

Creatures of a Lesser God! Gender-based differences in HR attributions mediated by person-job fit: A poly-contextual analysis

Abstract

Purpose. Using social information processing and sense-making theory, the current study examines how the poly-contextual factors and social environment of employees provide unique cues and shape an employee's person-job (PJ) fit perceptions in ways that enable males to perceive a better PJ fit than their female counterparts at work. These perceptions of PJ fit act as mediating processes between gender-based differences in HR commitment or HR control attributions.

Methodology. After collecting two waves of data over a six-month period from a sample of 498 banking sector professionals in Pakistan, the hypothesized relationships were tested using hierarchical multiple regression.

Findings. It was found that gender (female) was positively related to HR control attributions and negatively related to PJ fit perceptions and HR commitment attributions. The mean differences between males and females concerning these study variables were significant. Also, PJ fit mediated the relationship between gender and HR attributions.

Value. The study contributes to the advancement and understanding of the predictors of HR attributions by examining the poly-contextual factors that shape unique experiences, knowledge structures and social information processing, thus forming distinct PJ fit perceptions and subsequent HR commitment or control attributions for males and females.

Keywords: Gender, poly-contextual factors, person-job fit, HR commitment attributions, HR control attributions

HR attribution theory seeks to explain how and why people make causal judgments about events and behaviour, what types of judgments they make, and the consequences of these with regard to their subsequent workplace attitudes and behaviour (Kelley, 1973; Nishii et al., 2008). Nishii et al. (2008) explained that employees could form internal HR attributions, such as HR commitment attributions (employee judgments that HR practices are motivated by the management's intention to enhance employee well-being and service quality), or HR control attributions (employee judgments that HR practices are designed due to the management's motive to reduce costs and exploit employees). In addition, they can formulate external HR attributions (such as organizational motives to implement specific management practices to satisfy unions, the government, the regulatory bodies, etc.). The possibility that employees could form idiosyncratic attributions of why HR practices exist in an organization has been recognized in various studies (Nishii and Wright, 2008) and has implications for their subsequent behaviour (Nishii et al., 2008). The extant research on HR attributions has, to date, focused mainly on the consequences of HR attributions while largely neglecting their possible antecedents (Fontinha et al., 2012; Hewett et al., 2019; Nishii et al., 2008; Shantz et al., 2016), with only a few exceptions (Hewett et al., 2019). Understanding the antecedents of HR attributions is essential because different attributions are reported to be linked differently to a range of employee outcomes (Fontinha et al., 2012; Nishii et al., 2008; Shantz et al., 2016). Consequently, there have been calls from academic experts in the field to extend this body of literature around HR attributions by constructing and testing the theory on their precursors (Hewett et al., 2019; Nishii and Wright, 2008; Shantz et al., 2016). In response to the calls for research in this area, the current study attempts to examine how employees form their HR commitment or control attributions.

In the domain of social and organizational psychology, research has revealed that the way in which individuals draw causal inferences is based on their appraisal of the situation, environment, and social context. Not every employee processes information obtained from the social context in the same way (Nishii and Wright, 2008). Therefore, the organizational diversity literature suggests that individual differences can lead to cognitive schemas and beliefs that are shaped by their current or previous experiences of the social environment (Joshi, 2006) which has a subsequent bearing on their attributions of HR practices (Hewett et al., 2018; Nishii and Wright, 2008).

The current study argues that we can build an understanding of HR attributions by illuminating how individual-level, gender-based differences in the social context can lead to differences in HR attributions. As such, we draw upon social information processing theory and propose the adoption of a poly-contextual perspective, focusing on the different cues received by males and females from their work environment as the predictors of employee HR attributions. Policies may be designed uniformly for all employees belonging to a similar job profile; however, in practice, managers are guided by the poly-contextual factors, such as societal norms, religious, cultural, political beliefs, and values, in the implementation of these policies. These poly-contextual factors also shape the sense-making narratives, unique experiences, cognitive schemas and knowledge structures of the employees and drive the inferences about causality (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). This study argues that poly-contextual factors and their inter-woven complexities can confer different experiences and information on different gender groups and thus provide a distinct explanatory power regarding the employees' views of why human resource management (HRM) practices exist (Hofstede, 1997). Employees' experiences have been recognized as an essential antecedent of attributions and previous researchers have examined demographic characteristics as the

proxies of employees' experience and background (Helms and Stern, 2001). This leads to the first research question: *do gender-based differences exist within the HR commitment and HR control attributions of women and men based on a poly-contextual perspective?* It is important to note that this research examines only the two dimensions of internal HR attributions (HR commitment and HR control attributions) since these have been reported as exerting the strongest influence on employee outcomes compared to external attributions (Guest et al., 2021).

