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**An exploration of the role duality experienced by HR professionals as both implementers and recipients of HR practices: Evidence from the Indian Railways**

**Abstract**

The effectiveness of Human resource (HR) management practices has been empirically assessed in diverse ways throughout the literature. This innovative study focuses on the duality of HR professionals' experiences as both implementers and, concurrently, as recipients or internal customers of HR practices given that they are also employees of the organization. We hypothesize that HR professionals experience HR practices more favorably from an implementer perspective as compared to an internal customer perspective. We further hypothesize that these differences in experiences are likely to be influenced by HR professionals' hierarchical position in the HR department.

Our analyses of 1271 HR professionals employed by Indian Railways revealed a number of differences between the two types of experience. We found that some practices (recruitment and selection, training and employee welfare) were viewed more negatively from the implementer perspective, whereas others (compensation, benefits and employment relations) were rated more negatively from the internal customer perspective. The hierarchical position in the HR department also had an impact on experiences. Those holding more senior HR positions reported more positive experiences of training and employment relations from an internal customer perspective. Overall our contribution draws on the attribution theory and has important managerial implications.

**Keywords:** Assessment of HR Practices; HR Professionals; Hierarchy; Duality of Roles; Attribution Theory; Indian Railways

Literature on human resource management (HRM) has often focused on how the design and implementation of a set of internally consistent policies and practices ensure an organization's human capital can contribute to the achievement of its business objectives (e.g., Huselid, Jackson & Schuler, 1997). The core strategic guidelines concerning the management of the organizations' human resources are often developed and institutionalized by top management. These strategic guidelines are then implemented by human resource (HR) professionals, as well as line managers (MacNeil, 2003). In the current study we will focus specifically on the role of HR professionals. Focusing on HR professionals is extremely relevant as they are crucial for the successful implementation of HR practices, both directly and indirectly via the societal networks they establish in the organization (Manroop, Singh & Ezzedeen, 2014; Zupan & Kaše, 2007).

HR professionals, including managers, technicians and administrative staff, must meet and balance the expectations of a wide variety of stakeholders with whom they work. These include employees, labor unions, line managers, middle managers, top management, as well as external stakeholders (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart & Wright, 2012). However, these stakeholders' level of power will dictate how HR professionals prioritize and respond to expectations and requests. Furthermore, HR professionals face greater challenges in establishing themselves as key players in organizations, as compared to other members of staff because of the HR field's relatively low status in the organizational hierarchy (Ulrich, Younger & Brockbank, 2008; Rynes, 2004). According to Graham and Tarbell (2006), HR professionals' favoring of management interests results in the implementation of practices that could be opposing to the views of employees as stakeholders. This position is challenging considering that HR professionals are not only implementers of practices that respond to managerial demands, but they are simultaneously employees in the same organization.

In this paper, we investigate the particular duality experienced by HR professionals who both implement organizational HR practices and, at the same time, are subject to those practices as employees. Exploring the dual role of HR professionals in a large organization can give unique insights into their perception of HR practices and their attributions to such positive and negative experiences. This is not only innovative, but also extremely relevant, since HR professionals communicate and implement the organizational HR strategy, thus helping shape the organizational climate, influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately impacting organizational performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang & Takeuchi, 2007). Understanding the way HR professionals perceive HR practices and then attribute their experiences can therefore help us foresee the way they will be implemented and their possible impact on important outcomes for the organization.

In this study we test how HR professionals' experience both implementing and being subject to five core HR practices: recruitment & selection, training & development, compensation & benefits, employment relations and employee welfare. We examine differences in their perceptions of these practices from each point of view, and identify specific aspects where differing experiences appear to result in role conflict and tension for the HR professionals involved. Drawing on attribution theory and the concepts of organizational power and voice, we suggest that hierarchical position also affects the degree and type of experience, and consequently the attitude, of the individual HR professional towards the organizational HR system.

We offer some preliminary thoughts regarding the reasons why HR professionals experience more role conflict in relation to some of the five HR practices examined than others. Our case study, undertaken in a very large and highly bureaucratic operating context, has implications for other large business and public sector organizations, and provides a

possible pattern for future research. It also alerts those who manage an HR function or department in large organizations to some of the potential problems for HR staff at more junior levels which need to be understood and managed appropriately.

### **Focus on HR professionals**

Following the perspective of HRM as a vehicle to transmit organizational messages (Geare, Edgar & Deng, 2006; Tyson, 2006; Ulrich et al., 2008), HR professionals are expected to communicate management values across the whole organization, while they are simultaneously employees, who are also the recipients or internal-customers of the HR policies and practices. In the current study, we aim to contribute to literature on HR management by assessing the simultaneous roles of HR professionals as implementers of HR practices and as internal customers of these practices. We anticipate that these simultaneous and ambivalent roles are associated with different assessments of HR practices from the implementer and the internal customer perspectives. According to previous research, managers' experiences of HR practices are significantly more favorable than employees' experiences, which illustrates that implementing HRM and experiencing HRM are two different matters (Geare et al., 2006; Takeuchi et al., 2007). In this paper we investigate this assumption by focusing on the dual role of HR professionals as implementers and internal customers of HR practices. In particular, we hypothesize that HR professionals could report significantly more positive experiences of HR practices as implementers than as internal customers.

