual as such. Thus, the experience of severity of stress becomes a function of two components a). when a person cognitively appraises a situation to pose high-demands, b). while also thinking the he/she does not have enough resources to meet those demands (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) Moreover, people's causal attributions about the motives of their employers have a significant impact on transactionally appraised perceived stress levels (Perrewé and Zellars, 1999). Therefore, this study expects a relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' general job stress levels.

2. Literature Review
This review includes an overview of the constructs and their relationship with other factors.

2.1   Benevolent HRM Attributions
The term benevolent HRM attributions was coined by Fehr *et al.* (2017), who based it on HRM attributions construct developed by Nishii *et al.* (2008). Nishii *et al.* (2008) posited those employees respond to HRM practices based on their causal interpretations and attributions of HRM practices. In other words, before employees respond to HRM practices they develop an explanation as to why HRM practices exist. Moreover, these HRM practices can be seen by employees as

indicative of organization's exploitative or benevolent intent. Employees consider HRM practices as benevolent when they perceive that such practices are enacted by the management to support and benefit them (Fehr *et al.,* 2017).

Two benevolent HRM attributions are recognized in literature, performance HRM attributions and well-being HRM attributions. The term performance HRM attributions was coined by Shantz *et al.* (2016b) based on the works of Nishii *et al.* (2008). Performance HRM attributions are based on employee beliefs that the HRM practices were "primarily intended to support their job performance" (Shantz *et al.,* 2016b, p. 176). Well-being HRM attributions are based on employee beliefs that HRM practices were enacted by management with an intent to improve their well-being (Fehr *et al.,* 2017). One explanation for the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and well-being can be found in attribution theory (Heider, 1958). Positive attributions of an actor's behavior can result in a positive impact on an observer's affect and emotions (Weiner, 1985). More particularly, an explanation of the impact of benevolent HRM attributions (both performance and well-being) on reducing employees' GJS is provided by conservation of resources (COR) framework and transactional perspective (TP) (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Both TP and COR framework suggest that having access to material, emotional and psychological resources at work can help reduce employee stress levels (Erdem *et al.,* 2017; Hobfoll, 1989). Performance and well-being HRM attributions make employees think that an organization believes in them, supports them, values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Fehr *et al.,* 2017; Shantz *et al.,* 2016b). These attributions provide valuable psychological and emotional resources to employees and in-line with COR framework, can help reduce their general work stress (Fehr *et al.,* 2017; Shantz *et al.,* 2016b). Prior research has shown that performance HRM attributions result in reducing emotional exhaustion (Shantz *et al.,* 2016a), while both performance and well-being HRM attributions are positively associated with affective commitment and employee satisfaction (Nishii's *et al.,* 2008). Based on the theoretical foundations and research on the subject, it is envisioned that both benevolent HRM attributions (performance and well-being) will help reduce employees' general job stress (GJS) levels.

H1a: *Performance HRM attributions (PHRA) have a significant negative effect on GJS levels in the telecommunication sector.*
H1b: *Well-being HRM attributions (WHRA) have a significant negative effect on GJS levels in the telecommunication sector.*

2.2 Gratitude
Gratitude is described as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 554). Gratitude is a benevolent-attribution dependent emotion (McCullough *et al.,* 2001). This means that gratitude arises in the beneficiary from attributing benevolence to the intentions and motivations of a benefactor (Algoe *et al.,* 2008; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Tsang, 2006). Weiner (1985) suggests that as a benevolent-attribution-

dependent state (or emotion), gratitude arises from a two-step attribution process; (a) a recognition that one has received a good outcome and (b) believing that the good outcome was received from the benevolent motives of a benefactor. The good outcome or benefit received can be material (e.g., a tangible gift) or non-material (e.g., an emotional boost or support) (Emmons and McCullough, 2003).

Employees can make two benevolent attributions while judging the intentions of their management for enacting HRM practices; these include a). performance HRM attributions b). well-being HRM attributions (Nishii *et al.,* 2008; Shantz *et al.,* 2016b). Researchers suggest that benevolent attributions of HRM practices may invoke gratitude among employees, but this relationship has not been empirically examined (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Fehr *et al.,* 2017). In line with the theory of benevolence and gratitude (McCullough *et al.,* 2001; Weiner, 1985), this study proposes that benevolent HRM attributions (performance and well-being) can engender increased levels of gratitude among employees; thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H2$_a$: *PHRA have a significant and positive effect on gratitude in the telecommunication sector.*
H2$_b$: *WHRA have a significant and positive effect on gratitude in the telecommunication sector.*

2.3 General Job Stress (GJS)

Stress is an unpleasant emotional experience related with anxiety, fear, grief and dread (Motowidlo *et al.,* 1986), that ultimately has a detrimental impact on employee well-being and performance (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). The experience of stress impacts people's physical, psychological and behavioral reactions (Selye, 1978). General job stress is employees' generalized (overall) cognitive and subjective appraisal (or perceptions) of their work environment as stress inducing, pressurizing and threatening (Yankelevich *et al.,* 2012). GJS is a revised and more robust version of stress in general (SIG) construct (Stanton *et al.,* 2001; Yankelevich *et al.,* 2012), and they are both based on the transactional perspective (TP) of stress appraisal and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). While some situations can be inherently more stress inducing than others, TP suggests that individuals assess the same situation differently. Therefore, the amount of stress experienced depends upon an appraisal process where an individual compares his/her resources to the demands of the situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). GJS is similar to the construct of PS conceptualization (Perceived Stress) (Cohen *et al.,* 1983), a construct which is also widely deployed to measure stress from a transactional perspective. However, this study examines the impact of benevolent HRM attributions on work stress. Therefore, GJS construct is more relevant to the objectives of the study.

