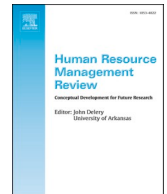




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## Caring human resources management and employee engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Research on employee engagement has demonstrated that human resource management (HRM) practices and systems are positively related to employee engagement. However, it is not clear what HRM practices or system of practices is most important for employee engagement or the theoretical mechanisms that intervene and explain the link between HRM and employee engagement. In this paper, I provide answers to these two important questions by developing a model of caring HRM and employee engagement based on the engagement, organizational climate, and strategic HRM literatures. The model indicates that a system of caring HRM practices (job design, training and development, flexible work arrangements, work-life balance, participation in decision making, health and safety, career development, and health and wellness programs) will result in an organizational climate of care and concern for employees that employees will respond to by caring for the organization which they will enact with higher levels of engagement. This model provides many avenues for future research and practice on HRM and employee engagement and introduces the notion of a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees to the literature on employee engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Employee engagement has become one of the most important topics in management for both scholars and practitioners. This is not surprising given the strong evidence that employee engagement is strongly related to employee attitudes, behaviors, performance, and well-being (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, & Fletcher, 2017; Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Halbesleben, 2010; Saks, 2006), as well as organizational outcomes such as financial and customer metrics of performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Schneider, Yost, Kopp, Kind, & Lam, 2018). Furthermore, collective organizational engagement (shared perceptions of organizational members that members of the organization are, as a whole, physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested in their work) has been described as a “unique, value-creating organizational capability” that is related to firm performance (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015, p.119). Thus, it is now generally believed that employee engagement can provide organizations with a competitive advantage (Barrick et al., 2015; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Schneider et al., 2018).

Employee engagement has been defined as the “simultaneous investment of an individual’s physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in active, full work performance” (Rich et al., 2010, p.619). This follows from Kahn’s (1990) definition of personal engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p.694). In contrast, personal disengagement involves “the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p.694).

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Work engagement has been defined by [Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker \(2002\)](#) as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p.74). *Vigor* involves high levels of energy and mental resilience while working; *dedication* refers to being strongly involved in one’s work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge; and *absorption* refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one’s work.

Thus, both definitions suggest that employee engagement is a multidimensional motivational state. Compared to other constructs such as job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, employee engagement is a broader construct that involves a more holistic and complete investment of the entire or full self in the performance of a task or role ([Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011](#); [Rich et al., 2010](#)).

Given the strong evidence of the positive effects and benefits of employee engagement for employees and organizations and the potential competitive advantage that can result from having a highly engaged workforce, the greatest concern for organizations is how to improve and enhance employee engagement. For researchers, an important topic is to determine the most important conditions for creating an engaged workforce. This is all the more important given that only one-third of employees in the United States report being highly engaged in their work, and disengaged employees cost organizations billions of dollars in lost productivity ([Barrick et al., 2015](#); [Johnson, 2004](#)).

Research on the predictors or antecedents of employee engagement has been primarily based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The JD-R model divides working conditions into job resources and job demands. Job resources refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational features of a job that are functional in that they help achieve work goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development. Job resources can come from the organization (e.g., pay, career opportunities, job security), interpersonal and social relations (supervisor and coworker support, team climate), the organization of work (e.g. role clarity, participation in decision making), and from the task itself (e.g., skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, performance feedback). Job demands refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational features of a job that require sustained physical, mental and/or psychological effort from an employee that can result in physiological and/or psychological costs. Common job demands include work overload, job insecurity, role ambiguity, time pressure, and role conflict ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2007](#)).

Research on the antecedents of employee engagement has identified dozens of job resources that predict employee engagement. For example, in a meta-analysis of job resources and job demands, [Crawford et al. \(2010\)](#) reported positive correlations between nine different types of job resources (autonomy, feedback, opportunities for development, positive workplace climate recovery, rewards and recognition, support, job variety, and work role fit) and employee engagement. In addition, three types of challenge demands (job responsibility, time urgency, and workload) were positively related to engagement. In a review of the antecedents of employee engagement, [Wollard and Shuck \(2011\)](#) identified 42 individual and organizational antecedents of employee engagement.