Extant research argues that "to understand or to predict behaviour, the person and their environment have to be considered as one constellation of interdependent factors" (Lewin, 1952, p. 239). In examining the links between gender-based differences and HR attributions, the person-job (PJ) fit is explored as a process mechanism, forming the next study goal. In examining employee perspectives of HRM, this paper argues that the match between individual abilities and organizational demands (the demands-abilities fit (DA fit)), and the match between employee needs and the resources provided (the needs-supplies fit (NS fit)) could potentially mediate the gender-based employees' interpretations of why HR practices exist (van Vianen, 2018). Depending on how optimal the NS and DA fits are, males and females construe critical information and assign meaning to their continuing workflow (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), thereby influencing their attributions of HR practices. Using sense-making theory, which views sense-making as a social construction process that outlines how employees understand the workplace in relation to themselves through the work that is assigned to them (Weick, 1995), this study argues that poly-contextual factors lead to unique perceptions of PJ fit for men and women, which colours their distinct HR attributions. This leads to the next study question: *do PJ fit perceptions mediate the relationship between the gender-based differences in HR commitment and HR control attributions?*

The present study makes at least four important contributions. First, it sheds light on the predictors of HR attributions by examining gender-based individual differences. Second, it considers poly-contextual factors that shape the unique experiences for males and females, by providing them with different signals and shaping their knowledge structures distinctly to inform their HR commitment or HR control attributions. Third, it examines how poly-contextual factors draw different PJ fit perceptions for males and females and subsequently determine their unique HR attributions. Lastly, unlike most of the HR attributions research, that has been conducted in a western context, this research was conducted in the unique context of Pakistan, which has unique

religious and political ideologies, social norms, and values that make it an exciting research site. Examining the poly-contextual factors beyond cultural factors becomes more critical for collectivistic countries, as these countries place more importance on contextual cues and societal pressure. Therefore, they are more likely to use more situationally oriented attributions to internalize the socially acceptable norms than in an individual context (Chao et al., 2011).

The Pakistani context – a thought-provoking study

So, what poly-contextual factors make Pakistan a unique and exciting area for research?

While the West has, to a great extent, overcome the gender-based gap, discrimination and other biases through feminist movements, Pakistan still struggles, as evidenced from the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI, 2021). The GGGI (2021) reports that Pakistan is the lowest-ranked country in South Asia, with an overall gender gap of 55%. It is second last (153 out of 156 countries) in the Global Gender Gap Index with respect to gender equality (GGGI, 2021). Female participation in the workforce remains chronically low (22.6% in 2016) compared to

the 67.8% of women in the US labour market, even though women comprise 51% of the country's total population. Only 5% of managerial positions are occupied by women in Pakistan compared to 42% in the US (GGGR, 2021). Furthermore, the income of an average Pakistani woman is 16.3% of an average Pakistani man, which is significantly lower than the 65.4% income of an average woman in the US compared to that of an average US man's income (GGGR, 2021). The country is unable to break the shackles of gender discrimination owing to a multitude of complex interwoven factors that could be viewed as a Pandora's Box (Syed, 2009; Syed and Ali, 2013). Pakistan was built in the name of Islam, with more than 98% of the population calling themselves Muslim (Imtiaz and Shahid, 2013). Although Islamic commandments allow female employment and advocate women's rights and equality (Al-Asfour et al., 2017), working women's outlook and job experiences in Islamic settings fail to reflect this (Syed, 2008). Unfortunately, the religious guidelines are greatly distorted due to the way in which they are reshaped, moulded, misrepresented, portrayed, and preached by "mullas" (religious scholars) to maintain the dominance of men and afford them power and control over women (Riaz, 2005; Raza and Murad, 2010; Pio and Syed, 2013). The patriarchal society uses religion as a tool and presents the profile of an "ideal Muslim woman" as one who exercises piety by remaining within the bounds of the home, does not interact with "na mahrams" (men with whom they are unacquainted), and does not go outside the home unnecessarily, as that is not her role (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Raza and Murad, 2010; Syed, 2009; Syed and Ali, 2013). In fact, being low with regard to gender egalitarianism, the society believes that it is men's role to provide for their women's needs (Cotter et al., 2011). All attempts by women to seek their (employment) rights spark a tremendous backlash among mullas and conservative males, who distort and decipher the Quranic guidelines in accordance with their male-controlled interests (Syed and Ali, 2013).

In Pakistan, HR is neither formalized nor standardized, HR practices are rarely monitored or audited, and the rules and procedures around HR practices remain unclear and undefined (Khan et al., 2013; Khilji, 2003; Niazi et al., 2019). As the implementers of HR practices, managers are poorly trained, yet afforded great discretion over allocating the resources and implementing the HR practices (Nadeem and Kayani, 2019). The system of “guanxi” that is prevalent in China appears to work in the same fashion in Pakistan (Islam, 2004; Nadeem and Kayani, 2019). Thus, it is “the who one knows” who determines the rules of the land, leaving women at a disadvantage in light of the societal expectations that a pious woman does not interact with ‘na-mehrams’ unnecessarily (Syed, 2009). Unfortunately, this means that the multi-contextual factors are heavily interwoven and coloured by misrepresented, male-chauvinistic guidelines, to the detriment of women. Women thus remain caught and trapped in the vicious poly-context and remain “creatures of the lesser God.”