We additionally investigate the role of hierarchy regarding HR professionals' experiences of HR practices as implementers and as internal customers. We follow the assumption that HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions are more likely to have a more prevalent role in making strategic managerial decisions. According to the literature on intra-organizational power, they would have more power due to their position, and thus more

legitimate authority over the other HR professionals (Bass, 1960). This added power would also allow them more voice, thus the ability to influence decision making (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers & Mainous, 1988; Van Dyne & Le Pine, 1998). They would also have a more distant relationship with employees in non-managerial positions. By contrast, HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions are likely to have less power and a lower propensity to voice their opinions when it comes to strategic HR management decisions (Islam & Zyohur, 2005). Their role would be more administrative and they are likely to simply follow the directions of HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions. They would have less voice concerning how HR practices are implemented, but at the same time they would have more contact with the other employees in the organization. This means that they would be more aware of non-managerial employees' problems and demands, but have less autonomy to resolve them. Accordingly, we anticipate that HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions are likely to assess HR practices less favorably, both as implementers and as internal customers, compared with HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions.

Following the rationale behind these two research questions, we tested our two related hypotheses among a sample of HR professionals from one of the largest employers worldwide, the Indian Railways.

### **HR professionals as implementers and internal customers of HR practices**

The assessment of HR management has been a concern for researchers and managers for some decades. According to Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005), there are several ways in which HRM can be assessed, namely by its presence (i.e. a dichotomous scale for whether it is actually in effect 'yes' or 'no'), by its coverage (i.e. a continuous scale for the proportion of the workforce covered by it) or by its intensity (i.e. a continuous scale for the degree to which an individual employee is exposed to the practice or policy). Other measures assess

the perceived fairness and effectiveness of these practices (e.g. Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008; Paul & Anantharaman, 2004; Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, some studies have examined the role of the HR function itself in terms of leadership and change delivery as well as the role of the immediate line manager or supervisor in the actual enactment process (Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton, & Swart, 2003). These differing measurement strategies suggest different assumptions about which dimensions of HR practices provide the most valid descriptions (e.g., use, coverage, effectiveness, etc.) and the unit of measurement relative to which one can provide an accurate report of these practices (Wright & Nishii, 2007). Another question that arises is whether managers or employees provide the most accurate reports of HR practices. Several studies opted for a multiple constituency approach in which both managers and employees' perceptions were assessed (e.g., Wright, Gardner, Moynihan & Allen, 2005). When compared, managers and employees' perceptions tend to differ: managers and employees often disagree on the presence of HR practices, as well as on their effectiveness (Takeuchi et al., 2007).

Our research focuses on five categories of HR management practices:

- recruitment and selection
- training
- compensation and benefits
- employment relations and
- employee welfare.

We chose to focus on these five categories of HR practice because a number of empirical studies have demonstrated that they are the ones with the strongest impact on employee attitudes and behaviors, and (ultimately) on organizational performance (Huselid, 1995; Huselid et al., 1997; Kinnie et al., 2005; Lepak, Taylor, Tekleab, Marrone & Cohen, 2007; Takeuchi et al., 2007). The impact of these practices on organizational performance

has also been empirically demonstrated in the Indian context (Singh, 2000; Budhwar & Bhatnagar, 2009).

We draw our *rationale* from the idea that there are notable differences of opinion between those who implement and those who experience HR practices as internal customers of HR management. According to Geare et al. (2006) managers as implementers, and employees as internal customers of HRM practices are likely to have divergent needs and expectations from HRM practices, and managerial experiences of HRM practices are likely to be significantly more favorable than those of employees (e.g., Takeuchi et al., 2007). Geare et al. (2006) explain these differences using attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972). Our assumptions are based on this theoretical paradigm.

The attribution theory is a major research paradigm in social psychology. It was advanced by Heider (1958) and further developed by Jones and Nisbett (1971, 1972). Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behavior. A person seeking to understand why another person did something may attribute one or more causes to that behavior. According to Jones and Nisbett (1971), people tend to explain their own behavior with situation causes and other people's behavior with person causes. Thus, the attribution theory helps in understanding causal explanations people make for events in their daily encounters and to identify the situational or personal determinants of causal attributions people make (Monson & Snyder, 1977). For example, a student (the actor) who is doing poorly in school may justify his/her inadequate performance with a high workload and stress, whereas the teacher (the observer) tends to attribute it to inability or laziness. Attribution theory has also been used to explain aspects of people's behavior in organizations (see for e.g. Björkman, Stahl & Vaara, 2007; Johnson, Lenartowicz & Apud, 2006; Pal, Medway & Byrom, 2011). In the context of research on Indian organizations too, recent research utilizes attribution theory as a lens to discuss varied

HR and organizational related areas (see for e.g. Lakshman, 2008, 2013; Gok, Deshpande, Deshpande & Hunter, 2012). We build on this body of literature.