Gratitude is both a cognition and an affect which is typically experienced as a positively valanced emotion (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). Grateful people experience reduced stress, enhanced health and well-being, personal development, social progress, and harmony (Emmons and

McCullough, 2003; Ma *et al.,* 2017; Wood *et al.,* 2008). These positive emotions are aroused in grateful people not only because of the actual benefit they receive, but because people feel that they have benefited as a result of someone's benevolence toward them (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; McCullough *et al.,* 2001). More particularly, gratitude is linked with lower levels of perceived stress in work settings (Lee *et al.,* 2018; Valikhani *et al.,* 2019). This effect is explained by the broaden and build theory of emotions (BBT) (Fredrickson, 2001). BBT postulates that positive emotions broaden cognitive repertoires and create *upward spirals* (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). This means that positive emotions can compound and accumulate, creating resilience and emotional resources, thereby reducing people's negative affect and perceived stress levels (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). More specifically, Fredrickson (2004) classifies gratitude as one of the most important positive resources, which can create upward spirals and reduce stress. Hence, this study posits that employees who feel grateful because of the perceived benevolence of HRM practices will experience reduced levels of general job stress.

H₃: *There is a significant negative relationship between gratitude and GJS in the telecommunication sector.*

2.4   *The influence of gratitude in the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' general job stress*

The previous evidence of the relationship between HRM perceptions and employee stress has been inconsistent (Guest, 2017; Marescaux *et al.,* 2019; Van De Voorde *et al.,* 2012). This points to the possibility of intermediary variables in this relationship. Mediator variables act as theoretical bridges to explain why HRM practices are connected with specific employee performance and well-being outcomes (Boxall *et al.,* 2016). More particularly, scholars suggest that the influence of perceived HRM practices on employee stress is not direct, but indirect through mediating attitudinal and affective constructs (Guest, 2002; Ogbonnaya, 2019; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018; Ramsay *et al.*, 2000).

This study has chosen to examine the mediating impact of an affective and attitudinal construct (i.e., gratitude) (Emmons and McCullough, 2003), between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' general work stress. To this end, this study has constructed the following hypotheses. First, it was hypothesized that benevolent HRM attributions reduce employees' general job stress. This hypothesis was based on TP and COR framework (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), and prior evidence which suggests that both benevolent HRM attributions (performance and well-being) have been shown to reduce employee exhaustion and improve their satisfaction levels (Nishii *et al.,* 2008; Shantz *et al.,* 2016b; Van De Voorde and Beijer, 2015). Secondly, the study hypothesized that benevolent HRM attributions can give rise to employee gratitude. This assertion is based on the theory that state gratitude is a benevolent-attribution-dependent emotion (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; McCullough *et al.,* 2001; Weiner, 1985). Scholars suggest that benevolent HRM attributions can also invoke employee gratitude (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Fehr's *et al.,* 2017). The study also hypothesized that gratitude could reduce employees' job stress levels.

This hypothesis was supported by the broaden and build theory of emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), and prior evidence which shows that gratitude is linked with perceived stress levels (Hameed *et al.,* 2017; Lee *et al.,* 2018; Valikhani *et al.,* 2019). These hypotheses are representative of a probable mediating influence of gratitude between benevolent HRM attributions and reduced job stress levels.

Gratitude's mediating effect can be explained by social exchange theory (SET), since a social exchange can be initiated and enacted out of gratitude (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). SET rests on the *norm of reciprocity,* which suggests that people respond positively to their benefactors (Gouldner, 1960). A social exchange arises (between employer and employee) when employees think of their employer as a kind benefactor, who supports them, makes them feel cared for and valued (Cropanzano *et al.,* 2017; Cropanzano *et al.,* 2001). Such perceptions of social support make employees respond positively to their employer, reduces work stress levels and improves their well-being (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Neves and Eisenberger, 2012; Zhang *et al.,* 2013). Gratitude plays an instrumental role in enacting social exchanges as it constructs and reinforces social relationships between benefactors and beneficiaries (Algoe *et al.,* 2008; Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960).

In short, employer is a seen as benevolent benefactor under two conditions; first, when employees perceive that the employer has enacted HRM practices with an intent to support their performance, and secondly to improve their well-being (benevolent HRM attributions). Since perceived benevolence of the benefactor invokes gratitude in the beneficiary, employees can respond positively to benevolent HRM attributions with increased gratitude towards their employer. Gratitude has been shown to reduce employee stress levels. Since gratitude builds and reinforces social exchanges, it can play a mediating role between benevolent HRM attributions and the reduction in their job stress levels.

