

# Sustainable Leadership, Gratitude, Forgiveness Climate and Prosocial Motivation of Academicians' Work Engagement in Higher Education Institutions

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## Abstract

The issue of low work engagement among academic staff in public sector Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan has been a major concern for the higher education sector. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors contributing to low work engagement among academic staff in the public sector HEIs. This study aims to examine the relationships between sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and work engagement among the academic staff of public sector HEIs. Additionally, the study will explore how prosocial motivation mediates these relationships. The proposed conceptual framework draws on relevant literature and key theories in the field of organizational attitudes and behavior to analyze these relationships. The study will utilize a quantitative method to test the proposed framework, and data analysis will be conducted using SmartPLS. The findings of this study are expected to have significant implications for educational leaders and stakeholders in public-sector HEIs, who can use these results to develop organizational policies and programs that promote sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and prosocial motivation, all of which are crucial in cultivating work engagement.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Leadership, Gratitude, Forgiveness Climate, Prosocial Motivation and Work Engagement

## Introduction

The history of higher education illustrates that universities and colleges have played a significant role in shaping and challenging paradigms. They have influenced societal change through scientific advancements and the education of intellectuals, leaders, and future innovators (Tilbury, 2011). Higher education has the potential to change the world by nurturing and broadening young minds, conducting research to address challenges, shaping

public policy, demonstrating understanding and commitment through effective campus management, and being a responsible employer and an engaged member of the business and local communities (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). In the era of globalization, universities and colleges also have a global impact through their procurement activities, international partnerships, and by educating students from various nations. Their potential influence on economic development, poverty alleviation, as well as health, and community building, should not be underestimated (Brekke, 2021).

The role of academicians in higher education institutions (HEIs) is pivotal in meeting challenges and fulfilling the fundamental objectives of knowledge creation and dissemination. Therefore, it is more crucial than ever from a managerial perspective to attract and retain excellent academicians in academic institutions. Additionally, it is widely believed that inspiring, retaining, and supporting current employees is a strategic approach to maintaining organizational performance and long-term survival in the market (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). The solution, according to researchers, rests in the thought of employee engagement, which thinks that inspiration is not limited to monetary rewards alone (Saks, 2019). Work engagement is a concept of HRM that deals with the level of commitment, dedication, and passion toward job and organizational values (Bakker, 2022). When employees are engaged with their jobs, they take their work with more responsibility and positively impact the other members of the organization (Canboy et al., 2023). Given the significant impact of employees on an organization's success, employee work engagement has garnered considerable attention from human resource managers and organizational theorists (Peng & Chen, 2021). Studying work engagement within universities, as centers of higher education, is crucial for improving the effectiveness of institutions. High levels of work engagement among academics are associated with better teaching quality, greater research productivity, and better student outcomes (Rahman & Karim, 2022). Faculty members who are actively engaged tend to invest more energy and effort into their professional responsibilities, fostering innovation in teaching practices, participating in institutional development, and providing mentorship to students (Iyer, 2016). This not only boosts the academic standing of the institutions but also enriches student learning experiences, resulting in increased satisfaction and retention rates among students. Research indicates that engagement promotes a sense of personal achievement, helping to alleviate burnout and turnover, which are prevalent issues in academia (Schaufeli et al., 2002). However, academic institutions are among the least engaged organizations globally according to Gallup (2017), indicating that they are not fully capitalizing on the potential of their most valuable asset-their workforce. Therefore, the higher education sector must recognize the importance of employee engagement and implement strategies to promote it.

The focus of this study is on public sector higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, aiming to understand the factors influencing and motivating increased work engagement. Over the past decade, the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan has significantly increased, with 247 recognized HEIs reported by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan (HEC, 2023). According to the Pakistan Economy Survey 2021 – 22, there are 58,000 teachers employed in Higher Education institutes in Pakistan, and the total student enrollment stands at 1.91 million. To present a more comprehensive overview of the higher education sector and outline future strategic frameworks, the HEC has introduced its Vision 2025. The HEC Vision Plan 2025 aims to improve faculty development,

elevate teaching standards, and expand opportunities for research and innovation in the higher education sector. Higher education in Pakistan faces various challenges, such as limited resources, insufficient funding, substandard quality of education, inadequate infrastructure, lack of industry collaboration, and limited opportunities for research and innovation (Hoodbhoy, 2022). Additionally, HEIs in Pakistan are often affected by political interference, leading many highly educated individuals to seek better opportunities abroad, resulting in a loss of human capital and hampering the development of the higher education sector (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019). The ongoing economic crisis in the country has further exacerbated issues, including a decline in economic growth, increased poverty, hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and reduced foreign investment. Consequently, social unrest has risen as people become increasingly dissatisfied with the state of the economy and the government's response to the crisis.