Jones and Nisbett (1972:80) defined the actor–observer effect as ‘the pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions’. In the context of our research we argue that on one hand managers as actors or implementers tend to attribute success to themselves or their actions, and attribute failure to environmental or external factors. On the other hand we argue that employees as observers or internal customers tend to attribute success to environmental or external factors, and failure to the actors or their actions (Geare et al., 2006; Gok et al., 2012). This study aims to contribute to this stream of literature by investigating a group of professionals who are simultaneously actors (implementers) and observers (recipients) of HR practices and who therefore experience both aspects of HRM concurrently. We innovate by focusing on a sample of HR professionals who are uniquely positioned to recount their experiences as both actors/implementers and observers/employees of HR practices in the organization.

HR professionals as employees have a dual and thus an ambiguous role in any organization. They are often charged with leading efforts to develop and manage a culture that supports the company values and objectives, a task which often targets employees directly (Guest & King, 2004; Huselid, Becker & Beatty, 2005). HR professionals as implementers must communicate HR practices clearly to employees in order for them to be effective (Graham & Tarbell, 2006). Implementing and communicating HR practices makes HR professionals more likely to embrace them, i.e. they will assume the role of actors in terms of attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972). This actor/implementer role is likely to lead to more favorable perceptions of HR practices. Nevertheless, HR professionals are also employees/internal customers. Their position in the organization is often relatively



low status and they may be marginal to management decision-making processes, especially at the strategic level (Caldwell, 2003). Considering their limited decision making power we anticipate that HR professionals maintain their simultaneous identity as recipients or customers of HR practices. Furthermore, they often have direct contact with other employees in the organization which means that they might have a heightened awareness of both individual and collective problems affecting the workforce. In fact, HR professionals often have to deal with tensions in sustaining an *ethos* of mutuality in the face of the opposing interests of management and employees. We anticipate that their perception of HR practices from the employee perspective is likely to be less favorable, since they are enacting the role of observers/internal customers, as determined by attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1.* HR professionals would report significantly more positive experiences of HR practices as implementers than as recipients or internal customers.

### **Different hierarchical positions, different HR experiences**

We assume that there are significant differences between HR professionals' experiences of HR practices from the implementer and from the internal customer perspectives. However, it is important to recognize that there is also heterogeneity among HR professionals. In particular, hierarchical position as a variable is likely to influence experiences of HR practices, both from the implementer and from the internal customer perspective.

We draw our rationale from the literature on intra-organizational power, more specifically on the generally accepted notion that there is an inverse relationship between hierarchical dependence and formal power (Marsden, 1983). The more a person depends hierarchically on another, the more s/he exerts formal power on him or her, creating an

asymmetrical relationship (Peiró & Meliá, 2003). Previous literature on power is based on the assumption that the supervisors' formal power is normally expected to influence subordinates' behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes (Ward, 1998). Power and hierarchy are extremely relevant in the Indian context, where there has been demonstrable evidence of significant differences between employees across hierarchical levels with regards to their perceptions of business management, communication, human resource management and networking (Vijayakumar, 2006). This also has a cultural, philosophical and historical relevance (e.g. Hofstede, 2007; Budhwar & Varma, 2011; Pereira & Malik, 2013; Pereira & Muniappan, 2014) in the Indian context where the higher the hierarchical position of an individual, the more power s/he has, hence the more propensity to voice his/her opinion (Islam & Zyphur, 2005). This is also true for HR professionals: the ones that are in higher hierarchical positions are likely to have more voice and power. They have a closer relationship with top managers within the organization and they are likely to be involved in major managerial decisions, including the definition of strategic HR management policies.

Greater power and voice opportunities have been shown to lead to favorable workplace outcomes, such as trust in the organization, perceptions of procedural and distributive justice, motivation, job satisfaction, satisfaction with leaders, reduced turnover and better performance (Brockner et al., 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Hunton, 1996; Spencer, 1986; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010). The augmented level of power and voice of HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions means that they are closer to the role of 'actors' (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972): they would assume the most responsibility for the implementation of the HR practices. This increased amount of responsibility for the HR practices, together with the positive outcomes of power and voice opportunities, is likely to be associated with a more favorable opinion about them from the implementer perspective. Increased voice and power are likely to co-exist with better employment conditions for HR

professionals in higher hierarchical positions, meaning they are likely to also perceive them more favorably from the internal customer perspective.