H4a: *Gratitude mediates the relationship between performance HRM attributions and GJS in the telecommunication sector.*

H4b: *Gratitude mediates the relationship between well-being HRM attributions and GJS in the telecommunication sector.*
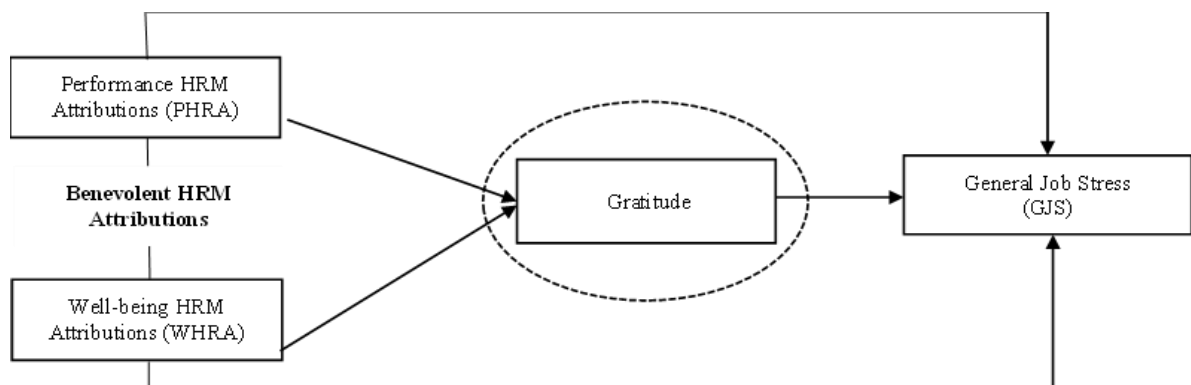
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample

Since anxiety and stress has been increasing globally among workers, Pakistan is no exception. The Pakistani mobile telecommunication companies (hereafter known as PKTelcos) have the10th largest customer base in the world (i.e., 160 million), and operate in an extremely high stress inducing industry. Economic recession, industry volatility, rapid technological changes, mergers and downsizing have a negative impact on employees' psychological well-being (Mucci *et al.,* 2016; Schnall *et al.,* 2018). In the same vein, recession, industry volatility, rapid technological advancements, mergers and downsizing have also made PKTelco employees susceptible to extremely high instances of work stress (Baloch, 2017; Ibrahim, 2017; Mansoor *et al.,* 2011; Ramay *et al.,* 2017).

3.2 Methodology

This study employed survey method to collect data on benevolent HRM attributions, gratitude, and general job stress. Moreover, this study utilizes an associational methodology embedded within a positivist research framework to examine the relationships between benevolent HRM attributions, gratitude and employees' job stress. A causal relationship is said to have occurred when on average, a variation in an independent variable is associated with a variation in a dependent variable (Bashir and Khwaja, 2018; Zaman, *et al.,* 2021). Research instruments deployed in the study have been validated in previous studies. Performance attributions was measured by the *performance HRM attribution* subscale by Shantz *et al.* (2016), while well-being attributions were measured by the *well-being HRM attribution subscale* by Nishii *et al.* (2008). Gratitude was measured with a 3-item checklist called *Gratitude Adjective Checklist* or GAC, developed by McCullough *et al.* (2002). GAC is a measure of state gratitude, which is frequently deployed by researchers because of its brevity and excellent psychometric properties (Card, 2019). Employee stress was measured by an 8-item unidimensional general measure of work stress called the General Job Stress (GJS) scale (Yankelevich *et al.,* 2012), which is a revised, more robust and parsimonious version of the original Stress in General (SIG) scale (Stanton *et al.,* 2001). Both scales are based on the which is based on the process/transactional stress framework developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The GJS has been successfully deployed by various scholars to measure generalized occupational stress and found to have sound psychometric properties (Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2015; Lanzo *et al.,* 2016). The mobile telecom phone service providers of Pakistan (i.e., PKTelcos) were selected as target population. PKTelcos serve world's 10th largest customer base (i.e. 160 million) and with a tele-density of 72.4%, operate in the most regulated and taxed industries in Pakistan (PTAAnnualReport, 2017). Technological dynamism, rapid innovation, tight regulation, and extreme competitive pressures have created a high stress working environment for PKTelco employees.

The study used a cross-sectional research design with the individual as the unit of analysis. The study used multi-stage random sampling. In this technique, first a random sample is calculated from an overall population; secondly, a proportionately stratified sampling technique is utilized. In this technique, the number of respondents selected from each stratum is proportionate to the

contribution of that particular stratum towards the total population (Hair *et al.,* 2015). Researchers argue that the proportionately stratified random sampling technique should be deployed in distributing questionnaires if data is available to make effective stratification possible (Bryman, 2015). The total number of employees working in the four leading telecommunication firms of Pakistan was 8143. Proportionately stratified random sample of 367 employees was calculated using the Morgan table. A hard copy of the questionnaire was made available to the employees through their HRM departments. After data collection, outliers and responses with missing values were removed. Subsequently, 318 responses were found to be appropriate for statistical data analysis. The assumptions of regression were fulfilled to determine cause and effect relationships. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was deployed for the estimation of theoretical model. IBM-SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 22.0 software were used for data modelling.

SEM technique examines the entire phenomenon by incorporating all the factors (Mahmood, *et al.,* 2019; Zaman, *et al.,* 2022). For data analysis, initially, data normality was determined in which mean, kurtosis, standard deviation and skewness was determined. Consequently, common method bias (CMB) test was conducted to configure if there were any biasness issues in the collected data. Eventually, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA and CFA) were conducted as these are mandatory tests in covariance based structural equation modelling (Bashir, *et al.,* 2019; Khwaja, *et al.,* 2020a). Along with CFA, convergent and discriminant validity were also estimated. After the attainment of affirmative results from the aforementioned tests, path analysis was conducted to test the causal relationships among constructs.