From a practical perspective, the never-ending list of the antecedents of employee engagement can leave organizations confused and disillusioned about how to improve employee engagement. Fortunately, there is some evidence that human resources management (HRM) practices are related to employee engagement. This provides some direction and guidance for organizations concerned about employee engagement in their organization and what they can do to improve it. However, at this time we only know that some HRM practices are important for employee engagement but we do not know what practices are most important or the theoretical basis for the relationship between HRM and employee engagement. Thus, we still need to explain conceptually how and why HRM practices lead to employee engagement ([Bowen & Ostroff, 2004](#); [Ostroff & Bowen, 2016](#)).

The main objective of this paper is to develop a theoretical model of HRM practices that are most likely to be related to employee engagement and the processes and mediating mechanisms that explain why certain HRM practices will be important for developing and influencing employee engagement. The main foundation of this model is caring and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Employees who believe that their organization cares about their needs and concerns will respond by caring for their organization which they will enact with high levels of engagement. This requires HRM practices that I refer to as *caring HRM practices* that are designed and implemented to help employees achieve their needs and promote employee growth, health, and well-being.

In the remainder of this paper, I discuss the research on HRM and employee engagement, research on organizational care and a climate of concern for employees, and research on the relationship between care and employee engagement. The integration of these different streams of research is then used to develop a model of caring HRM and employee engagement. The paper concludes with implications for research and practice on caring HRM and employee engagement.

## 2. Human resources management and employee engagement

There are two streams of research that have investigated the relationship between HRM and employee engagement. First, several studies have investigated the relationship between individual HRM practices and employee engagement. For example, [Conway, Fu, Monks, Alfes, and Bailey \(2016\)](#) investigated the impact of performance management and employee voice on employee engagement and emotional exhaustion in a large public sector organization in Ireland. They found that performance management was positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to employee engagement while employee voice was negatively related to emotional exhaustion and positively related to employee engagement. In addition, employee voice moderated the relationship between performance management and emotional exhaustion and engagement such that the relationships were stronger when employee voice was low. The findings for performance management were due in part to the fact that the performance management initiatives within the public sector tend to be top-down and focus more on measurement, monitoring, and control rather than development. Thus, in this study performance management was considered a demand rather than a resource.

[Bal and DeLange \(2015\)](#) investigated the role of flexibility HRM (opportunities for employees to make choices about when, where, and for how long they work) for employee engagement and job performance. They found that the availability of flexibility HRM but not

the use of flexibility HRM was positively related to employee engagement and job performance. In addition, engagement mediated the relationship between availability of flexibility HRM and job performance. There was also some support for a moderating effect of age such that the relationship between the use and availability of flexibility HRM was more strongly related to engagement for younger workers.

Masuda, Holtschlag, and Nicklin (2017) investigated the relationship between telecommuting and employee engagement. They found that the availability of telecommuting was directly and indirectly related to employee engagement through perceived supervisor goal support and goal progress. Employees who worked in organizations that offered telecommuting were more engaged than those working in organizations that did not offer telecommuting. Masuda et al. (2017) noted that their results “highlight the importance of adopting practices that signal to employees that the company *cares* for their welfare” (emphasis added, p.214).

Aktar and Pangil (2017) examined the relationship between three HRM practices (career advancement, job security, and performance feedback) and employee engagement. They found that the three practices were positively related to employee engagement and these relationships were moderated by perceived organizational support (POS). The three HRM practices were more strongly related to employee engagement when POS was high.

Second, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between HRM systems or “bundles” of HRM practices and employee engagement. For example, Alfes, Shantz, Truss, and Soane (2013) tested a model in which employee engagement mediates the relationship between perceived HRM practices and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and turnover intentions. They found that perceptions of HRM practices were positively related to employee engagement, and employee engagement mediated the relationship between perceived HRM practices and OCBs and turnover intentions. In addition, POS and leader-member exchange (LMX) moderated the relationships between employee engagement and OCB and turnover intentions.

Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, and Gatenby (2013) examined the relationship between perceived line manager behavior and perceived HRM practices with employee engagement, task performance, and innovative work behavior. They found that perceptions of HRM practices and perceived line manager behavior were positively related to employee engagement, and employee engagement mediated the relationships between perceived HRM practices and perceived line manager behavior with self-report task performance and innovative work behavior.