Gendered differences and HR attributions

The poly-contextual factors, such as social, political, cultural, and religious norms and patriarchal ideology, that exist in a society are expected to be reflected also in its organizations (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Syed and Ali, 2013; Pio and Syed, 2013; Tariq and Syed, 2018), influencing how the employers and organizations act and the ways in which the employees live up to those expectations (Scott, 2014; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). The social information processing theory argues that the conditions of the workplace (events) are not given but constructed (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), based on people’s experience of the poly-context. Poly-contextual factors provide unique information and work experience in ways that cultural differences alone may be unable to capture (Shapiro et al., 2007). Research

suggests that human behaviour is highly sensitive to social contexts (Dishion and Patterson, 1997). Borrowing from the tenets of social information processing theory, we argue that employees' context provides different cues to men and women, based on their contrasting experiences, and leads them to develop alternative mental models, sense-making processes (Weick, 1995), and knowledge structures with regard to why HR events take place (Dodge and Crick, 1990). Thus, the information from the social environment speaks more loudly, giving individuals cues through which they construct and interpret HR events. Employees are expected to gather and interpret information from the myriad of poly-contextual factors and develop experience-based mental representations regarding whether their organization's intention to implement HR practices is control-focused or commitment-focused. The power of the social informational context to affect the employees' beliefs and judgements is not new (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978).

In Pakistani society, managers, who are usually male (GGGR, 2021), are overwhelmed by the context presented above and thus implement HR practices in the workplace that are coloured by what is 'socially acceptable', resulting in gender inequality. For example, the gender segregation produced by the poly-contextual factors prevailing in patriarchal societies like Pakistan reproduces inequality in the workplace by providing women with limited access to power, networking, career development or promotion opportunities, and rewards, when compared to men (Ali, 2013; Kanter, 1977). The stereotyping attached to women indicates that they cannot balance their work life with their family life, and that their work should never take priority over their family (Rehman and Rumi, 2012). The assumption is that women are "never" ready to assume higher roles, responsibilities, or challenges, as they lack capability and ability, as well as being less productive than men (Rehman and Roomi, 2012). This leads to the inequitable filtering of organizational resources that favour men. Since HR is

less formalized, while accountability and governance system in the country are weak (Khan et al., 2013; Khilji, 2003; Niazi et al., 2019), social relationships are a significant determinant of who gets what in an organization. However, the political frame has its roots in religion, as explained here. For women, socializing with men in the workplace, attending work lunches with them, or having work meetings over coffee with them are all considered unacceptable actions socially, which limits women's opportunities to build social networks, since their male colleagues occupy most of the powerful positions (Rehman and Roomi, 2012). Thus, the political, social, and cultural norm of "female modesty" limits women's opportunities within the workplace, impacting their access to the organizational resources (Syed et al., 2018). Men can access a wealth of information and resources that are inaccessible to women because of social networking opportunities that they are 'afforded' or entitled to receive by 'birth'. Because fewer opportunities are given to women, they remain low in terms of their organizational status or title and thus receive inferior treatment from their managers compared to their male counterparts, who can seek higher positions and titles (Cifre et al., 2013). Despite the increased percentage of women attaining higher education in Pakistan, they continue to face challenges regarding accessing HR resources/practices in terms of equal opportunities to mentorship, career development, promotion, resources, networking, information, participation, and decision-making. Based on social information processing theory, we argue that, since women lack access to and experience the reduced allocation of organizational HR resources, they are more likely to view and interpret the organizational intentions behind the implementation of HR practice as organizational attempts to control and exploit them, based on the information derived from their social context. By contrast, since the information from the social context is more favourable to their male counterparts based on their experiences in terms of the allocation of HR practices, they may process HR

events more favourably and judge that the HR practices are implemented by the organization to improve their well-being and work quality.

Hypothesis 1: Women are more likely to attribute the organizational motives behind the implementation of HR practices as being (a) control-focused, and (b) less commitment-focused (compared to men).

Gendered differences with regard to PJ fit

Although the focus on gender-related differences in terms of person-job or person-organization fit perceptions remains scarce to date (Scherer and Petrick, 2001), there are a few reports of gender-based differences with regard to the perceptions of PJ fit which indicate that men perceive higher levels of PJ fit compared to their female counterparts (Cifre et al., 2013; Scott, 2014). Research shows that organizational (HR) events provide information to employees about the extent to which they 'fit' into the broader organizational environment (Carless, 2005). Based on an evaluation of their experiences of and information derived from the organizational social context and HR events, individuals can determine the extent to which they perceive themselves as a 'fit' with the organization (Carless, 2005).

The current research argues that the perceptions of PJ fit may differ widely for job incumbents of opposite genders, based on their significantly different experiences arising from their interaction with their environment and HR events, which provide them with distinct information and cues. The differences between the informational cues based on the (mis)match between employees' needs and the organizational supplies/resources, such as training events, their ability and the organisational demands (the nature of task allocation, for example), determine their perceptions of PJ fit. Edwards (1991) outlined a two-dimensional