4. Results

4.1 Data Normality

After cleansing data from outliers and missing values, data normality is checked. Multivariate and univariate normality of items was performed in order to ensure that data readiness for further analysis. In table 4.1, Performance HRM Attributions are denoted by PHRA, Well-Being HRM Attributions by WBHRA, Gratitude by GRTD, and employee stress with General Job stress GJS. As per the normality outcomes presented in table below, standard deviation of all the constructs is less than 2, which is in the acceptable range (Khwaja, 2014). Furthermore, skewness and kurtosis values are less than 2, and 3 respectively, indicating that there are no data normality concerns (Khwaja *et al.,* 2020b). The results therefore elucidated that the data was acceptable for further analysis. Along with data normality, common method bias (CMB) or common method variance (CMV) were conducted using Harmon' one factor test. Two-step process was conducted to determine CMB; namely, procedural measures and statistical measures. Procedural measures were concerned about items adaption, randomizing of items, and items determination during pre-testing (Khwaja, Zaman and Butt, 2022) For statistical measures, Harmon's one factor variance test was conducted. According to Khwaja *et al.,* (2020b), using a single fixed factor, common variance must be less than 50%. The test provided common variance of 26.37% which is in the permissible range, hence, there were no CMB concerns in the data.

Table 4.1: *Data Normality (N=318)*

Constructs	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							Std.		Std.
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error	Statistic	Error
GRTD	318	1.00	5.00	3.06	1.02	-0.09	0.14	-0.87	0.27
GJS	318	1.00	5.00	3.21	0.84	-0.43	0.14	0.00	0.27
PHRA	318	1.20	5.00	2.99	0.92	0.15	0.14	-0.94	0.27
WBHRA	318	1.40	5.00	3.53	0.85	-0.61	0.14	-0.25	0.27

4.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) technique based on covariance (CB-SEM), requires exploratory factor analysis (EFA) prior to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). EFA showed that there were no cross-loadings and all the loadings were in the permissible range. Statistically sound outcomes of EFA were followed by CFA analysis on AMOS 22.0. The outcomes of EFA and CFA are provided in table 4.2. EFA factor loading values are denoted by ρ, while CFA factor loading values are denoted by λ. The outcomes indicate that EFA and CFA values are between 0.4-1 which is permissible in CB-SEM (Gaskin, 2016; Khwaja *et al.,* 2019). Cronbach's alpha (α) test was conducted for the determination of construct reliability. Construct's reliability of PHRA, WBHRA, GRTD and GJS emerged to be 0.796, 0.819, 0.761, and 0.870 respectively, which is in the permissible range. Composite reliability is denoted by CR whose values also lie in the acceptable range (i.e., above 0.7). Average variance extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.40 are acceptable if the composite reliability of the constructs is higher than 0.7 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Safiih, & Azreen, 2016; Huang, *et al.,* 2013; Hon, *et al.,* 2012). AVE tends determine convergent validity of the constructs. CFI, GFI, IFI, TLI must be less than 0.95, AGFI less than 0.850, and RMSEA and RMR must be less than 0.08 (Gaskin, 2012). The results in table 4.6 notify that $\chi 2/df$ value is 2.082 which is clearly in the acceptance range. Furthermore, P-value is 0.000, GFI value is 0.890, AGFI 0.850, RMSEA 0.058 and SRMR 0.055. All these absolute fit indices are in the acceptance range. The incremental fit indices results reveal CFI value 0.921, IFI 0.922 and TLI 0.909, which are all less than 0.95; hence are in the acceptable range. Thus, table 4.2 fulfills not only EFA and CFA criterion, but also satisfies the thresholds of convergent validity.

Table 4.2: *EFA/CFA and Convergent Validity Outcomes*

Constructs & Items	ρ	λ	CR	AVE	α
Performance HRM Attributions (PHRA)					
PHRA1	0.688	0.678	0.777	0.422	0.796
PHRA2	0.537	0.617			
PHRA3	0.584	0.707			
PHRA4	0.888	0.790			
PHRA5	0.438	0.380			
Well-Being HRM Attributions (WBHRA)					

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WBHRA1	0.631	0.721	0.808	0.471	0.819
WBHRA2	0.723	0.771			
WBHRA3	0.791	0.815			
WBHRA4	0.749	0.666			
WBHRA5	0.468	0.361			
Gratitude (GRTD)					
GRTD1	0.763	0.758	0.767	0.526	0.761
GRTD2	0.716	0.792			
GRTD3	0.586	0.612			
General Job Stress (GJS)					
GJS1	0.524	0.579	0.869	0.404	0.870
GJS2	0.547	0.546			
GJS3	0.417	0.449			
GJS4	0.544	0.581			
GJS5	0.742	0.742			
GJS6	0.822	0.745			
GJS7	0.672	0.728			
GJS8	0.496	0.644			

a. Absolute fit indices
χ^2 = 458.067, df = 220, χ^2/df = 2.082, *P* = 0.000, GFI = 0.890, AGFI = 0.861, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.055
b. Incremental fit indices
CFI = 0.921, IFI = 0.922 and TLI = 0.909

*Note. *p<0.05; ρ = Factor loadings at 0.40 using EFA; λ = standardized factors loadings using CFA; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.*

4.3 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity indicates the extent to which constructs are different from each other. Discriminant validity is determined by variance inflation factor (VIF), correlations and maximum shared variance (MSV) (Hameed and Khwaja, 2022). Discriminant validity is satisfied when correlations among exogenous constructs is less than 0.85. The variance inflation factor (VIF) value must be between 1-4, correlations results must be less than 0.85 and maximum shared variance must be less than 1 (Zaman *et al.,* 2021). VIF value greater than 4, and correlations results higher than 0.85 indicate multicollinearity concern. The results attained in table 4.3 indicate that there were no discriminant validity concerns.