Boon and Kalshoven (2014) investigated high-commitment HRM practices and employee engagement. High-commitment HRM practices focus on creating a long-term relationship with employees and involve HR practices such as high job security, promotion from within, continuous training, extensive benefits, and career development. They argued that high-commitment HRM provides employees with organizational resources that will enhance employee engagement. As expected, they found that employee perceptions of high-commitment HRM practices were positively related to employee engagement, and employee engagement mediated the relationship between high-commitment HRM and organizational commitment. These relationships were especially strong for employees with low task proficiency.

Zhong, Wayne, and Liden (2016) investigated the relationship between high-performance HRM practices and employee engagement and work outcomes. They argued that POS will mediate the relationship between high-performance HRM practices and engagement, and engagement will be positively related to in-role performance and OCBs, and negatively related to intent to quit. As predicted, POS partially mediated the relationship between high-performance HRM practices and engagement. Further, the positive relationship between high-performance HRM practices and POS was strongest when collectivism was high and power distance orientation was low. In addition, employee engagement was positively related to in-role performance (but not OCB), and negatively related to intent to quit.

Several other studies have also reported mediating effects for the relationship between high-performance work systems (HPWS) and employee engagement. Cooke, Cooper, Bartram, Wang, and Mei (2019) found that resilience mediated the relationship between HPWS and employee engagement in a sample of 2040 employees in the Chinese banking industry, and Huang, Ma, and Meng (2018) found that positive mood and job satisfaction mediated the relationship between HPWS and employee engagement in a sample of employees working in the manufacturing and service sectors in China.

Finally, several studies have investigated the role of HR attributions in the relationship between HRM practices and employee engagement. For example, Alfes, Veld, and Furstenberg (2020) found that HPWS was positively related to HR well-being and HR performance attributions, and both attributions mediated the relationship between HPWS and employee engagement. Guest, Sanders, Rodrigues, and Oliveira (2020) found that high-commitment HR practices were positively related to employee engagement and this relationship was mediated by employees’ HR attributions. High-commitment HR practices were positively related to employee commitment attributions which were positively related to employee engagement.

In summary, research on HRM and employee engagement has found that some HRM practices and HRM systems are positively related to employee engagement. However, very few specific HRM practices have been studied and those studies that measured bundles of HRM practices or HRM systems have measured different sets of HRM practices. Thus, it is not clear what HRM practices or systems are most important for employee engagement. Furthermore, similar to research on HRM and firm performance (Jiang, Takeuchi, & Lepak, 2013), very little research has focused on the mediating mechanisms that link HRM practices and systems to employee engagement. In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to answer these two important questions by developing a model in which an organizational climate of care and concern for employees plays an important role in linking a caring HRM system to employee engagement.

### 3. Human resources management and organizational care

Although some organizations consider caring to be a guiding principle and a core part of its values (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014), and a

majority of workers expect their organization to take care of their physical and psychological health and well-being (Bernier, 2015), organizational care has seldom been the focus of management and HRM research and remains an undeveloped construct without a universal theory or model (Houghton, Pearce, Manz, Courtright, & Stewart, 2015; Kroth & Keeler, 2009).

In the management literature, perceived organizational support (POS) (employees' beliefs about the extent to which the organization values employee contributions and cares about their well-being) is the most similar construct to organizational care (Houghton et al., 2015; McAllister & Bigley, 2002). However, POS is an individual-level construct that reflects an individual's perceived support from their organization. In other words, POS is "egocentric in nature, expressed in terms of a belief about the extent to which the organization cares for 'me'" (McAllister & Bigley, 2002, p.895). Organizational care is an organizational-level construct "reflecting perceptions regarding the broad provision of care by the organization to all employees. It captures beliefs about the extent to which the organization cares for employees in general" (McAllister & Bigley, 2002, p.895).

McAllister and Bigley (2002) define organizational care as "a 'deep structure' of values and organizing principles centred on fulfilling employees' needs, promoting employees' best interests, and valuing employees' contributions" (p.895). Organizations that care about their employees are responsive to the needs, interests, concerns, and well-being of organizational members.

According to McAllister and Bigley (2002), "the essence of organizational care is contained in the values and principles that bring coherence over time and across situations to organizational routines and practices" (p.895). In caring organizations, employees perceive the organization as caring, supportive, and nurturing (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011). Houghton et al. (2015) also note that caring involves being fully committed to another's well-being, helping others succeed, learn and develop, a desire to see others grow, and a willingness to provide resources to help facilitate growth in others.