Numerous studies have suggested that frustration can have a detrimental impact on work engagement and contribute to mental health issues among employees in educational institutions (Wang et al., 2022; Xu, 2023). In these challenging times, institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to keep their workforce engaged, especially without the financial means to provide incentives. As a result, employees become demotivated, unhappy, and dissatisfied, leading to a decline in their commitment to work and ultimately affecting their performance (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019). The State of the Global Workplace 2022 report reveals alarming statistics about employee engagement in Pakistan, with only 13% of employees reporting that they are engaged with their work.

One of the most intriguing findings in the 2022 Gallup Report on the State of the Global Workplace was the concept of the Cascade Effect. This effect refers to the direct influence of managers' engagement on their employees' engagement, which in turn is influenced by their managers' engagement. It's well established that a leader's attitude and engagement directly impact those under their supervision. Several studies have explored the relationship between different leadership styles and work engagement, such as transformational leadership (Bui et al., 2017), authentic leadership (Wirawan et al., 2020), empowering leadership (Arshad et al., 2022), self-leadership (Knotts & Houghton, 2021), servant leadership (Peng & Chen, 2021), inclusive leadership (Wang et al., 2019), and paternalistic leadership (He et al., 2021). Surprisingly, sustainable leadership has not received much attention in these studies.

Sustainable leadership is a burgeoning area of effective leadership that has emerged to address issues related to sustainable development (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021). Foundational sustainable leadership practices are long-term perspectives, systemic innovation, workforce development, and a focus on quality. Sustainable leadership embodies ethical, socially responsible leadership that prioritizes the long-term success of the organization (McCann & Holt, 2010). In today's demanding work environment, characterized by the pursuit of the common good, leaders need to exhibit empowering and supportive behaviors toward their employees (Abid & Contreras, 2022). Sustainable leaders cultivate a positive work environment by prioritizing the well-being of their employees, offering opportunities for growth and development, and fostering a sense of purpose and meaning in work (Abid et al., 2023), which in turn leads to heightened levels of work engagement.

In today's rapidly changing and uncertain environmental landscape, relying solely on the wisdom and management techniques of team leaders to mitigate organizational risks and enhance organizational effectiveness has become increasingly challenging. Therefore, it is essential for employees to actively communicate their thoughts to continually optimize teamwork through an ongoing iterative process. The expression of positivity introduces a fresh perspective on behavior, and this study will also explore whether gratitude, seen as a personal resource, can enhance their engagement with work. Gratitude has been defined in various ways, including as a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, a coping mechanism, and even a life orientation (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Wood et al., 2010). For this study's purposes, gratitude will be defined as the appreciation of valuable and meaningful elements in one's life (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Described as an individual's tendency to recognize and appreciate the positive aspects of their surroundings (Wood et al., 2010), gratitude appears to enhance their capacity to adapt and influence their work environment effectively. Research has found that gratitude is positively associated with work engagement, as employees who feel appreciated and valued by their organization are more likely to be engaged in their work (Wiroko & Sugiharti, 2022). Gratitude exerts a positive influence on how educators perceive job characteristics, thus protecting their health, improving their motivation, and enhancing their engagement (Nicuță et al., 2023).