conceptualization of PJ fit consisting of an NS and a DA fit. An NS fit refers to the congruence between an employee's needs, desires, and preferences and the rewards received for doing the job. A DA fit is the compatibility between the job demands and employees' knowledge, skills, and ability (Cable and DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown, et al., 2005). In the Pakistani context, because of the lack of HR formalization, inadequate and corrupt governance, and limited accounting procedures, there is poor policy implementation by managers, which leaves more room for poly-contextual factors to come into play (Khan et al., 2013; Khilji, 2003; Niazi et al., 2019). In the Pakistani context, job characteristics are unevenly distributed between the genders; for example, women are assigned tasks with a lower decision latitude, skill utilization, and strategic value (GGGR, 2021), due to the contextual belief that they cannot and should not undertake such tasks. Since all of the organizational actors comply with the social norms and values, it is customary for managers preclude women from career development, promotion, and other related opportunities (Eagly et al., 1995), even when the women in question possess high levels of education and skill sets (Khilji, 2003; Khan et al., 2013). The dilemma is that many educated women today realize that they are being exploited in the name of religion, are challenging the situation, demanding their work rights (Khilji, 2003; Niazi et al., 2019), and aspiring for a career for the sake of a career and nothing else. However, many males (line managers) feel pressured and threatened due to the poly-contextual factors noted earlier and are unwilling/unprepared to provide women with equal work opportunities. Female employees continue to get a smaller share of the pie, their needs remain unmet, and they continue to be the "ideal victims" in the workplace, with their abilities undervalued (Khan et al., 2013), leading to their reduced PJ fit perceptions.

Hypothesis 2: Females report weaker PJ fit perceptions compared to males.

The mediation of PJ fit

This study argues that the perceptions of PJ fit mediate the relationship between gender and HR attributions. Women and men often make sense of their context by extracting information from the assigned task, which helps employees to form knowledge structures and cognitive schemas related to why certain HR practices are in place. In developing this argument, the study borrows from sense-making theory, which suggests that employees are keenly involved in an interpretive course in an attempt to make sense of their roles, job content, and themselves at work by understanding, comprehending, and extrapolating prompts received from stimuli (Weick, 1995). Thus, an alignment between people's needs/abilities and their job demands and supplies (PJ fit) can serve to form employee judgments about the organizational intentions underlying the implementation of HR practices (Kalleberg, 2009).

The research on gender discrimination indicates that treatment discrimination occurs when the job outcomes between the two gender-based employee groups are comparable in terms of their work experience, education, and skills but differ in terms of salary and other forms of HR events (Levitin, et al., 1971; Truman and Baroudi, 1994). Access discrimination occurs when the allocation of organizational resources is based on the non-job-related qualifications of individuals, such as their gender (Levitin, et al., 1971; Truman and Baroudi, 1994, 1994). In Pakistan specifically and around the globe generally, since the distribution of resources is unequal between men and women despite their comparable levels of abilities and skills (GGGR, 2021), employees' sense-making mechanisms may rationally prompt individuals to assign different interpretations to organizational HR events in their mental

schemas (Nishii and Wright, 2008) leading to their idiosyncratic understanding of why HR practices exist (Den Hartog et al., 2013). Task assignments given to women often do not match their ability, as they are either undervalued or considered peripheral, contingent employees, with limited strategic value to the organization (Truman and Baroudi, 1994, 1994). Societal norms contribute to the stereotype that, since women work only want to support their family financially and do not require/need/ aim to build their career, their access to the organisational (HR) resources should be limited. Managers, who are the gatekeepers of HR practices, filter out women based on these intersectionally-led stereotyped biases to create and sustain an overarching patriarchal ideology that excludes women from the workplace. Managers thus tend to adopt different HRM models, that are not intended to match the value and competency of employee groups but instead match their stereotypical ideas of work roles, guided by religious, family, political and economic logic. When (female) employees' needs and abilities fail to match the characteristics of an assigned organizational HR event (i.e., a perceived misfit occurs) in an 'access' and 'treatment' discriminating poly-contextual environment, they construe that the organization's intention behind HR practice implementation is self-interested, control-based, and aimed at maximizing the organization's own motives - whether profitability or a desire to conform to societal pressure. Women's sense-making does not allow them to consider that the organizational intentions to implement HRM might benefit themselves any way, since this is not what they experience in their social context. The formulation of care and well-being attributions requires positive (work) experiences and a sense of benevolence (Nishii et al., 2008). Contrarily, since men are considered to possess more valuable, unique skills and considered more strategically important for the organization than women (Levitin, et al., 1971; Truman and Baroudi, 1994, 1994), they perceive much better PJ fit levels than women.

Through the provision of the necessary organizational supplies and assignment of tasks that match their abilities, males are more likely to assume that the organization is making an effort to provide them with opportunities in which their capabilities, skills, and strengths can be fully utilized. This would mean that, for them, the organization is not allocating job roles with a disregard to their needs and skillsets but is, rather, concerned about their well-being and service quality, leading to (male) employees' sense-making that HR practices are commitment-focused.

Hypothesis 3: PJ fit perceptions mediate the relationship between gender and (a) HR commitment attributions and (b) HR control attributions.

Methodology

Participants and procedures

An online questionnaire was sent to the employees of a large public sector bank located in Pakistan for the purpose of collecting data via email. Gender inequality is a particular problem in the financial sector of Pakistan (Mirza and Jabeen, 2020). Out of the total of 748 employees working in the bank, an email was circulated on behalf of the researcher to all of the 612 employees working in non-managerial roles through the HR department of the bank, inviting them to participate in the online survey. Our decision to exclude managers from the research sample was based on the fact that our aim was to capture the employees' beliefs regarding the organizational motives in implementing HR practices (that are usually enacted by the (line) managers themselves). It was noted in the email that the data collected via the survey would only be accessible to the principal researcher for the sole purpose of research, and would not be shared with the HR department or have any bearing on their employment