By contrast, HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions have less power and voice concerning the implementation of HR practices, which might be related to more unfavorable outcomes in the organization (e.g.: Travis & Mor Barak, 2010). HR professionals may also assume the role of observers, according to attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972). This means that they have an active role in implementing certain HR practices that they might not even agree with. HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions are then more likely to have less favorable perceptions of the implementation of HRM practices. Furthermore, HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions have more extensive contact with employees in the organization; they are more aware of employee demands and problems but have limited power to resolve them. We believe that HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions will have less favorable opinions of HR practices from the internal customer perspective by comparison with HR professionals in senior positions. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2.* HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions will experience and report HR practices more positively than HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions, both as implementers and as internal customers.

## **Method**

### **Procedure and Participants**

This study was conducted in one of the largest public sector organizations in the world – the Indian Railways (IR), in the year 2009-2010 and was sponsored by a grant from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), USA. IR is managed by an organization called the Railway Board, which gave permission and access to conduct the study. Indian Railways comprises 16 geographic zones covering all India, subdivided into 67

divisions. Given the size and scale of Indian Railways, it was decided to approach six zones that would represent different geographical areas of India. These were Western Railways; Central Railways; North-Eastern Railways; North-Central Railways; South-Western Railways; and South-Central Railways. Written permission was granted to conduct the study on these six areas, which encompass 30 of the 67 divisions.

The study involved three sequential stages. The first stage comprised interviews with 62 top-level HR managers and line managers responsible for HR, in order to obtain a detailed description of current HR practices, how they are being implemented and how they are combined to create an HR system. Using qualitative data gathered from the interviews, we were then able to identify a set of five core HR practices that are inter-related, namely: recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits, employment relations, and employee welfare. We then gathered specific data on how these practices are implemented by the HR professionals in the Indian Railway's 'personnel department' (processes involved for e.g. extent of computerization) and on how these practices might be interpreted by employees (e.g. whether employees perceive that these practices might represent an investment in them and intend to enhance their commitment to the organization or not).

We additionally obtained qualitative data concerning the tasks developed by different hierarchical groups within the HR department. We were able to ascertain that although the higher hierarchical positions had more power, personnel clerks and junior personnel clerks and typists also had an important role as implementers of HR practices (rather than mere transferrable administrative roles). Top-level HR managers and line managers encouraged us to include clerks and junior clerks and typists in our sample for three reasons. First, when new clerks, junior clerks and typists joined the personnel department, they received specific HR-focused training, which allowed them to become more familiar with HR practices in

general and Indian Railways' specific practices. Second, career advancements (i.e. promotions) were purely based on internal examinations and interviews on HR related knowledge and experience. Third, we were informed that clerks, junior clerks and typists in the personnel department interact very frequently with other employees concerning specific HR matters (namely salaries, leave, absenteeism, and administering welfare activities). For the above reasons these groups of employees have an important role as implementers of HR practices (MacNeil, 2003).

In the second stage of this research, and based upon the information gathered from the interviews, we developed a research questionnaire focusing on the set of five HR practices. This questionnaire with self-report measures was considered the most effective tool to assess our research questions, since we were interested in assessing HR professionals' experiences of HR practices based on their two simultaneous roles: implementers and internal costumers of HR practices. We followed Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff's (2003) suggestions on questionnaire design, which reduced potential risks associated with common method variance (such as anonymity and instructing the participants that there are no correct or incorrect answers). We first conducted a pilot study using a small sample of HR professionals from the Central and Western Indian railways' personnel departments. For this pilot study, we distributed 300 questionnaires (150 in each location). We received a total of 88 completed questionnaires (a response rate of 29.3%), 41 from the Central railways and 47 from the Western railways. We performed a preliminary exploratory factor analysis (with Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation) for the "Assessment of HR Practices as Implementers" scale and found that a five factor structure explained 77.83% of the variance. We also performed an exploratory factor analysis (with Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation) for the "Assessment of HR Practices as Customers" scale and found that a five factor

structure explained 74.62% of the variance. The results of the pilot study allowed us to set the structure and content of the final questionnaire.

The third stage of the study involved sending questionnaires to all HR professionals in the personnel departments of the 30 divisions of IR included in the sample. In total we sent 2856 questionnaires, one for each HR professional working in these 30 departments and we received 1293 responses, a response rate of 45.27%. After eliminating 22 questionnaires which had more than 25% missing data, a total of 1271 responses remained for analysis.

The participants' average age was 45.62 years (SD = 8.71); 33.77% of the respondents were female and 66.23% were male. They had an average tenure at the organization of 21.6 years (SD = 8.79). HR professionals were distributed in four main hierarchical categories. The first category included 299 section heads and senior inspectors (23.6%), the second included 229 second line supervisors and junior inspectors (18%), the third included 595 personnel clerks (46.9%) and the fourth included 146 junior personnel clerks and typists (11.5%). As discussed earlier, all four categories of HR professionals undergo periodical training and undergo examinations in understanding and implementing current HR policies. Promotions are based on testing candidates' knowledge of such policies and their implementation through internal examinations and interviews. There were significant differences between hierarchical categories regarding age ( $F=110.38, p<.001$ ) and tenure ( $F=116.01, p<.001$ ). This is consistent with the career progression patterns in the Indian public sector: the higher the hierarchical position of the HR professionals, the older s/he was and the longer s/he has been in the organization.