McAllister and Bigley (2002) investigated the relationship between organizational care and employees' organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). They found that organizational care was positively related to OBSE, and this relationship was mediated by perceived organizational fairness and perceived job authority.

Wang, Tsai, Lee, and Ko (2019) investigated the moderating effect of organizational care for the relationship between work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC) with emotional exhaustion and job performance in a sample of first-line employees working in luxury hotels in Taiwan. They argued that when organizations take actions to care for their employees, they enhance object resources that ease job pressures and generate social resources. As predicted, they found that the positive relationship between WFC and emotional exhaustion, and the negative relationship between FWC and job performance were both stronger when caring was low. Thus, organizational caring was found to attenuate the negative effects of WFC and FWC on emotional exhaustion and job performance.

In the strategic HRM literature, several studies have suggested that HRM practices influence employee and organizational outcomes through a construct that is similar to organizational care – a concern for employees climate (Takeuchi, Chen, & Lepak, 2009). A concern for employees climate "represents employees' cognitive appraisals of the behavior of agents (e.g., immediate management) toward employees' well-being in the organization's internal environment" (Burke, Borucki, & Hurley, 1992, p.719). It represents employees' beliefs and shared perceptions about the extent to which the organization values and cares about employees' well-being. In a concern for employees climate, employees view their organization as caring about employees' success and well-being (Takeuchi et al., 2009). According to Takeuchi et al. (2009), employees in the same organization "likely share perceptions of concern for employees' climate because they are exposed to similar stimuli and experiences that inform them of how employees are treated by their organization, such as HRM practices" (p.5).

Two studies have investigated the relationship between HRM practices and a concern for employees climate. Takeuchi et al. (2009) examined the relationship between HPWS, a concern for employees climate, and employee job satisfaction and affective commitment in 76 Japanese establishments. They argued that "HPWS involve a set of HR practices that signal employees that their establishment values, cares about, and supports its employees" (p.6). They found that a HPWS was positively related to a concern for employees climate, and a concern for employees climate mediated the relationships between a HPWS and employee job satisfaction and affective commitment. The authors concluded that "improving establishments' HRM system does in fact translate into improved climate in which employees perceive their organization or establishment as caring about and supporting them, as well as more positive employee reactions" (p.22–23).

Chuang and Liao (2010) investigated the relationship between HRM practices of a HPWS and business unit's market performance in a sample of 133 service stores in Taiwan. They argued that HPWS engender a positive climate of concern for customers and employees which then leads to service performance and helping behavior. Chuang and Liao (2010) found a strong positive relationship between HPWS and a climate of concern for customers and a climate of concern for employees. In addition, concern for customers was positively related to service performance, and concern for employees was positively related to employee helping behavior. The relationship between HPWS and business unit market performance was partially mediated by the climate of concern for employees and customers as well as service performance and helping behavior. Thus, HPWS practices were positively related to the extent to which the organization cares about employees and customers, and a climate of concern for employees was associated with employee helping behavior and subsequent business unit market performance.

In summary, organizational care and a climate of concern for employees are important for employee attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, HRM practices have been found to be related to employee perceptions of the extent to which their organization cares about and is concerned for its employees, and a positive climate of concern for employees mediates the relationship between HPWS and employee and organization outcomes. As described in the next section, there is also some evidence that care is important for employee engagement.

#### 4. Organizational care and employee engagement

Although previous research has not explicitly examined the relationship between organizational care and employee engagement, there is some indirect evidence that care is important for and related to employee engagement. For example, POS has been found to be positively related to employee engagement (Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006; Zhong et al., 2016). As indicated earlier, POS overlaps with care in terms of some of its content and several items of the POS scale emphasize organizational care for employees (“The organization really cares about my well-being”), (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Thus, the strong and positive relationships between POS and employee engagement provides indirect evidence that care is important for employee engagement.

In a study on caring in a social service agency, Kahn (1993) demonstrated the importance of caring for burnout and engagement. He investigated networks of caregiving among organizational members and different patterns of caregiving between organizational members. Kahn (1993) found that when organizational members felt that they were cared for they were more willing and able to provide caregiving to organizational members and clients. When care was withheld, they felt frustrated and angry and overtime they withdrew physically and emotionally, and eventually stopped providing care to both co-workers and clients. A lack of caregiving between superiors and subordinates led to organizational members withdrawing “emotionally from one another, creating relationships in which they are regularly disengaged, alienated, and emotionally absent rather than present” (p.555). A lack of caregiving was a contributing factor to burnout, disengagement, and turnover.