relationship, whatsoever. A participation information sheet was also circulated to the potential study participants through the HR department, containing information about the scope, nature, and aims of the research and its practical relevance. The information sheet also specified that the decision to participate was completely voluntary and the respondents were assured that their data would remain anonymous and confidential at all times. To reduce the potential for common method bias, we collected the data at two different time-points: T1 and T2 (with a gap of six months in between). The respondents' names were recorded on the surveys filled out at T1, which were assigned identification codes so that the data collected at T2 could be matched with them. Once the coding had been completed, the names were removed from the surveys and only the data with unique identification codes were stored, thus keeping the data entirely confidential. Throughout the data collection process, the survey responses were only accessible to the principal researcher and were kept securely locked away. The survey was conducted in English, since the staff had good English language skills, the official language of Pakistan being English. During the first wave (T1), the participants completed a survey involving questions regarding their demographic characteristics and internal HR attributions. Six months later, during the second wave, the participants reported their PJ fit perceptions. By the time the two waves had been completed, we had amassed 498 complete responses, giving a response rate of 81%. Sixty-four percent of the employees were male; eighteen percent were aged less than 30 years, forty-one percent were aged 30 and 40 years and the remainder were above 40; twenty-nine percent had less than five years of work experience at the bank, forty-six percent had five to ten years' experience, and the remainder had over ten years' experience. Sixty-eight percent of the study participants were married.

Following the recommendations of Armstrong and Overton (1977), we examined the potential influence of no-response bias by comparing the early and late respondents with regard to the study variables. Research indicates that late respondents respond in similar ways to non-respondents (Poppo and Zenger, 2002). No significant differences were observed between the early and late respondents, which increased our confidence in the representativeness of the study sample.

Measures

All of the survey questions were adapted from previously established scales. Since all the measures used in the study had previously been established and tested for reliability and validity in various contexts, we did not conduct EFA but only CFA to check the distinctiveness of the various measures, where required. The responses to each item on the questionnaire were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree').

PJ fit. Two three-item scales were used to measure the demand-abilities fit and needs-supplies fit, respectively, as developed by Cable and DeRue (2002). Example items are 'The attributes that I look for in a job are fulfilled very well by my present job' and 'My abilities and training are a good fit with the requirements of my job'.

We checked the distinctiveness of the two sub-dimensions of PJ fit by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The results showed, that upon constraining the demand-abilities fit and needs-supplies fit into one factor, the fit indices became acceptable (GFI=0.93; AGFI=0.92; CFI=0.94; St. RMR=0.03; RMSEA=0.02). The indices, however, became inferior when treated as two sub-dimensions (GFI=0.74; AGFI=0.76; CFI=0.76; St. RMR=0.07; RMSEA=0.08). This outcome led us to treat PJ fit as a uni-dimensional construct.

Furthermore, the extant research shows that the two different components of P-J fit (i.e. needs-supplies fit and demands abilities fit) were initially studied as two sub-dimensions of fit but are now generally combined into the overall conceptualization of PJ fit (Cable and DeRue, 2002). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.92.

Commitment-focused HR attributions. We used a 10-item scale adopted from Nishii et al. (2008) to measure HR commitment attributions. The scale requested the participants to rate the two dimensions of HR commitment attributions, i.e., employee well-being and work quality, for the five selected HR practices used in the bank (selective recruitment, training, rewards, performance appraisal, and participation). We checked the distinctiveness of the two sub-dimensions of commitment-focused HR attributions by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). It was found that, when we constrained employee well-being and work quality into one factor, the fit indices became acceptable (GFI=0.92; AGFI=0.93; CFI=0.91; St. RMR=0.02; RMSEA=0.02). The indices, however, turned out to be inferior when these were treated as two sub-dimensions (GFI=0.77; AGFI=0.75; CFI=0.75; St. RMR=0.06; RMSEA=0.07). This outcome made us to treat commitment-focused HR attributions as a one-dimensional construct. Example items used in this scale are: 'our organization provides employees with training: (1) 'in order to help employees achieve high work quality' and (2) 'so that employees feel valued and respected, which enhances their well-being' (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).

Control-focused HR attributions. A 10-item scale was adopted from Nishii et al. (2008) to measure control-focused HR attributions. The respondents rated two sub-dimensions of control-focused HR attributions, i.e., employee exploitation and cost reduction, for each of the five HR practices measured in the study. We conducted CFA to check for the

distinctiveness of the two sub-dimensions of control-focused HR attributions. We discovered that, when cost reduction and employee exploitation were treated as one factor, the fit indices between the model and data were satisfactory (GFI=0.94; AGFI=0.96; CFI=0.95; St. RMR=0.03; RMSEA=0.02). The indices, however, became inferior when the two sub-factors were treated separately (GFI=0.77; AGFI=0.72; CFI=0.75; St. RMR=0.06; RMSEA=0.07). We thus treated control-focused HR attributions as a one-factor construct in the subsequent analysis. The sample item for this scale is: 'our organization provides employees the training: (1) 'to try to keep costs down' and (2) 'to get the most work out of employees' (Cronbach's α = 0.80).

Gender: Gender was dummy coded, with males assigned a value of 0 and females 1.