Table 4.3: *Discriminant Validity Outcomes*

Constructs	VIF	Tolerance	MSV	GJS	WBHRA	PHRA	GRTD
GJS	-	-	0.447	**0.636**			
WBHRA	1.060	0.944	0.280	0.529	**0.686**		
PHRA	1.069	0.935	0.447	0.668	0.512	**0.650**	
GRTD	1.051	0.952	0.286	0.512	0.474	0.535	**0.725**

4.4 Hypotheses Results

Table 4.4 below provides comprehensive results of the hypotheses testing. The path coefficients (beta values) of hypotheses H1a and H1b were -0.128 and -0.254 respectively. T-values provide insights about the acceptance and rejection of a hypotheses. T-value greater than 1.96 (for two tailed tests) shows acceptance of a hypotheses (Tabassum, et al., 2020; Zaman, *et al.,* 2022). Similarly, P-value was significant at 0.000. Thus, H1a and H1b were accepted. The path coefficients of H2a and H2b were 0.157 and 0.126 respectively. T-values attained were 2.803 and 2.242 respectively and the outcomes were in the acceptable significance levels of less than 0.05. The third hypothesis of the study also had significant outcomes as beta value was -0.128, t-value -2.351 and p-value of 0.025 respectively. These results demonstrate strong direct relationship between the constructs. H4a and H4b necessitated a mediation analysis. The mediated path outcomes of H4a and H4b were -0.108 and -0.238 respectively, with a t-value of -2.45 and -4.49 respectively. Henceforth, all the hypotheses were accepted.

Table 4.4   *Hypotheses Results for Direct Effects*

	Hypotheses	**Path Coefficients**	**S.E**	**T-Value**	**P-value**	**Results**
H1a	PHRA → GJS	-0.128	0.043	-2.345	p<.001	Supported
H1b	WBHRA → GJS	-0.254	0.053	-4.655	p<.001	Supported
H2a	PHRA → GRTD	0.157	0.050	2.803	p<.001	Supported
H2b	WBHRA → GRTD	0.126	0.061	2.242	p<.001	Supported
H3	GRTD → GJS	-0.128	0.048	-2.351	p<.001	Supported
H4a	PHRA → GRT → GJS	-0.108	0.044	-2.450	p<.001	Supported
H4b	WBHRA → GRT → GJS	-0.238	0.053	-4.490	p<.001	Supported

5. Discussion and Recommendations

This study has important theoretical, practical, and contextual implications for HRM-well-being literature.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

At the heart of HRM theory, lies the idea that HRM practices should be designed and enacted with a view to improve employee performance and enhance their well-being (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Ogbonnaya and Aryee, 2021; Peccei *et al.*, 2013). The reality of theoretical HRM focus depicts a different picture altogether. Researchers have shown that HRM studies are primarily focused on how to enhance the competitive advantage for the employer through enhancing employee performance, while mostly neglecting employee well-being (Beer *et al.*, 2015; Guest, 2017; Ogbonnaya and Aryee, 2021; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019). Another issue in HRM and

well-being literature arises from the conflicting outcomes model (Van De Voorde *et al.*, 2012); this model suggests that HRM practices can do more harm than good for employee well-being. The conflicting outcome model has shown that HRM's singular focus on improving performance can result in employees experiencing increased job-demands and intensified work, ultimately leading to an increase in job stress levels and deteriorated levels of overall well-being (Kroon *et al.*, 2009; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018, 2019; Van De Voorde *et al.*, 2012). Contradictory results in the literature that establishes the relationship between HRM and well-being, in particular the strand of research that demonstrates that HRM practices can increase work stress, necessitated the present study which examined *how* HRM may reduce employees' general job stress levels. Researchers are increasingly calling for the employee well-being to also be considered in HRM literature. Ogbonnaya and Aryee (2021) strongly recommend that future HRM research must consider how HRM can improve employee well-being and not just focus on performance enhancement. Another emerging and possibly more comprehensive field is sustainable HRM (Kramar, 2022; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019) and common good HRM (Aust *et al.*, 2020). One of the main foci of common good and sustainable HRM is focusing on improving employee health at work through HR practices and encouraging health promoting behaviors among employees (Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018). This study recommends that while promoting employee health at work is certainly a commendable goal, a more concentrated scholarly effort is required in order to reduce occupational stress.