## **Measures**

*Experiences of HR Practices as Implementers.* We decided to assess HR professionals' experiences regarding the quality of the processes involved in the implementation of five sets of HR practices: recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and

benefits, employment relations and welfare. The measure included 10 items in total: two representing each of these HR practices. Items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). We performed a factor analysis with Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation set in five factors, which explained 67.64% of the variance. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was .77 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2=1678.47, p<.001$ ). Scale items and the factor analysis are presented in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale was .63.

**(Insert Table 1 about here)**

*Experiences of HR Practices as Internal Customers.* We assessed HR professional's experiences on HR practices, considering their status as employees from the organization. The items aimed to measure their perceptions in terms of scope, quality and fairness of HR practices. The measurement included 10 items (two representing each HR practice/category of practices: recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits, employment relations and employee welfare). Items were rated in a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). We performed a factor analysis with Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation set in five factors, which explained 69.21% of the variance. Our sample was adequate (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure was .74) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2=1972.68, p<.001$ ). Table 2 presents the factor analysis and the items that compose this measure. Concerning reliability, Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .70.

**(Insert Table 2 about here)**

*Hierarchical Position.* We categorized HR professionals in four main hierarchical categories according to their objective career position, as well as the strategic value of the tasks they perform. The first category included section heads and senior inspectors; the second included

second line supervisors and junior inspectors; the third included personnel clerks; and the fourth included junior personnel clerks and typists.

## **Results**

Table 3 presents the correlations between our studied variables, i.e., the five sets of HR practices from the implementer and the internal customer perspective. We found significant correlations between all HR practices, including between the ones experienced from the implementer and the internal customer perspective. Hierarchy was significantly related to almost all HR practices, except for training and recruitment and selection from the internal customer perspective, as well as compensation and benefits from the implementer perspective.

**(Insert Table 3 about here)**

In order to compare the mean values of HR professionals' experiences of HR practices both as implementers and as internal customers (employees), we performed separate *t*-tests for each group of HR practices (recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits, employment relationships and welfare). Table 4 presents the means and the paired *t*-tests' results. The *t*-tests' results partially support our hypothesis 1. In particular, we found that the HR professionals' assessments of the implementation of recruitment and selection, training and welfare-related practices were significantly more negative than their perceptions of these practices as internal customers. In contrast the assessment of compensation and benefits and employment relations in the customer perspective was significantly more negative than the assessment of their implementation.

**(Insert Table 4 about here)**

In order to test our second hypothesis, we performed a one-way ANOVA to test whether the overall differences between the means of the four different hierarchical categories were significant. We tested for the validity of the heterogeneity of variances



assumption by performing Levene's test for equality of variances (Field, 2009). We performed post-hoc tests using Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) in order to assess significant differences between each HR professionals' hierarchical position. Table 5 presents the results of the ANOVAs and the LSD post-hoc tests. We did not find significant differences between HR professionals in different hierarchical positions regarding the experiences they have of HRM practices as implementers, which partially refutes our second hypothesis. However, we were able to identify some significant differences between hierarchical positions regarding HR professionals' experiences as internal customers. In particular we found that training and employment relations were assessed significantly poorer by employees in lower hierarchical positions, compared to employees in higher hierarchical positions. Section heads and senior supervisors (Category 1) presented significantly more positive assessments of training, compared to second line supervisors and junior inspectors ( $t=.13$ ;  $p<.05$ ), personnel clerks ( $t=.10$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and junior personnel clerks and typists ( $t=.16$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Section heads and senior supervisors experienced employee relations significantly more positively than junior personnel clerks and typists ( $t=.23$ ;  $p<.05$ ); furthermore, second line supervisors have significantly more positive experiences of employment relations than personnel clerks ( $t=.18$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and junior personnel clerks and typists ( $t=.32$ ;  $p<.01$ ). These results provide partial support for hypothesis 2.

**(Insert Table 5 about here)**

## **Discussion**

The major purpose of the current study was to analyze the possible differences between HR professionals' experiences of HR practices, considering their simultaneous roles as implementers and recipients/internal customers of these practices. Furthermore, we anticipated that these likely different interpretations would be emphasized by HR professionals' hierarchical category within the HR department. We formulated two

hypotheses based on attribution theory (e.g.: Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972) and on power and voice theories (e.g.: Islam & Zyphur, 2005; Marsden, 1983). Our hypotheses were partially supported as discussed below.