Controls. Demographics are considered important control factors in the HR attributions research (Hewett et al., 2019). To rule out the possible influence of these factors on the respondents' perceptions of the PJ fit and their responses to the dependent measures, we used the study participants' age, educational background, and tenure as the control variables. The controls were categorized as follows: employee age under 30, between 30 and 40, and over 40 =1, 2 and 3, respectively; single employee =0 and married employee =1; and employees with less than five years, between five and ten years, and over ten years' experience with the current organization =1, 2 and 3, respectively. Education was coded as follows: participants who had completed middle school or below =1, participants who had completed high school =2, participants with a college degree =3, participants with a bachelor's degree =4 and participants with a master's degree or above =5.

Preliminary analyses

Measurement Model: We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to determine the unidimensionality, validity, and reliability of the study constructs' underlying dimensions. Following the guidelines provided by Hair et al. (2006), and also because the chi-square is significantly affected by the sample size, we used the overall model's χ^2/df , the CFI, GFI, TLI and RMSEA to assess the model fit. We compared the fit indices of our hypothesized measurement model with numerous nested plausible alternative models, as presented in Table 1. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), that examined the distinctiveness of the study variables, as shown in Table 1, indicate that the fit indices for the hypothesized three-factor measurement model fit better than any of the other alternative nested models, and so support the discriminant validity of all of our study measures.

(Table 1 here)

Furthermore, the results of the factor loadings showed that all of the items loaded significantly on their intended latent factor and that the standardized loadings ranged from .71 to .89 ($p < .01$). No cross-loadings were observed. The average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.70, as follows: 0.76 (HR commitment attributions), 0.84 (HR control attributions), and 0.80 (PJ fit). Additionally, all of the composite reliabilities exceeded 0.80, as follows: 0.92 (HR commitment attributions), 0.95 (HR control attributions), and 0.86 (PJ fit), thus supporting the construct validity.

Hypothesis Testing

The means, standard deviations, α coefficients, and inter-correlations are reported in Table 2. The study participants reported a stronger HRM commitment attribution compared to the HR control attributions ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.61$, $M = 1.98$, $SD = .76$, respectively). We found that the PJ fit perceptions were positively related to HRM commitment attributions and negatively related

to HR control attributions ($r=0.36$, $p<0.01$; $r=-0.28$, $p<0.01$ respectively). HRM commitment attributions and HRM control attributions were negatively related to each other ($r=-0.25$, $p<0.01$), which indicates that, when employees' control-related HR attributions increase, their commitment-related HR attributions fall, and *vice versa*.

(Table 2 about here)

We tested the study hypotheses using a hierarchical multiple regression, as indicated in Table 3. None of the study controls had any significant impact on PJ fit, as indicated in Table 3. We evaluated the direct path from the independent variable (gender) to the HR commitment attributions and HR control attributions in model 2a and 3a in Table 3. The results indicated significant negative effects of gender on HR commitment attributions ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .01$) whereas these effects were positive for HR control attributions ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$). Additionally, we also performed an ANCOVA to examine gender-based differences in HR attributions. The ANCOVA yielded a main effect of gender, $F(1,223) = 15.54$ ($p < 0.01$), such that women ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.49$) reported higher levels of HR control attributions compared to men ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.79$). As expected, the ANCOVA yielded a main effect of gender, $F(1,004) = 18.43$ ($p < 0.01$), such that women ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .63$) reported weaker HR commitment attributions compared to men ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.01$). Thus, hypotheses 1a and 1b of the study were supported.

Our next study hypothesis proposed that gender is negatively related to PJ fit perceptions and that the gender-based differences between PJ fit perceptions are significant. We evaluated the direct path from the independent variable (gender) to the study's mediator (PJ fit) in model 1b in Table 3. The results indicated significant negative effects of gender on PJ fit perceptions ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .01$). Additionally, we conducted an ANCOVA to examine gender-

based differences in PJ fit. The ANCOVA yielded a main effect of gender, $F(1,3111) = 17.13$ ($p < 0.01$), such that women ($M = 2.10, SD = .63$) reported weaker PJ fit perceptions compared to men ($M = 4.44, SD = 0.72$).

Hypotheses 3a and b proposed that PJ fit mediates the relationship between gender and HR commitment and HR control attributions. The results in model 2b indicate that, when both gender and PJ fit perceptions are entered into the equation simultaneously, the effect of gender on HR commitment attributions becomes non-significant ($\beta = -0.21, n.s.$), whereas PJ fit significantly influences HR commitment attributions ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.01$). The results of the Sobel test also indicated the mediation of PJ fit in the links between gender and HR commitment attributions ($z = -4.82, p < .01$), thus supporting hypothesis 3a. Hypothesis 3b proposed that PJ fit mediates the relationship between gender and HR control attributions. The results in model 3b indicate that, when both gender and PJ fit perceptions are entered into the equation simultaneously, the effect of gender on HR control attributions becomes non-significant ($\beta = 0.10, n.s.$), whereas PJ fit significantly influences HR control attributions ($\beta = -0.29, p < 0.01$). The results of the Sobel test also indicated the mediation of PJ fit in the links between gender and HR control attributions ($z = -4.39, p < .01$), thus supporting hypothesis 3b.