Occupational stress can nullify and oppose efforts to promote mutual gains as instead of a win-win scenario, it results in a loss for both the worker and the employer. While it is well known that rising occupational stress damages employee health, what is ignored even by the employers is that it costs organizations in terms of sick leaves, medical costs and reduced productivity. Since the Covid-19 pandemic has also increased levels of toxic stress among the working population, it has become even more vital for researchers to develop theoretical frameworks through which employee stress levels can be reduced/managed through both proactive HRM policies and reactive/remedial measures. Thus, the present study was carried out because researchers are demanding scholarly robust yet practically viable HRM frameworks that show how HRM can reduce employee stress and improve their well-being (Guest, 2017; Kramar, 2022; Ogbonnaya and Aryee, 2021; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019).

The present study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature by showing how positive perceptions of HRM practices (benevolent HRM attributions) can reduce general job stress of employees. In order to examine employees' subjective perceptions and interpretations of HRM practices, the present study chose the construct of benevolent HRM attributions (Fehr *et al.*, 2017); two benevolent HRM attributions were chosen to examine their impact on general job stress levels, a). Performance HRM attributions (employees perceive that HRM practices support and help improve their performance) (Shantz *et al.*, 2016b), b). Well-being HRM attributions (employees perceive that HRM practices improve their well-being). "despite its promise, the role of HR attributions remains under-developed both theoretically and empirically" and "it is therefore timely to extend theory and research on the role of HR attributions" (Sanders *et al.*, 2021, p. 2).

The present study focused on the impact of benevolent HRM attributions on reducing employee stress as this is a novel, promising yet underdeveloped area. The present findings showed that both

performance and well-being HRM attributions reduce employees' job stress, thereby reinforcing the idea that the effect of HRM practices on employee performance or well-being does not depend on the inherent vices or virtues of HRM practices (Sanders *et al.*, 2014). Instead, HRM's influence on well-being is based on employee perceptions of the said practices, i.e., whether employees think such practices are supportive, caring or benevolent (Fehr *et al.*, 2017; Sanders *et al.*, 2014).

Since the impact of HRM practices on well-being is neither direct nor immediate (Sanders *et al.*, 2021; Sanders *et al.*, 2014), it suggests the presence of intermediary and intervening variables (Boxall *et al.*, 2016; Hewett *et al.*, 2018; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). These findings have shown that positive subjective interpretations (benevolent HRM attributions) can reduce employee stress levels. It is such employee perceptions and interpretations (rather than the content of HRM practices) that can help shed light on the contents of the closed *black box* (Boselie et al., 2005), which conceals the intermediary variables and theoretical bridges that connect HRM with employee well-being (Nishii's *et al.*, 2008; Sanders *et al.*, 2014). More particularly, only a handful of studies have examined the intermediary variables while examining the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and employee well-being (Hewett *et al.,* 2018; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Wang *et al.,* 2020). To the best of the author's knowledge, no study has examined intermediary variables between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' job stress levels. The present study added to the literature by demonstrating that employee gratitude is one such intermediary variable that can bridge the theoretical gap and mediate the relationship between both benevolent HRM attributions (performance and well-being) and employees' general job stress.

The construct of gratitude has been considered an exceptionally important psychological/emotional state, virtue and personality trait in positive psychology movement (Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Emmons and Mishra, 2011; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Waters *et al.*, 2021). For two decades, special attention has been paid in scholarly literature on how gratitude arises and impact people's psychological, emotional and social well-being (Cregg and Cheavens, 2021; Portocarrero *et al.*, 2020; Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). Despite gratitude's promise and potential to improve employee well-being in occupational settings, scholarly studies on how gratitude arises in work settings and can reduce employee stress and improve their well-being are almost non-existent (Di Fabio *et al.*, 2017; Fehr *et al.*, 2017; Youssef-Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Since gratitude has been repeatedly shown to arise in the beneficiary because of the perceived benevolence of a benefactor (Algoe *et al.,* 2008; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Tsang, 2006), the same effect was expected to happen in organizational settings (Di Fabio *et al.*, 2017; Emmons, 2003; Fehr's *et al.*, 2017), though this was never empirically examined. The present study has lent empirical support to the theoretical assertions that gratitude in work settings can arise because of the perceived benevolence of employment practices (Emmons, 2003; Fehr *et al.*, 2017), and also that such employee gratitude be an important valuable emotional resource which can reduce employees' general jobs stress levels (Fredrickson, 2004, 2013; Waters *et al.*, 2021),

In short, both benevolent HRM attributions were shown to have a direct and negative impact on GJS levels and a positive impact on employee gratitude. Gratitude also demonstrated a negative impact on GJS. The results also showed that gratitude mediated the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and employees' general job stress levels.

5.2 Practical and Contextual Implications

The current study has developed and examined an HRM-well-being model in Pakistan, as HRM literature in the country is in a nascent phase and requires sound theoretical development (Ali and Brandl, 2017). The findings are especially relevant to Pakistani telecommunication companies (PKTelcos), but also generalizable to different contexts and cultures. Studies conducted in developing countries can contribute to an understanding and generalizability of HRM and organizational psychology literature (Budhwar and Debrah, 2013; Khilji, 2012; Schuler, 2013).