The importance of care for employee engagement was demonstrated in a study on the differential value of resources for predicting employee engagement (Cooper-Thomas, Xu, & Saks, 2018). The theoretical basis for this study was resource theory of social exchange (Foa & Foa, 2012). Resource theory describes six different resources that individuals exchange with others: love, status, information, goods, services, and money. The main premise of the theory is that people exchange resources that are similar to resources they receive (Foa & Foa, 2012).

Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018) categorized seven resources or predictors of engagement in terms of the six different resources of resource theory. Engagement was categorized as a love resource that represents warmth and caring because when employees are engaged, they invest their whole-hearted full selves into the performance of their job. Furthermore, engagement is a highly particularistic resource because the exchange partner is the employee’s organization. Thus, employees will be most likely to exchange their engagement for love resources that demonstrate warmth and caring towards them from their organization.

Based on resource theory, Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018) expected to find that the “love” resources would be the strongest predictors of employee engagement. In support of resource theory, they found that two of the three resources most closely aligned with love (learning and development and vision and purpose) were the strongest predictors of employee engagement. In other words, the resources that were most proximal to love, care, and warmth were the most strongly related to employee engagement. The authors suggested that organizations should provide employees with resources that demonstrate warmth and caring if they want to improve employee engagement.

Further evidence for the importance of care and concern for employee engagement comes from a study by Schneider et al. (2018) on workforce engagement (the aggregate of the work engagement experiences of individual employees in an organization). They investigated the relationship between three antecedents (company-level organizational practices, supervisory support, and work attribute characteristics) and workforce engagement, and the mediating effect of engagement for the relationship between the antecedents and financial and customer metric outcomes in a sample of 102 publicly traded organizations.

Schneider et al. (2018) found that workforce engagement was positively related to several indicators of financial and customer performance and each of the three antecedents were positively correlated with workforce engagement. However, when all three of the antecedents were regressed on workforce engagement, only organizational practices were significant. Thus, organizational practices were the most important predictor of workforce engagement, and workforce engagement mediated the relationship between the three antecedents and financial and customer performance.

With respect to the prediction of workforce engagement, the authors noted that their results indicate that engagement is the result of more than just the attributes of work. According to Schneider et al. (2018), “the larger context in which work exists has a stronger impact than the work itself on workforce engagement in work” (p.476) and the primary driver of workforce engagement “is a work context where people experience the organization as being goal directed and demonstrating *concern for people*” (emphasis added, p.476). Thus, an important driver of workforce engagement is a work context in which employees feel that their organization is concerned about them.

The most direct evidence for a relationship between care and employee engagement is from a study on the relationship between care felt and employee engagement in innovative work behaviors (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011). Care felt refers to the extent to which an employee feels that other organizational members care for her or him. It has to do with the extent to which employees feel that their co-workers care about and take care of them, value their contributions, and show concern for their needs (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011).

Vinarski-Peretz and Carmeli (2011) argued that care felt cultivates Kahn’s (1990) three psychological conditions for engagement (i.e., meaningfulness, safety, and availability) and these conditions will increase employees’ intrinsic motivation to engage in innovative behaviors and result in a higher level of engagement in innovative work behaviors. As predicted, they found that care felt was positively related to the psychological conditions for engagement and employee motivation to engage in innovative behaviors. The three psychological conditions mediated the relationship between care felt and employee motivation to engage in innovative behaviors, and motivation to engage in innovative behaviors mediated the relationship between the psychological conditions and engagement in innovative behaviors. The results of this study indicate that caring “is crucial to the development of psychological conditions that engender motivation and personal engagement in innovative work tasks” (Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011, p.50).



In summary, caring appears to be important for facilitating employee engagement and as suggested by resource theory, when employees believe that their organization cares about them and exhibits acts of concern and warmth towards them, they are more likely to exchange that care for similar resources such as higher levels of engagement. As discussed in the next section, this raises the possibility that HRM practices might influence employee engagement through its effect on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees.

## 5. Caring human resources management and employee engagement

The research reviewed in the previous sections suggests that HRM practices are positively related to employee engagement and a climate of concern for employees. There is also some evidence that care is related to employee engagement. In this section, the findings from these studies are integrated to develop a new model of caring HRM and employee engagement.