The intersectional effects of gender and marital status on employee outcomes are noted in the extant literature (Kailasapathy, Kraimer and Metz, 2014). Although we did not hypothesize any such relationships, we conducted an additional analysis to examine the interactive effects of marital status and gender on the study's main and mediating relationships. The results from models 1c, 2c and 3c in table 3 show that married women had stronger negative perceptions of PJ fit and HR commitment attributions ($\beta = -0.41, p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.48, p < 0.01$, respectively), whereas stronger positive HR control attributions ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.01$). Model 2d and model 3d of Table 3 indicate that the interactive effects of gender and

marital status on HR commitment and HR control attributions became non-significant ($\beta = -0.25$, n.s., $\beta = 0.20$, n.s. respectively) whereas PJ fit perceptions remained significant in influencing both HR commitment and HR control attributions ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$, $\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) when these were entered simultaneously into the equation, thus indicating the mediation of PJ fit perceptions. The results of the Sobel test also indicated the mediation of PJ fit in the links between the interactive effects of gender and marital status on HR commitment and HR control attributions ($z = -4.19$, $p < .01$; $z = -4.59$, $p < .01$, respectively).

Discussion

This study extends the research on HR attributions by showing how national contextual factors, such as the traditional social, cultural, and religious values, work structure, work experiences, and the dominant gender ideology, may shape women and men's unique mental model of HR ascriptions. By building on social information processing theory, the study shows that employees are rational human beings, capable of processing information that is presented to them in their social environment. Their social environment forms their first-hand experiences and can strongly influence their interpretation of their employers' motives in implementing HR practices. After all, as they say, "actions speak louder than words."

Specifically, this two-wave study aimed to examine the effects of gender on the formation of two types of HR attributions, i.e., commitment and control-focused HR attributions, mediated by PJ fit perceptions. The study showed how poly-contextual factors lead to differences between the work experiences of males and females in Pakistani society, leading to differences in their social information processing of HR attributions. Although the

influence of gender differences on HR attributions has not been explored to date, the extant research indicates that women working in gender stereotypical contexts form different achievement and affiliation attributions compared to their male counterparts (Campbell and Henry, 1999; Chandler et al., 1983). Our research findings are also in line with extant research which indicates that gender-based differences reflect different individual knowledge structures and distinct mental models, which can lead to differences in cognitive processing and guide inferences about causality (Morris and Fu, 2001). This finding is also in line with extant research that indicates how various forces, such as religion, politics, and social norms, guide individuals' choices when creating sensemaking, narratives, and cognitive schemas to inform their interpretation of the social systems (Thornton and Ocasio, 2012). Teasing out the institutional and cultural factors and their interwoven complexities could provide better explanatory power regarding the employees' view of HRM practices (Brookes et al. 2011).

The research findings support the hypothesis that gender-based differences in PJ fit perceptions are linked uniquely to employees' HR control and commitment attributions. Theoretical perspectives, such as the person-environment fit, have been recommended but not examined to explain and understand the employees' perspectives of HR practices (Lepak et al., 2012). Our research indicates that gender-based differences contribute to the formation of differences in PJ fit perceptions, which ultimately translate into differences in terms of the two genders' HR commitment and HR control attributions through their sense-making processes. This research shows that perceptions of PJ fit provide employees with cues to interpret their organization's actions, intentions, and characteristics, as they lack "textbook" information about the organizational intentions (Turban, 2001). Our research shows that significantly lower levels of PJ fit are perceived by women, since the organizational demands and supplies fall short of their needs and abilities.

Our research shows that a lack of perceived PJ fit means that employees view the specific tasks assigned to them as based solely on the company's motivation to meet its own goals of cost reduction and increased competitiveness (i.e., HR control attributions), and *vice versa*. Although the relationship between PJ fit and HR attributions has not been explored in the existing research, the evidence suggests that a fit between employees and their environment leads to positive individually and organizationally relevant outcomes (Lepak et al., 2012). Also, the extant research has detected an analogy between employees' perceptions of the job content, assignments, and circumstances and their personal inclinations and preferences that determine their subsequent individual-level outcomes (Edwards, 1991).

Lastly, the findings from the additional analyses speak of a social context that places greater emphasis on married women staying at home. If they go out to work, they are further deprived of workplace management practices and opportunities, leading to a deeper perception of a reduced PJ fit and stronger HR control attributions among this group compared to unmarried women, and men (whether married or not). This finding is in line with extant research that reports differences between employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour based on the intersectionality between their gender and marital status (Kailasapathy et al., 2014; Tariq and Syed, 2018).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The current study contributes to the strategic HRM literature in multiple ways by examining the mechanisms regarding when and how employees' PJ fit perceptions determine their HR commitment and control attributions. The current study suggests that the research on HR attributions should be contextualized within the local, societal, sectoral and organizational

milieu. Although the design of HR practices may be consistent within a country, the heterogeneity within women and men's respective work experiences, based on the contextual factors and administrative apparatuses within their organizations (Thornton and Ocasio, 2012), can lead to differences in the interpretations of HR practices between the two gender groups.

Traditionally, HRM research has been conducted from two different standpoints. Person-based approaches focus on individual differences, positing that behaviour is best predicted by measuring the so-called "stable" personal characteristics, such as values, personality traits, and ability that are reflected in behaviour (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). On the other hand, situation-based approaches focus on more directly observable aspects of the work environment, such as the organizational policies and practices. This approach proposes that environmental factors exert the most significant influence on people's work experiences and behaviour (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). In exploring employees' perspectives of HRM, in the current study, these two perspectives are brought together, based on the assumption that they must be studied in conjunction in order to evaluate and understand how employees attach meaning to why HR practices exist.