PKTelcos operate in a highly turbulent, technologically dynamic and stress inducing environment Since extreme competition and price wars have made PKTelcos exert excessive pressures on their employees to perform, these employees suffer from high stress (Mansoor *et al.,* 2011; Naseem, 2018), with higher mean stress levels than the health sector, banking, software companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and insurance companies (Khan and Imtiaz, 2015). More recently, Malik and Sattar (2022) showed that there was high prevalence of workplace bullying and stress prevalent among PKTelco employees. There is a complete dearth of quality research on the relationship between HRM and well-being in the telecom sector of Pakistan. Two studies have shown that HRM practices are linked with increased job-satisfaction (Jawaad *et al.,* 2019) and resilience (Khan *et al.,* 2019) in PKTelcos. Other studies in the country have followed the international trend and shown mixed and inconclusive results for the relationship between HRM and well-being. For instance, from a mixed sample of employees Gulzar *et al.* (2014), showed that HRM practices are linked with increased employee anxiety and burnout.

Although occupational stress requires urgent attention and investment, few organizations would do so because of required effort and financial commitments (Guest, 2017). Employee well-being or occupational stress in particular, do not seem to be a priority for Pakistani organizations. In an qualitative study, Fareed *et al.* (2019) interviewed leading HRM professionals from all PKTelcos. Fareed and colleagues asked these HR professionals questions regarding the challenges faced by PKTelcos and what makes HRM professionals effective in answering those challenges. The answers given by HRM professionals revolved around employee performance, productivity and organizational performance. The challenges to employee well-being or occupational stress in the telecom sector were not even raised once.

The PKTelco HRM departments must recognize that they are also the custodian of employee well-being and convince their management to put effort into ensuring the same. Improving employee well-being is a core ethical/social responsibility of HRM practices (Beer *et al.,* 1984; Guest, 2017). There is also a good business case for firms to focus on employees' psychological and emotional well-being as a happy worker is a productive worker (Nielsen *et al.,* 2017; Zelenski *et al.,* 2008). Legislation makes it mandatory for employers to invest in employees' physical health and safety, regardless of its costs (Quinlan *et al.,* 2010). On the other hand, work stress is stigmatized as stress-proneness and hyper-susceptibility to stress on part of the employees, with employers shouldering almost no responsibility for alleviating occupational stress through HR policies (Butler *et al.,* 2015). As early as 1985, in an article "*who's liable for stress on the job"*, Ivancevich *et al.* (1985)

suggested that stress can be as debilitating as physical injury and employers should constitute policies for management of stress. While Article 37(e) of the constitution of Pakistan decrees that " the state shall make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work" (COP, 2018, p. 18), enforcement of employee health and welfare legislation in Pakistan is almost non-existent (Ahmad, 2019). Given the physical health harm resulting from occupational stress, securing *just and human conditions of work* must include ameliorating and managing employee stress through HRM practices (Beer *et al.,* 1984; Guest, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019).

There is still a silver lining in the cloud as PKTelcos have implemented a full range of sophisticated HRM practices. The empirical findings from the study provide a viable solution to HRM practitioners at PKTelcos as they can invest energy and resources towards ensuring that HRM practices are perceived as supportive, caring and indicative of the management' benevolent intent. The biggest challenge in this regard is the difference between *intended and implemented* HR policies/practices (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018). Since HRM policies are implemented by line managers, *Intended Vs Implemented* HRM issue points to the idea that there is a gap between what management intended their HRM practices to be (e.g., effective, friendly and supportive) and how they are implemented by unwilling or incompetent line managers, and thus ultimately perceived by the employees through line managers (Khwaja and Ahmad, 2013). It is not the intended HRM practices but how they are carried out by line managers and ultimately perceived by employees that generates a positive or negative employee response (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018; Nishii's *et al.,* 2008).

The same intended/implemented HRM issue exists in Pakistani organizations. Organizations in Pakistan have hybrid management practices in that they display signs of modernity while simultaneously preserve a traditional (*seth)* manner of managing employees (Khakwani and Case, 2012). In the Pakistani context, Saqib *et al.* (2022) showed that though management may intend to enact well-being oriented HRM practices, but the same HR practices become a manifestation of culturally appropriate *"lordly management style (seth management in Urdu)"* when enacted by line managers; these *lordly management practices* (in the guise of HRM practices) neglect employee well-being and "reinforce and accentuate existing material and status differences"(p.14) between management and employees. HRM practices may be designed with the best of intentions by the HRM department; however, "By maintaining *seth* culture, managers are able to reproduce their social power and status, disrupting and negating the aims of HRM in dominant HRM models" (Saqib *et al.*, 2022).

Since gratitude is a remedy for toxic emotions in organizations (Emmons, 2003), HRM practices must can be designed and enacted to invoke organization-wide gratitude (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Fehr *et al.,* 2017). PKTelco HRM managers can design and enact HR practices come across as supportive, caring and exemplifying their organization's benevolent intent towards employees, while guarding them against proliferation of the *seth* culture. Such policies can engender gratitude and result in lower levels of employee stress. Since line manager's willingness, perceived agency, competence and agreement is absolutely essential in ensuring intended HRM objectives (Townsend *et al.*, 2022), they should be extensively trained and monitored to carry out the policies in true letter and spirit (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018; Bos-Nehles *et al.,* 2013; Jiang *et al.,* 2013). Formal and informal communication and feedback channels must be open to understand

how HRM policies are being perceived at the worker's end, and especially if they come across as a manifestation of *seth* culture.