This study suggests that a forgiveness climate can have a positive impact on employees' work engagement. A forgiveness climate refers to the overall atmosphere in the workplace, focusing on how employees experience forgiveness in their daily interactions (Ostroff et al., 2003). It is associated with a decrease in punitive responses to ethical misconduct (Salvador, 2019) and an increase in positive emotions such as empathy, sympathy, and love, which can enhance innovative behavior (Kim et al., 2018). Additionally, it is linked to increased positive thinking and subjective happiness (Vural Batik et al., 2017). In a forgiveness climate, employees' mistakes and failures are tolerated (Cox, 2008), and in return, employees tend to complete their work with mutual understanding, help, and cooperation (Chen et al., 2022), leading to greater work engagement. The concept of forgiveness in the workplace influences employees' behaviors by signaling appropriate social responses to workplace transgressions (Guchait et al., 2014). Studies have highlighted that job resources such as support from the organization, supervisors, and colleagues, a positive team environment, and psychological safety contribute to favorable outcomes for employees (Guchait, Lanza-Abbott, et al., 2016). These outcomes include increased organizational commitment, job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, reduced turnover intention (Guchait, Lanza-Abbott, et al., 2016), job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2021), well-being, and work engagement (Imran et al., 2020).

Prosocial motivation refers to the desire to exert effort to benefit others or social collectives (Grant, 2007). Prosocial behavior encompasses actions that benefit another person, such as helping, sharing, showing consideration and concern, and making amends for past wrongdoings (Luo et al., 2021). Literature on interpersonal helping suggests that the effect of giving and receiving help differs depending on the actor's motivation (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Individuals with high prosocial motivation, when engaging in helping behavior, are strongly affected by social influences and are less concerned with personal rewards and consequences, whereas those with low prosocial motivation help others due to self-interest and expectations of personal returns (Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Prosocially motivated individuals

can better understand others' needs and values as a result of thinking about problems from the perspective of others as opposed to their stance (Yu et al., 2021). Given the above, the current study will assess the role of prosocial motivation as a mediator in the relationship between sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and work engagement.

Thus, consistent with previous literature findings, organizations may find it increasingly relevant to study the variables contributing to employees' work engagement, especially concerning the academic staff of public sector HEIs in Pakistan. Furthermore, recognizing the elements that drive work engagement is essential for university leaders and policymakers who wish to foster supportive work environments. Given the increasing workload demands, scarce resources, and higher expectations for research outputs, institutions need to explore non-financial methods to maintain faculty motivation. Universities can formulate strategies that enhance engagement and job satisfaction by pinpointing crucial factors such as leadership, workplace culture, and opportunities for professional development. This ultimately contributes to better faculty retention, enhanced institutional performance, and a deeper commitment to educational excellence. Therefore, this study focused on the relationship between sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and work engagement and the role of prosocial motivation as a mediator in this relationship.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The current framework is grounded in the JD-R model, which serves as the basis for both the independent and dependent variables. When examining the concept of work engagement, the most frequently referenced theory is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker et al., 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). According to the JD-R model, employees who have sufficient job and personal resources can mitigate the negative impact of job demands (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Research has shown that employees with adequate work resources can effectively manage job demands in the workplace (Schaufeli, 2017). This implies that fully engaged employees, who exhibit vigor, dedication, and absorption in their roles (work engagement), can perform effectively even in the face of high job demands. Bakker and Demerouti (2007), explained that the blend of job resources and personal resources predicts work engagement and thus leads to many positive performances.

### **Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

#### *The Relationship between Sustainable Leadership and Work Engagement*

Leadership, as a provider of job resources, plays a crucial role in determining employees' work engagement (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). Sustainable leadership is a type of leadership that takes responsibility for individuals, groups, and organizations, assessing economic, social, and ecological sustainability principles in society and organizations. It supports the effective management of sustainable thoughts (Çögenli, 2021; Šimanskienė & Župerkienė, 2014). According to Gilal et al (2019), higher education organizations should integrate sustainable behaviors into their management philosophies to enhance their financial and environmental performance and earn their employees' commitment. Organizations in the higher education sector should employ sustainable strategies to help staff members address their problems and challenges (Aboramadan, 2022). Although sustainable leadership has predominantly been applied in developed countries, it is also pertinent in less developed countries such as Pakistan. According to Pham & Kim (2019), leaders can assess and influence their staff



members' sustainability-related behaviors, attitudes, awareness, and motivation, which can impact their engagement with their work and organization.