Fig. 1 presents a model of caring HRM and employee engagement. The model begins with an HRM policy that provides guidelines for action and what is to be achieved with HRM practices and programs. HRM policies indicate an organization's stated intentions about what HRM practices should be implemented (Boon, den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016; Schuler, 1992). Thus, caring HRM practices should follow from and be based on an HRM caring policy that emphasizes and prioritizes employees' basic needs, opportunities for growth and development, and a genuine concern for employees' best interests and their physical and mental health and well-being. The HRM practices based on this policy comprise a system of caring HRM practices or a caring HRM system.

Caring HRM practices are designed and implemented to help employees fulfill their basic psychological needs and contribute to their well-being, physical and mental health, promote employees' best interests, and help employees learn, grow, and succeed. In general, caring HRM practices (described below) are those that signal or communicate to employees the organizations' care and concern for the well-being and health of employees' and all organizational members (Houghton et al., 2015; McAllister & Bigley, 2002).

As shown in Fig. 1, caring HRM practices are expected to lead to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Organizational climate is a "shared perception of what the organization is like in terms of practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards – what is important and what behaviors are expected and rewarded" (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p.205). It is a social linking mechanism through which HRM practices influence employee attitudes and behaviors and mediates the relationship between HRM systems and employee and organizational outcomes (Jiang et al., 2013; Takeuchi et al., 2009). Thus, HRM practices and systems are an important determinant of climate perceptions and organizational climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Jiang et al., 2013). As noted by Chuang and Liao (2010), "HR practices shape employee shared perceptions about the organizational climate, which in turn influence employee collective behaviors, and employee collective behaviors then contribute to organizational performance" (p.154).

Therefore, based on research on a climate of concern for employees (Chuang & Liao, 2010; Takeuchi et al., 2009) and organizational care (McAllister & Bigley, 2002), an organizational climate of care and concern for employees can be defined as employees' beliefs and shared perceptions about the extent to which the organization values and cares about fulfilling employees' needs, employees' contributions, and promoting employees' best interests, health, and well-being.

Research on SHRM and a concern for employees climate suggests that a bundle or system of HRM practices can lead to a climate in which employees believe that their organization cares about employee well-being, and this climate links HRM systems to employee and organizational outcomes. As shown in Fig. 1, caring HRM practices are expected to lead to a strong organizational climate of care and concern for employees.

Although the practices that comprise a HPWS have been the focus of previous research, HPWS are designed primarily to enhance

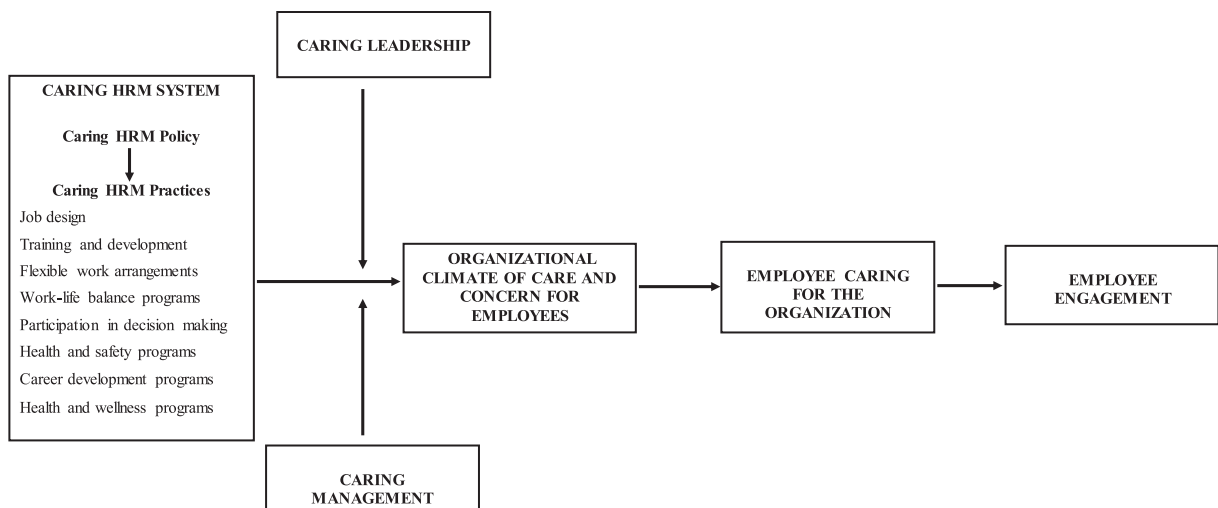


Fig. 1. Model of caring human resources management and employee engagement.