Organizations can also benefit from prioritizing, highlighting, and strengthening benevolent HRM perceptions through intra-firm communication strategies and employer branding. Employer branding communications can convey the message to the employees that their contributions are valued and the management cares about their well-being (App *et al.,* 2012; Kryger Aggerholm *et al.,* 2011). Put simply, it is not enough for PKTelcos to develop policies and practices to reduce employee stress. To invoke gratitude, it is important that HRM policies are clearly perceived and considered by employees as caring and benevolent. Using conventional media (posters, internal newsletters etc.), company intranet and social media, organizations can convey the perception that HRM practices are enacted to support employees perform better and improve their well-being.

The present study shows that employees feel increasingly grateful when they believe that their organization has enacted HRM practices to support them and care for them. Various PKTelco organizations have disjointed policies where they facilitate the employees by getting them discounts for gym/sports club memberships. However, these HRM departments can develop and administer comprehensive wellness programs to demonstrate their care and support for employees (Ongori and Agolla, 2008; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018). Passey *et al.* (2018) identify some key components of organizational wellness programs as follows, a). *build a supportive organizational and social environment, integrate wellness in organizational structure, provide workplace screening and health education, and create employee assistance programs*. These programs can have a direct and indirect effect; first, they directly improve employee well-being. Indirectly, they can result in employee perceptions that their organization supports them and cares about them; ultimately, these benevolent HRM attributions can enhance employee gratitude, which in turn can improve various well-being indicators.

Studies on gratitude over the past two decades show that gratitude interventions (GIs) e.g., counting one's blessings, gratitude letters and journaling, thanking a benefactor and turning one's attention to positives in life can improve the experience of gratitude among people (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Gottlieb and Froh, 2021; Ma *et al.*, 2017; Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). GIs can also rouse "the expression, recognition, and perception of gratitude in the workplace" (Cortini *et al.,* 2019, p. 8). Evidence suggests that gratitude in occupational settings can also be invoked in with similar activities and exercises. Benevolent HRM attributions, appreciation programs (where expression of gratitude is encouraged at different levels in the organization), GIs and developmental feedback can embed gratitude within the identity and culture of an organization (Fehr *et al.,* 2017). Recently, Sawyer *et al.* (2022) conducted various studies where greater mindfulness and perspective taking lead to improved levels of gratitude among employees. The methodology deployed by authors was a 16-minute mindfulness meditation activity followed by gratitude journaling over 10 days. The authors discovered that these activities resulted in increased levels of gratitude and pro-social motivation among employees. PK Telcos can also attempt to

introduce similar activities and intervention to permeate gratitude within the culture of their organizations.

5.3 Conclusion and Limitations

The present study demonstrated that the impact of these benevolent HRM attributions on general job stress takes place through employee gratitude. Di Fabio *et al.* (2017) suggested that studies examining gratitude in organizations were quite rare; they further recommended that such studies were required because gratitude "contributes to enhancing individual well-being and reducing negative emotions" (p. 2). A sentiment which is shared by Fehr *et al.* (2017) who stated, "only a handful of studies have scholars examined its role in organizations" (p. 361). This study contributes to existing literature by showing how employee gratitude arises in response to perceived supportive and well-being oriented HRM practices. Moreover, this study showed the impact of such gratitude on reducing employees' general job stress levels. This study also makes a contextual contribution by developing and empirically examining an HRM-well-being framework in Pakistan.

Cross-sectional research has some inherent limitations which also apply to this study. The relationship between constructs was examined at only one point in time which can be considered associational but not causal. Further studies can be conducted by deploying a longitudinal research design to remedy this particular issue. Moreover, the present study was conducted in the telecom sector of Pakistan. Selecting one industry might also limit the generalizability of the findings and does not account for between-industry differences.

5.4 Future Research Directions

Mixed/inconclusive evidence in HRM well-being literature, particularly the studies which attempt to examine the link between HRM and stress, necessitates more research in the area specifically in the Pakistani context. HRM attributions offer a valuable lens to look into HRM *black box* (Boxall *et al.,* 2016; Paauwe and Blok, 2015; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019) which obscures the link between HRM practices and employee well-being. The research study has examined two benevolent HRM attributions, i.e., performance HRM attributions and well-being HRM attributions. There are other benevolent HRM attributions that can be the focus of future studies, e.g., justice HRM attributions. Justice is largely driven by perceptions of benevolence of the other party (Tyler, 1989). Thus, HRM practices can be considered benevolent by the employees if they are perceived as upholding fairness and justice.

Fehr *et al.* (2017) argue that gratitude can be cultivated at three levels; *episodic gratitude*, which is a feeling of thankfulness occurring for a brief period of time in response to a particular kindness of a benefactor; *Persistent gratitude*, which is a more stable emotion of gratitude emerging in

employees as a result of frequent beneficent organizational acts and practices; *collective gratitude*, that becomes embedded in organizational policies, culture, people and the social context. This study examined only two antecedents of state or episodic gratitude. Future research can examine antecedents of all three types of gratitude and how the experience of episodic gratitude turns into persistent and collective gratitude (Fehr *et al.,* 2017). For instance, cognitive training can help increase the intensity and frequency with which people experience gratitude, thus allowing people to experience gratitude on a more persistent basis (Wood *et al.,* 2008). The biggest challenge for researchers is to understand how an organization can embed gratitude in its culture and social context. Culturally embedded collective gratitude becomes a durable organizational emotion and a defining feature of the organization itself (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Fehr *et al.,* 2017).

Declaration of Conflicting Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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