The cultivation of sustainable leadership is crucial for achieving expected performance and addressing organizational needs, challenges, and opportunities (Armani et al., 2020). This fosters a culture that is critical, innovative, and introspective, constantly questioning routines, assumptions, and principles (Javed et al., 2021). In addition to recognizing sustainable opportunities, leaders must demonstrate interpersonal skills to engage, learn from, and adapt to stakeholders, including their team members (Chew & Dovey, 2014). Compared to other leadership styles linked to work engagement, sustainable leaders can uniquely foster work engagement by showing genuine care for their employees and valuing their perspectives. They empathize with and support their employees, building strong emotional connections (Çögenli, 2021). For instance, transformational leadership, extensively discussed in leadership-work engagement literature, focuses on motivating employees based on organizational needs (Bui et al., 2017) and typically does not involve acknowledging employees' individuality during interactions (Çögenli, 2021). In contrast, sustainable leaders must cultivate and exhibit several essential habits, including a systemic, interdisciplinary understanding; emotional intelligence and a compassionate attitude; a values orientation that shapes culture; a strong vision for making a difference; an inclusive style that fosters trust; a willingness to innovate and be radical; and a long-term perspective on impacts (Gutterman, 2023). Therefore, sustainable leaders inspire employees to fully engage in their work.

This may convince employees that the organization deserves the investment of additional efforts and that they should be fully engaged in their work (Shuck et al., 2011). According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), resources have motivating potential, because they help to (1) reduce the impact of energy-depleting job demands, (2) achieve work-related goals and (3) learn and grow as a person. Thus, when employees have access to more social support, more opportunities to use their strengths, and/or have higher levels of autonomy, they are usually more engaged in their work. As per the JD-R framework (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010), this study views sustainable leadership as a job resource that enhances employee work engagement. This model has been supported by numerous studies (Hakanen et al., 2006; Simbula et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), including meta-analyses (Crawford et al., 2010; Halbesleben, 2010; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023).

#### *The Relationship between Gratitude and Work Engagement*

Numerous studies have highlighted the significance of being thanked in the workplace, indicating that gratitude plays a crucial role in fostering positive interactions among individuals (Cortini et al., 2019). Emmons et al (2003), emphasized the fundamental nature of gratitude as a human need, particularly in the context of the workplace where individuals spend a substantial amount of their time. Gratitude, as defined by Wood et al (2010), involves recognizing and appreciating the valuable and meaningful aspects of one's life. Additionally, dispositional gratitude, as part of a broader life orientation, enables individuals to acknowledge and value the positive elements in their environment (Wood et al., 2008).

Furthermore, gratitude is described as an affective state that arises from acknowledging the actions of others, leading to reciprocal behavior (Brock et al., 2016). It is closely linked to other

positive emotions (e.g., Fehr et al., 2017; Greenbaum et al., 2020) and has been differentiated from happiness, compassion, pride, and elevation (Fehr et al., 2017). Gratitude is conceptualized as a positive emotional response to a perceived benefactor and is considered a universal social construct crucial for fostering connections within society (Nourpanah, 2021). Expressed through both verbal and written means (Agbaglo, 2022), gratitude significantly influences the dynamics of beneficiary-benefactor relationships (Locklear et al., 2023). Furthermore, the witnessing effect of gratitude showcases the role of gratitude expression in promoting relationship building among the expresser, receiver, and third-party witnesses (Algoe et al., 2020).

According to the Job Demand-Resources model (JD-R model), work engagement is influenced by two main components: job resources and personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Interventions targeting job resources encompass improvements in the physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job (e.g., development opportunities, social capital, and coworker/supervisor support) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Knight et al., 2017). On the other hand, interventions focusing on personal resources include programs designed to enhance self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism through cognitive-behavioral approaches and empowerment programs (Knight et al., 2017; Komase et al., 2019). One effective method of bolstering personal resources is through gratitude interventions, which involve participants regularly engaging in brief activities aimed at nurturing a sense of gratefulness (Davis et al., 2016). Studies by McCullough et al. (2002), and Rey (2009), have highlighted a positive correlation between gratitude and personal resources, such as self-efficacy and optimism. Additionally, previous research has demonstrated a link between gratitude and personal resources like self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience (Dickens, 2017; Waters & Stokes, 2015).