employee performance, reduce turnover, increase productivity, and improve the financial performance of organizations (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011) not to fulfill employee needs and improve employee health and well-being. Furthermore, there is some evidence that HPWS are associated with increased levels of work demands and job strain and have a negative effect on employees' health and well-being (Han, Sun, & Wang, 2020; Jiang et al., 2013; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Thus, HPWS focus more on improving performance rather than caring about employees' health and well-being.

Finally, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees is expected to result in employee caring for the organization and employee engagement. That is, employees will respond to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees with increased caring for the organization which they will enact through higher levels of engagement. These relationships and the corresponding propositions are explained in more detail below following a description of the caring HRM practices that comprise a caring HRM system.

### 5.1. Caring HRM system

Caring HRM practices are somewhat discretionary in that organizations do not have to offer them to employees (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003), and they are not required to function effectively or even survive. Thus, when organizations implement caring HRM practices it is because they value and care about their employees and they are willing to make investments in them (Allen et al., 2003). Employees will benefit from such programs with respect to their knowledge, growth, development, physical and psychological health, well-being, and career success. Caring HRM practices provide tangible benefits and resources to employees and enable employees to satisfy their basic psychological needs and facilitate their growth, development, health, and well-being.

As discussed below, a caring HRM system will consist of a bundle of caring HRM practices that include job design, training and development, flexible work arrangements, work-life balance programs, participation in decision making, health and safety programs, career development programs, and health and wellness programs.

#### 5.1.1. Job design

Job design and job characteristics have consistently been found to be positively related to employee engagement (Bailey et al., 2017). Job characteristics demonstrate to employees that the organization cares enough about its employees to provide them with work that is interesting, challenging, and meaningful. Providing employees with some control and autonomy in how they perform their job is especially likely to signal to employees that the organization cares about them. As noted by McAllister and Bigley (2002), "caring organizations cultivate empowerment-capable employees and provide them with job authority commensurate with their capabilities. Further, as these capabilities increase, greater job authority can be forthcoming" (p.897).

According to Barrick et al. (2015), when organizations implement "job characteristics to enhance motivation at lower levels of the organization, employees collectively sense that their work has value and purpose, which generates a shared perception of psychological meaningfulness throughout the firm" (p.116). In a similar vein, employees are also likely to sense that the organization cares about them because they are provided with work that makes them feel valuable, useful, and important. Enriching entry-level motivating work design (autonomy, task significance, task identity, variety, and feedback) has been found to be positively related to employee engagement (Barrick et al., 2015).

#### 5.1.2. Training and development

Training and development provide employees with opportunities for growth and fulfills employees' need for competence and strengthens their personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy). As noted by McAllister and Bigley (2002), "caring organizations are likely to place particular emphasis on employee development, to promote the confidence and skill employees need to exercise discretion and, thus to use external controls sparingly" (p.897). By providing opportunities for learning through training and development, organizations signal to employees that they are investing in them and care about their contributions, growth and development. Research on employee engagement has found that opportunities for learning are positively related to employee engagement (Crawford et al., 2010).

#### 5.1.3. Flexible work arrangements

Flexibility in the workplace provides employees with the opportunity to "make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks" (Bal & DeLange, 2015, p.127) and provides employees with choices about when and how they work thereby fulfilling employees' needs for autonomy.

Bal and DeLange (2015) made a distinction between two types of flexibility: regular flexibility and irregular flexibility. Regular flexibility refers to the "freedom employees have in choosing their work schedules, starting and quitting times, and flexibility in job sharing on a more daily basis" (Bal & DeLange, 2015, p.129). Irregular flexibility refers to "those practices aimed at facilitating the workers' needs to irregularly reduce workload over a certain period of time by practices such as unpaid leave from work to pursue something else, such as volunteer work or career breaks" (Bal & DeLange, 2015, p.129).