Our first hypothesis stated that ‘HR professionals would report significantly more positive experiences of HR practices as implementers than as internal customers’. We anticipated that this would be due to the fact that as implementers of HR practices, HR professionals would assume the role of actors as per the attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972), being more likely to assume responsibility for them, embrace them and thus have a more favorable perception of them. In contrast, while assuming the role of internal customers, HR professionals would be mere observers, with less responsibility for HR practices, and with a less favorable opinion about them (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972). Our results demonstrated that some HR practices are interpreted more favorably from the implementer versus the internal customer perspective, while others are interpreted more favorably from the internal customer versus the implementer perspective.

Specifically, we found that HR practices relating to compensation and benefits, as well as employment relations were interpreted significantly more positively from the implementer perspective as compared to the internal customer perspective. These are likely to be HR practices which are highly standardized across IR. This means that there are likely to be fewer ambiguities or undefined situations in their implementation, which would lead to a higher rating at this level. HR professionals are unlikely to have voice in decisions regarding compensation and benefits since these decisions are usually taken at Board level. They are also unlikely to intervene in decision making processes involving trade unions, because of their position in the organization which implies a certain ‘mandatory’ compliance with and transmission of organizational values (Geare et al., 2006; Tyson, 2006; Ulrich et al., 2008). However, this lack of voice in decision making and their role as ‘observers’ may have led HR

professionals to rate HR practices more negatively from the internal customer perspective (see Travis & Mor Barak, 2010; Jones & Nisbett, 1971, 1972).

By contrast, recruitment and selection, training and welfare-related HR practices were interpreted significantly more positively from the internal customer perspective, as compared to the implementer perspective. These results may lead us to assume that these practices are more problematic for HR professionals to implement. Recruitment, selection and induction form a large part of the HR function and HR professionals are likely to dedicate a lot of time to these processes. The management of training and the administration of welfare activities are also likely to be a major part of the HR departments' daily activities. Unlike compensation and benefits and employment relations, HR professionals have more autonomy regarding recruitment and selection, training and development, and employee welfare issues. There are likely to be more ambiguous and potentially contentious situations as well as greater scope for interpretation and decision-making, with the likelihood that different HR professionals will make different decisions. It is noteworthy that an unclear task definition (variability, interdependence, information asymmetry) may buffer the positive impact of autonomy on performance (Langfred & Moe, 2004). It is also possible that in a context where tasks are not so well defined, problems related to different interpretations by different HR professionals may occur. Different interrelated perspectives might collide, disturbing the implementation of these HR practices and making the work more stressful. We believe this might be the reason why HR professionals' satisfaction ratings as implementers of recruitment and selection, training and welfare practices were lower than their experiences of these HR practices from the internal customer perspective.

The second hypothesis stated that HR professionals in higher hierarchical positions would experience HR practices more positively than HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions, both as implementers and as internal customers. This hypothesis was based on the

concept that the greater the amount of power and voice HR professionals had, the more responsibility they would take for HR practices, and the more they would embrace them (e.g.: Islam & Zyphur, 2005), especially in the Indian context (Hofstede, 2007; Pereira & Muniappan, 2014; Pereira & Malik, 2013). This would result in a more favorable interpretation of HR practices, both from the implementer and from the internal customer perspectives.

Our results did not allow us to establish significant differences between different hierarchical categories of HR professionals regarding the experiences they had of HRM practices as *implementers*. These results indicate that no matter what the hierarchical position of an HR professional in the department, s/he is likely to embrace HR practices and implement them. However, when focusing on their perspective as *internal customers* of HR practices, there were significant differences. More specifically, we found that training and employment relations' experiences were reported as significantly worse by HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions, compared to the ones in higher hierarchical positions. This is a relevant result since these two practices are the most reflective of the exchange mechanisms in the organization (Blau, 1964), both involving perceived justice. HR professionals in lower hierarchical positions, such as personnel clerks, junior personnel clerks and typists are significantly less likely to receive continuous training, due to the characteristics of their tasks, compared to section heads and senior supervisors. They are also less likely to experience employment relations where they feel that they are recipients of substantial benefits and where they have the power and opportunities to voice their opinions. These different experiences of HR practices by hierarchical categories are reflective of a system where higher positions are placed in the core business, whereas lower positions are considered peripheral (Lepak & Snell, 1999). The different internal customer experiences of training and employment relations based upon hierarchical categories are consistent with previous

research reflecting the unfavorable outcomes of reduced power and voice (Brockner et al., 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Hunton, 1996; Spencer, 1986; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010).

### **Limitations and future research**

Despite its strengths and innovative character, the current study might trigger criticism regarding the generalizability of the results. In particular, this is related to the fact that most organizations have much smaller and ever-shrinking HR departments. However, the structure of the HR department of the Indian railways is comparable to the majority of other large organizations, as the ratio of actual number of HR employees per number of overall employees is miniscule. Moreover, each HR department in each division operates with a high degree of complexity, due to the large geographical dispersion of departments. Accordingly, we believe that the complexity and geographical spread in which each HR department in the large Indian Railways operates allows it to have similar characteristics to HR departments from most multinational organizations. This means that our results concerning the duality of experiences of HR professionals as implementers and recipients of HR practices, as well as the hierarchical differences found, are extremely likely to be transferable to HR professionals in other organizations.