Research also suggests that experiencing gratitude influences individuals to act in ethical ways (e.g., engaging in less cheating and sabotaging behavior) and promotes higher levels of engagement. Therefore, experiencing gratitude may enhance employees' positive functioning in the workplace, such as work engagement and ethical decision-making (Locklear et al., 2023). A study by Komase et al (2021), has concluded that receiving gratitude from others is directly associated with work engagement. Previous research has also shown that employee appreciation programs, developmental feedback, and interactions with beneficiaries foster gratitude among employees in an organization (Fehr et al., 2017). Wandell (2016) found that being thanked was associated with higher work engagement. Job resources refer to a job's physical, social, or organizational aspects (eg, social support from one's supervisor and coworkers). These important determinants of engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) may increase the possibility of workers being thanked at work (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Personal resources, which refer to positive self-evaluations, such as resilience, that is, an individual's ability to protect themselves from mental disorders and dynamically adapt to challenging life conditions (Nishi et al., 2010) are postulated to affect work engagement (Malik & Garg, 2020) and potentially lead to receiving more gratitude from others (Fehr et al., 2017). In a nutshell, according to empirical investigation and the JD-R framework (Schaufeli & Bakker 2010), this study views Gratitude as a personal resource that enhances employee work engagement.

*The Relationship between Forgiveness Climate and Work Engagement*

The concept of work engagement refers to the motivation that drives individuals to perform better, achieve superior outcomes, and experience greater job satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2008). However, the workplace is often fraught with challenging situations that disrupt regular work activities. Employees frequently encounter conflicts with colleagues, their own and others' mistakes, inadequate actions, and circumstances beyond their control (such as time pressure, excessive workloads, and changed completion dates). Effectively navigating these situations requires additional skills and resources, including the ability to generate and implement alternative solutions to problems. One potentially beneficial strategy in this regard is forgiveness, defined as a single act of pro-social change toward a specific offender (McCullough, 2001). Forgiveness, on the other hand, refers to an individual's tendency to forgive across relationships, time, and situations (Brown, 2003; Enright et al., 1992; Worthington et al., 2010).

Forgiveness climate has recently become a subject of interest in organizational studies. Initially, forgiveness was examined as a concept related to individuals. However, in recent years, it has also been considered as a characteristic of organizations (Cao et al., 2021). Forgiveness can be viewed as a personal attribute that individuals use to resolve individual conflicts, but it can also be seen as an organizational attribute (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). The spread of forgiveness among individuals leads to its emergence as a collective phenomenon at the organizational level (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). When forgiveness transforms into collective consciousness, it shapes the organizational climate and impacts the entire organizational environment (Aquino et al., 2003). Guchait et al. (2016, p.381) define forgiveness climate as "the abandonment of resentment and blame as well as the adoption of a positive, forward-thinking approach to errors, mistakes, and offenses in the workplace". In organizations where a forgiveness climate is dominant, individuals tend to avoid bearing a grudge as much as possible, refrain from accusing one another when they face mistakes, and tolerate mistakes (Cox, 2011).

Individuals who can reframe negative experiences, such as conflicts with co-workers, their own mistakes, and time pressure, and who are forgiving, tend to be more engaged in their work and perceive their organization as a place where they can grow and advance in their careers (Mróz & Kaleta, 2019). The JD-R model identifies two components that determine work engagement: job demands and job resources. Job demands encompass physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and psychological effort or skills and are associated with certain psychological costs (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These demands include high work pressure, irregular hours, lack of flexibility, unfavorable physical environment, and emotionally demanding interactions with customers. Meeting these demands without adequate recovery can lead to job stress (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Additionally, the occurrence of errors or mistakes may further contribute to work stress, as employees need to exert extra effort to resolve the error and address complaints from customers, supervisors, and peers (Eluwole et al., 2022).