Furthermore, although PJ fit has been applied in various contexts to assess numerous factors, such as applicant attraction, stress, job choice, and performance (Uggerslev et al., 2012), PJ fit perceptions have not been studied based on employees' perspectives of HRM. This research indicates that neither the job content nor individual differences alone determine an employees' perspectives of HR systems; rather, individual employees' experiences of the job context determine the extent of the fit and are vital for exploring employees' perspectives of HR. Our research indicates that PJ fit perceptions are critical with regard to employees' understanding of why HR practices are in place.

The current study may also be considered a response to the need to extend HR attributions theory into a non-western cultural context in order to examine HR attributions in different settings (Nishii et al., 2008). It is important to note that, although this research was conducted in the unique context of Pakistan, which has a low level of gender egalitarianism (House et al., 2004), owing to the myriad of contextual factors discussed, the findings are not limited to the Pakistani context but have important implications for other societies and cultures too. Although at a lower level in Western societies, gender discrimination, gender pay gaps, and other gendered gaps still exist (GGGR, 2021). While the West has largely overcome the traditional social role expectations (paid paternity leave and demographic information-seeking becoming illegal are two examples), the gender divide in the West remains significant.

The research shows that HR managers can play a vital role in creating positive HR commitment attributions by concentrating on employees' PJ fit. This focus will expand the PJ fit purview to comprise the fit between employees' needs, abilities, and job content. Since managers play an essential role in assigning job tasks and responsibilities to employees, they should try to create a fit between a person's needs and the job demands in order to induce positive interpretations among employees regarding HR commitment attributions. Allocating tasks to employees and expecting them to perform regardless of their ability and needs simply reduces their PJ fit perceptions and increases their HR control attributions. It is vital for managers to understand the difference between what people do versus what they aspire to do, and jobs should be tailored accordingly to maximize the PJ fit for each employee, whether male or female. By examining employee HR attributions, this study shows that managers should differentiate between different types of HR attributions during their daily conversations with the employees. Also, managers need to distinguish between employee

attributions of HR practices in terms of how employees evaluate these. Managers should consider redesigning and adjusting aspects of these tasks to fit the employees' needs, skills, and abilities to create the best fit possible, so that employees' commitment attributions may be formed, regardless of their gender. The perceptions of PJ fit can potentially create positive employee experiences, which may be important precursors of HR attributions, as indicated in this research. This study also highlights the role that the government and other non-governmental organizations can play in terms of creating awareness about the true Islamic guidelines related to working women and their rights.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our research contributes to the existing knowledge in several ways, we recognise that it also suffers from several limitations. One limitation is that the study hypotheses are tested on a sample of highly educated banking professionals. It would be interesting to see if the same results were found using samples of non-professional and semi-skilled/less knowledgeable employees. Another limitation of our study is that we failed to examine the relationship between PJ fit and external HR attributions, which involves responding to the regulatory bodies, government, or unions, where possible. This was mainly because our study population was drawn from a private sector, non-unionised organization. Also, in Pakistan, industrial relations are conducted differently compared to the U.S. and other western countries, since the union's role is very limited, with only 3.4 percent of the labour force being unionised (Raza et al., 2016). However, since employees are becoming increasingly more sensitive to how their organization responds to external stakeholders, examining how and if PJ fit influences employees' external HR attributions in future research might prove fruitful. Also, since the data for our study were collected from only one service sector

organization, the generalizability of our study findings may be considered somewhat limited, thus warranting more research based on other organizations. The theoretical framework and argumentation for developing and explaining employee perspectives of HRM deserves far more attention in future research. It would be interesting to see how the gender-based HR attributions are linked to different outcomes for males and females, and also if other variables, such as career aspirations, career orientation, career commitment, and an achievement orientation, play important moderating roles in the studied relationships. In the current study, we explored the relationship between one type of fit and HR attributions. However, PE fit theories, such as person-organization fit, person-vocation fit and person-supervisor fit, might help to establish to what extent these fits impact gendered evaluations of HR attributions. This is also an underexplored research area. It is pertinent to mention here that the current research focuses on employees' subjective fit perceptions, as individuals' own assessments of fit have been shown to be a more proximal predictor of their successive outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction) compared to objective fits. Individuals consider their own psychometrics, as well as assessing the job's physiognomy, when formulating their perceptions of their degree of fit with their job. However, it may prove rewarding to explore objective PJ fit and other dimensions of person-environment fit with regards to their impact on HR attributions.

Lastly, research on the gendered differences in PJ fit perceptions and gender-based interpretations of why management/HR practices are in place is called for in Western and other non-Asian contexts. Such research might further advance our understanding of whether there exists a difference in terms of the magnitude or strength of HR attributions between the genders in various social contexts. For example, such differences might be more pronounced in hyper-masculine environments compared to those that are more focused on

gender equality. Research in different contexts would also increase the confidence that the differences between HR attributions are related to the differences between the respective environmental and social cues received by males and females, rather than to differences between gender predispositions.

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