Whilst this study has contributed to our understanding of HR professionals' experiences of HR practices as implementers and as internal customers, there are additional avenues that still need to be explored. In particular, future research could establish a comparison between HR professionals' experiences of HR practices as internal customers, and those of other employees in the organization. For instance, how different are HR professionals' experiences of HR practices as internal customers compared with other groups of internal customers? Do they differ substantially, and to what extent does this result from HR professionals' simultaneous but potentially conflicting role as implementers? Does

hierarchical position influence experiences? Future research could also establish correlations between the two *foci* of HR professionals' experiences of HR practices and outcomes such as employees' attitudes (e.g. organizational commitment) and behaviors (e.g.: organizational citizenship behaviors, absenteeism, and individual performance), and ultimately organizational performance.

### **Conclusions and Managerial Implications**

The current study is among the first to measure experiences of HR practices from the perspective of HR professionals' two simultaneous organizational roles: implementers and internal customers of HR practices.

We found that their experiences as implementers were more favorable than their experiences as internal customers in the case of HR practices with a straightforward implementation in which they have limited power or voice regarding decision making (compensation and benefits, and employment relations). This pattern was reversed in the case of HR professionals' experiences of recruitment and selection, training and welfare administration. These are practices in which they have some autonomy, but when tasks are more undefined, that can generate implementation problems. The implementation problems might be more intractable than the problems HR professionals identify as internal customers. We additionally found that HR professionals in higher hierarchical categories rated experiences of training and employment relations more positively from the internal customer perspective, as compared to those lower hierarchical categories.

These conclusions have relevant practical implications. In particular, the detailed portrait of the dual experiences of HR professionals is likely to contribute to our understanding of the way in which they will communicate and implement them. The way HR professionals communicate and implement the organizational HR strategy helps shape the organizational climate, influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately

impacts organizational performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Takeuchi et al., 2007). Thus, it is extremely relevant that HR professionals are also appropriately managed, so that their satisfaction with the way they are managed is then reciprocated (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) and transmitted in the communications / implementation they make of HR practices. This leads us to believe that it may be strategically beneficial to promote the engagement of HR professionals as internal customers, in order to consolidate their role as implementers.

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**Table 1**

*Factor Analysis (Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation) of the scale “Experiences of HRM practices as Implementers”*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. With respect to the computerization of processes, the Recruitment and Selection procedures have been automated to a great extent.	.82				
2. Current job openings/vacancies are posted on the Indian Railways website.	.81				
3. The identification of a training need is most probably the outcome of performance appraisal, which is an annual exercise.		.77			
4. The nomination for a training program can be communicated to the specified staff members electronically.		.81			
5. You are satisfied with the compensation and benefits pay system that is currently operant in the organization (e.g.: banking / cash modes of payment).			.73		
6. There has been automation of the compensation module of the 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> pay commissions.			.82		
7. Trade unions at the Indian Railways have been acceptable of computerization of various processes within the system.				.91	
8. The level of HR/Personnel Department interventions, for the overall development and growth of the Indian Railways staff, has increased immensely over the last ten years.				.40	
9. With the computerization of the welfare benefits and a wholly dedicated website, the whole process of communication of welfare facilities to employees has been simplified.					.71
10. The level of involvement of the HR/Personnel Department is very high in administering welfare activities within the organization.					.80

*Note* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 2**

*Factor Analysis (Kaiser Normalization and Varimax Rotation) of the scale “Experiences of HR Practices as Internal Customers”*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Manpower planning process within the Railway system has emerged as a best practice amongst other HR processes in the recent years.	.79				
2. Employees have accepted the changing trends within the last 10-30 years in the Indian Railways system positively.	.80				
3. There has been an involvement of the HR/Personnel Department in a training program over some time.		.64			
4. In comparison to previous trends, there has been as increase in the number of training programs held for employees of the Indian Railways in the last 10-30 years.		.83			
5. You are satisfied with the bonus payments received by you, during the last 3 years of your tenure in the organization.				.40	
6. There has been a drastic progressive shift in the pay scales from the 1980s and 90s to the present year, for the Indian Railways staff.			.91		
7. There is a strong presence of Trade Unions within the organization currently.				.85	
8. The relationship between the employees, top management and the current trade union is commendable.				.82	
9. You are satisfied with the welfare facilities offered to you as an Indian Railways employee.					.77
10. The welfare measures introduced by the Personnel department for the staff increased greatly over the last 10-30 years.					.78

*Note* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 3***Correlation matrix*