According to the JD-R model, job resources result in positive work outcomes e.g., increased performance, increased organizational commitment, lower intention to leave, increased organizational citizenship behavior and increased work engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Mróz & Kaleta, 2019; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Job resources refer to those physical,



psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that reduce job demands; are functional in achieving work goals; and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Hobfoll et al., 2003). An encouraging work environment, which includes support from supervisors, coworkers, and the organization, as well as a positive team climate and psychological safety, are job resources that have been shown to enhance employee work outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Edmondson, 1999; Guchait et al., 2014; Guchait, Paşamehmetoğlu, et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2021). In such an environment, employees reciprocate the support and understanding they receive by working with mutual understanding, assistance, and cooperation (Chen et al., 2022), leading to increased work engagement. When employees in organizational environments observe a climate that prioritizes forgiveness over holding grudges and understanding over accusations during challenging situations (Cox, 2008), they are more likely to develop a positive organizational identity (Yeşiltaş et al., 2022) and, as a result, become more engaged in their work (Mróz & Kaleta, 2019).

### **Prosocial Motivation as a Mediator**

In general, a mediating variable represents the mechanism through which the independent variable can influence the dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This study will investigate prosocial motivation as a mediator of the association between sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and work engagement. Prosocial motivation is the drive to take actions that benefit, help, or connect with others (Besley & Ghatak, 2018). In contrast to intrinsic motivation, which focuses on enjoyment and pleasure as reasons for effort from a hedonic perspective, prosocial motivation emphasizes value, purpose, and meaning as reasons for effort from a eudaimonic perspective (Grant, 2008). Without prosocial motives, few people would pay attention to social issues, and many social problems would remain unsolved due to a lack of economic incentives (McMullen & Bergman, 2017). Prosocial motivation involves a desire to make a positive impact on other people or social groups (Grant, 2007) or the desire to safeguard and advance the well-being of others (Grant & Berg, 2011).

Previous research indicates that individuals with strong prosocial motivation and extensive social work experience are more likely to embrace others' perspectives and better understand the needs and values of others (Yu et al., 2021). As a result, they develop a strong sense of their capabilities and competence, which helps them identify the needs of others and comprehend the fundamental information underlying specific social issues (Bolino & Grant, 2016). Expressions of gratitude from others for their intentions can lead individuals to feel that their work and efforts have meaning (Yu et al., 2021). When individuals with strong prosocial motivations perceive something as valuable and beneficial for others, they are inclined to have a behavioral intention to fulfill their other-oriented value (Grant & Sumanth, 2009).

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model highlights the significance of prosocial motivation in the relationship between job resources, work engagement, and performance, as well as the link between job demands, fatigue, reduced performance, and exhaustion (Bakker, 2015). Specifically, prosocial motivation mitigates the negative relationship between job demands, fatigue, and performance, while amplifying the positive connection between job resources, work engagement, and performance. Bakker (2015) further illustrates the intricate interplay

among job demands, available resources, and prosocial drive, showcasing how diverse responses to job demands and available resources hinge on one's prosocial motivation. Individuals with a pro-social orientation are drawn to helping others because they recognize the benefits outweigh the drawbacks (Grant, 2007). Those with a prosocial drive may perceive opportunities to assist others and cultivate meaningful connections with them (Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004). Consequently, employees with a pro-social motivation are likely to be more engaged at work (Shin & Hur, 2021).

Effective leadership plays a crucial role in shaping prosocial motivation (Li & Bao, 2020). Leadership style encompasses the methods and behaviors employed by a leader to inspire and motivate followers, including providing inspiration, setting a positive example, encouraging intellectual growth, and addressing individual needs (Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Scholars suggest that leaders can motivate employees by aligning their roles with their personal preferences, fostering a sense of commitment that extends beyond personal interests (Eva et al., 2020). This indicates that leadership has the potential to enhance employees' prosocial motivations to further the organization's interests and the causes they hold dear.

Sustainable leaders lead by example, demonstrating dedication to the overall well-being of the organization (Davies, 2007). They use emotional and symbolic appeals to foster a sense of community and purpose among followers (Conger et al., 2000), thereby increasing their prosocial inclination to support each other and the organization. Moreover, sustainable leaders prioritize environmental diversity, continuous learning, effective stakeholder management, resource development, long-term success, positive working relationships with the workforce, and socially responsible behavior (Zhang et al., 2021). This approach makes sustainable leaders effective in addressing environmental challenges.

Prosocial employees who receive support from their leaders are more capable of maintaining focus and staying actively involved in their work (Teng et al., 2018). Conversely, individuals with poor prosocial motivation may not view leadership support as a valuable resource for their work; instead, they may feel obligated to reciprocate, which can negatively impact their work engagement (Eva et al., 2020). Moreover, those lacking a desire for social connections may not value assistance from others (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), including their leaders, and consequently, display less enthusiasm and commitment to their work. As a result, employees with lower pro-social motivation may not derive as much benefit from the resource-replenishing aspect of leader-follower support as their more pro-socially motivated counterparts.

Gratitude, defined as the feeling of thankfulness that arises from interpersonal relationships between givers and receivers, has been the subject of several studies (Blau, 1964; Weiner, 1985). When a recipient acknowledges a helper for their positive outcomes, they experience feelings of gratitude. Recipients often express their gratitude by recognizing the assistance of others. Research indicates that these displays of appreciation benefit both the helpers and the receivers. Expressions of gratitude can serve as a morale booster, enhancing the prosocial drive of those who assist (McCullough et al., 2002). Studies have also found that individuals who offer help are more likely to do so again if they receive gratitude from the people they helped (Carey et al., 1976). From an agentic perspective, showing gratitude may enhance

individuals' motivation to help others by making them feel more competent and effective (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Gratitude provides helpers with validation that their efforts have been successful and encourages them to continue, fulfilling their desire to feel competent and productive. From a social perspective, expressing gratitude may enhance prosocial motivation by making volunteers feel valued (Grant & Gino, 2010).

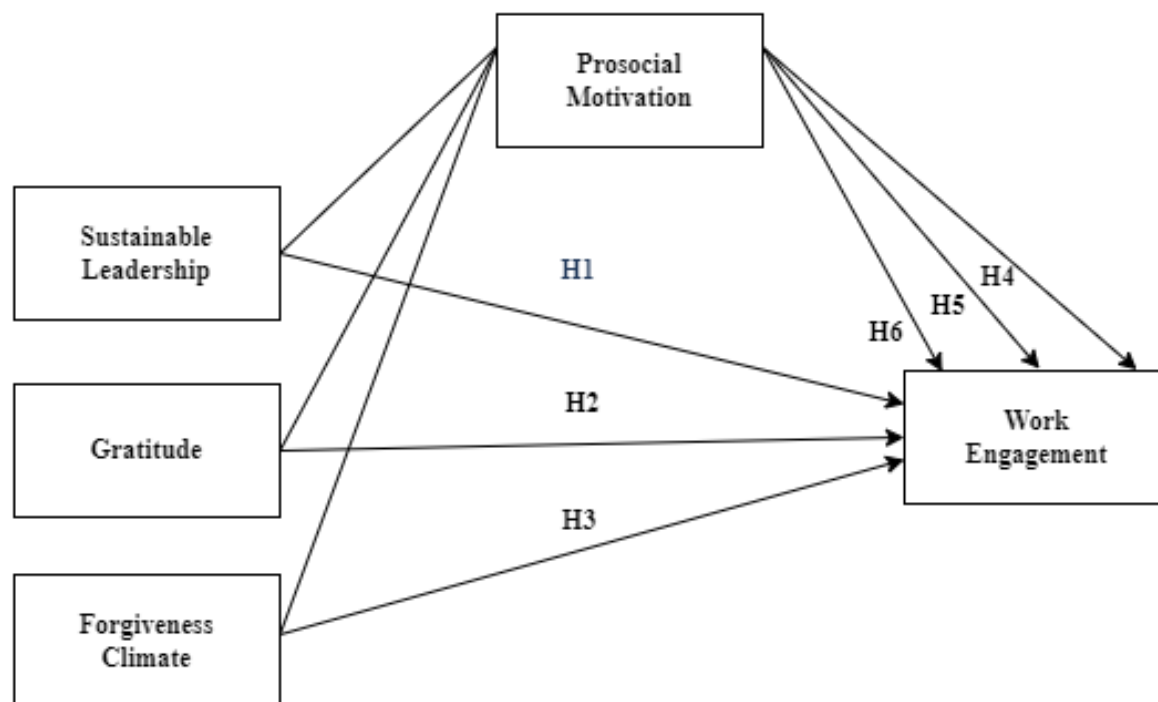
Previous research has demonstrated that when recipients express gratitude toward their helpers, the helpers are more likely to assist them and others in the future (Rind & Bordia, 1995). Gratitude expressions from recipients are part of a social exchange process and are likely to motivate recipients to make positive changes in their lives and demonstrate prosocial motivation and behavior in the future (Wangwan, 2014). Studies have shown that gratitude can predict prosocial motivation, as individuals who feel grateful are more inclined to engage in helpful actions and demonstrate concern for others (García-Vázquez et al., 2020; Shiraki & Igarashi, 2018).