	Age	Tenure	Hierarchy (1 to 4)	R&S Imp.	R&S I.C.	Training Imp.	Training I.C.	C&B Imp.	C&B I.C.	E.R. Imp.	E.R. I.C.	Welfare Imp.
Age	1											
Tenure	.83***	1										
Hierarchy (1 to 4)	.09**	.06	1									
R&S Imp.	-.10**	-.09**	-.12***	1								
R&S I.C.	-.02	-.01	-.04	.30***	1							
Training Imp.	-.03	-.04	-.15***	.20***	.19***	1						
Training I.C.	.04	.07*	.01	.15***	.23***	.10***	1					
C&B Imp.	-.06	-.03	.02	.25***	.26***	.09**	.29***	1				
C&B I.C.	-.07*	-.07*	-.10**	.26***	.25***	.19***	.17***	.33**	1			
E.R. Imp.	-.03	-.01	-.10***	.28***	.34***	.21***	.30***	.28***	.30***	1		
E.R. I.C.	.06	.07*	.09**	.12***	.20***	.09**	.27***	.27***	.28***	.41***	1	
Welfare Imp.	-.02	.00	-.24***	.27***	.25***	.22***	.26***	.27***	.30***	.38***	.24***	1
Welfare I.C.	.02	.01	-.13***	.26***	.24***	.11***	.25***	.27***	.35***	.37***	.30***	.58***

Notes \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; Hierarchy (1 to 4) represents the hierarchical categories from higher to lower (1 = Sectional heads and senior inspectors; 2 = Second line supervisors and junior inspectors; 3 = Personnel Clerks; 4 = Junior Personnel clerks and typists); R&S Imp. = Recruitment and Selection from the Implementer perspective; R&S I.C. = Recruitment and Selection from the Internal Customer perspective; Training Imp. = Training from the Implementer perspective; Training from the Internal Customer perspective; C&B Imp. = Compensation and Benefits from the Implementer perspective; C&B I.C. = Compensation and Benefits from the Internal Customer perspective; E.R. Imp. = Employment Relations from the Implementer perspective; E.R. I.C. = Employment Relations from the Internal Customer perspective; Welfare Imp. = Welfare from the Implementer perspective; Welfare I.C. = Welfare from the Internal Customer perspective



**Table 4**

*Means and t-tests – Comparison between HR practices' experiences from the implementer and the internal customer perspective*

	Experiences of HR Practices' Implementation	Experiences of HR Practices – Internal Customer Perspective	Mean Difference	t-tests
Recruitment and Selection	3.33	3.64	-.31	-10.98***
Training	3.52	3.63	-.10	-.35**
Compensation and Benefits	3.66	3.27	.39	14.66***
Employment Relations	3.49	3.25	.24	9.05***
Welfare	3.43	3.53	-.10	-4.74***

*Note* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 5***HR practices' experiences in different hierarchical positions*

	Experiences of HR Practices' Implementation			Experiences of HR Practices – Internal Customer Perspective		
	Target Hierarchical Position	Hierarchical Position to Compare	Mean Difference	Target Hierarchical Position	Hierarchical Position to Compare	Mean Difference
Recruitment and Selection	Category 1	Category 2	-.07	Category 1	Category 2	.05
		Category 3	.02		Category 3	-.01
		Category 4	-.10		Category 4	.05
	Category 2	Category 3	.09	Category 2	Category 3	-.06
		Category 4	-.03		Category 4	.00
	Category 3	Category 4	-.12	Category 3	Category 4	.06
Training	Category 1	Category 2	.03	Category 1	Category 2	.13*
		Category 3	-.04		Category 3	.10*
		Category 4	-.11		Category 4	.16*
	Category 2	Category 3	-.07	Category 2	Category 3	-.02
		Category 4	-.15		Category 4	.03
	Category 3	Category 4	-.07	Category 3	Category 4	.06
Compensation and Benefits	Category 1	Category 2	.01	Category 1	Category 2	-.04
		Category 3	.04		Category 3	-.05
		Category 4	.09		Category 4	-.10
	Category 2	Category 3	.04	Category 2	Category 3	-.01
		Category 4	.09		Category 4	-.06
	Category 3	Category 4	.05	Category 3	Category 4	-.05
Employment Relations	Category 1	Category 2	-.00	Category 1	Category 2	-.09
		Category 3	.09		Category 3	.09
		Category 4	.07		Category 4	.23*
	Category 2	Category 3	.10	Category 2	Category 3	-.18*
		Category 4	.07		Category 4	.33**
	Category 3	Category 4	-.03	Category 3	Category 4	.14
Welfare	Category 1	Category 2	.07	Category 1	Category 2	.08
		Category 3	.07		Category 3	.09
		Category 4	.07		Category 4	.16
	Category 2	Category 3	-.00	Category 2	Category 3	.01
		Category 4	.00		Category 4	.08
	Category 3	Category 4	.00	Category 3	Category 4	.07

Notes \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; Category 1 = Sectional heads and senior inspectors; 2 = Second line supervisors and junior inspectors; 3 = Personnel Clerks; 4 = Junior Personnel clerks and typists