An organization's forgiveness climate is shaped by its commitment to managing conflicts in a prosocial manner, as demonstrated by the behavior of individuals within the organization (Korchakova & Bezliudna, 2022). This climate is not only fostered by a prosocial conflict resolution model but also by the values of compassion, which create an environment supportive of forgiveness throughout the organization (Deutsch, 1973). Research has indicated a positive link between compassion and prosocial conflict responses, such as forgiveness, at the individual level (Grant, 2008). Karremans et al (2005), explored the relationship between forgiveness and prosocial thinking, providing evidence that the extent of forgiving behavior toward a previous offense influences a person's general prosocial orientation and motivation to behave prosocially towards the offender. This supports the idea that motivations stemming from specific interactions and experiences can have broader impacts beyond the immediate connection (Baaren et al., 2004).

Prosocial motivation is at the heart of forgiveness. Enright et al (1992), suggests that forgiving others requires a prosocial approach. This concept, also known as "forgiveness as love," represents the highest stage in his developmental model. Gassin (2013), describes it as an unconditional act of forgiveness, rooted in genuine recognition, acceptance, and love for others. Research by Korchakova and Bezliudna (2022), found that individuals who perceived a forgiving work environment were more likely to exhibit higher levels of prosocial motivation, which in turn correlated with increased work engagement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research is primarily centered on the premise that work engagement is influenced by sustainable leadership, gratitude, and forgiveness climate within an organization. The study will utilize sustainable leadership, gratitude, and forgiveness climate as the independent variables and employees' work engagement as the dependent variable. Additionally, prosocial motivation will be considered as the mediating variable. Building upon the literature review and discussion in this chapter, a conceptual framework has been developed, as depicted in the following figure.



### Hypotheses Development

Based on an earlier literature review, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

**H1:** There is a significant relationship between sustainable leadership and work engagement.

**H2:** There is a significant relationship between gratitude and work engagement.

**H3:** There is a significant relationship between forgiveness climate and work engagement.

**H4:** Prosocial motivation mediates the relationship between sustainable leadership and work engagement.

**H5:** Prosocial motivation mediates the relationship between gratitude and work engagement.

**H6:** Prosocial motivation mediates the relationship between forgiveness climate and work engagement.

### Conclusion

Based on the information presented, particularly the literature review, it is evident that there is a dearth of a suitable framework for investigating the current subject matter, which revolves around sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, prosocial motivation, and academicians' work engagement within public sector HEIs in Pakistan. Therefore, the framework employed in this study contributes to the existing literature by examining the impact of sustainable leadership, gratitude, and forgiveness climate on academic staff work engagement, while also considering the mediating role of prosocial motivation. Additionally, the framework is expected to fill the gap in the literature by presenting a new model within public sector HEIs. The findings of this study will aid in developing employee strategies and policies to promote academic staff work engagement, considering the positive influence of favorable work attitudes on their teaching environment. The inclusion of organizational factors such as sustainable leadership, gratitude, and forgiveness climate may positively impact academic staff's work engagement. Essentially, this study can benefit public sector

HEIs by promoting the work engagement of skilled academic staff to gain a competitive advantage and steady growth.

Furthermore, the results of this study will also assist leaders, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in recognizing the need to promote sustainable leadership, gratitude, and forgiveness climate as strategies to enhance work engagement. Insights from this study may also provide crucial information about employee engagement in Pakistan's higher education sector. Consequently, educational leaders and stakeholders may use the findings to address organizational policies and programs that foster sustainable leadership, gratitude, forgiveness climate, and prosocial motivation among employees, all of which contribute to cultivating work engagement.

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