As indicated earlier, Bal and DeLange (2015) found that the availability of flexibility (regular and irregular) was positively related to employee engagement. In describing this relationship, the authors stated that "availability of flexibility HRM served as a strong indicator of the organization's caring for employees, as it positively related to employee engagement and job performance" (emphasis added, p.146).

Organizations that offer employees flexibility in terms of when and/or where work can be completed is an indication that they are willing to give employees some control and autonomy over their working hours and they care about employees needs with respect to

when and where it is best for them to work. Others have also noted that flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting signal to employees that the organization cares about employees' welfare and well-being (Masuda et al., 2017).

#### 5.1.4. Work-life balance programs

Work-life balance programs are designed to help employees balance the demands of their work and family life and roles and to minimize and manage work-life conflicts. HRM practices and programs that promote work-life balance include on-site childcare, seasonal childcare programs, eldercare assistance, parental and family leave policies, and longer vacation time. These programs allow employees to manage their family life and spend more time with their families.

Research on work-life/family balance has found that balance is positively related to employee attitudes (job, life, and family satisfaction) and behaviors, and negatively related to mental health (anxiety and depression) (Casper, Vaziri, Wayne, DeHauw, & Greenhaus, 2018; Haar, Russo, Sune, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014). Wayne, Butts, Casper, and Allen (2017) found that employees who were more balanced had higher organizational commitment, were more satisfied with their job and family, performed better in their job and family, and were less likely to leave their organization.

Work-life balance programs help employees balance their dual roles and avoid the conflict and stress that often results when there is a lack of balance. Organizations with work-life balance programs care about their employees' family life and provide programs and resources to help them manage and balance their work and family roles and avoid the negative consequences of a lack of balance and work-life conflict.

#### 5.1.5. Participation in decision making

HRM practices that involve information sharing, employee input, and participation in decision making provide employees the opportunity to express their concerns and provide input into organization decisions that might affect their work and well-being. Closely related to this is employee voice which has been found to be positively related to employee engagement (Conway et al., 2016; Holland, Cooper, & Sheehan, 2017; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013). When organizations share information with employees and offer them the opportunity to provide input and voice on important organizational matters it is because they care about employee opinions and value their input and contributions. Thus, employees are likely to view opportunities for input, voice, and participation in decision making as indicative of an organization that cares about its employees and their contributions.

#### 5.1.6. Health and safety programs

Health and safety programs are important because they demonstrate that the organization cares enough about employees that they have invested in practices and programs that are designed to ensure the health and safety of employees in the workplace. Research has shown that health and safety programs have a positive effect on safety knowledge and performance (Burke et al., 2011). Thus, health and safety programs are effective for protecting the health and well-being of employees and are an indication that the organization cares about the health, safety, and well-being of its employees.

#### 5.1.7. Career development programs

Career development programs provide employees the opportunity to plan and manage their career and to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities so they can improve their chances of advancing in the organization. Organizations that have extensive career development programs not only provide resources for employees to manage their career but also offer opportunities for promotions and advancement. Thus, career development programs focus on helping employees grow, develop, and succeed in their career and demonstrate that the organization cares about its employees' career objectives and success.

Career development programs in which employees have opportunities to develop new skills and career progression and advancement opportunities can also result in a greater sense of meaningfulness and engagement (Shuck & Rocco, 2014). As indicated earlier, Aktar and Pangil (2017) found that opportunities for career advancement were positively related to employee engagement.

#### 5.1.8. Health and wellness programs

Health and wellness programs provide employees with resources and programs to manage their physical and psychological health. They "provide services designed to help employees reduce specific health risks such as high blood pressure and cholesterol, cigarette smoking, and obesity, and to maintain and improve overall health by increasing physical exercise, improving nutrition, and addressing stress" (Erfurt, Foote, & Heirich, 1992).

Common examples of health and wellness programs are fitness and exercise programs, weight loss programs, smoking cessation programs, employee assistance programs, healthy eating programs, as well as programs that provide counselling for mental health issues. The main purpose of these programs is to improve the physical and mental health and well-being of employees. Research has found that these programs can have beneficial health outcomes for employees such as lowered risk of cardiovascular disease and mitigation of the negative effects of stress (Harrison & Liska, 1994). These programs are an indication that the organization cares about their employees' general health and well-being.

### 5.2. Organizational climate of care and concern for employees

HRM practices are organizational resources that shape the nature of the employee-firm relationship (Barrick et al., 2015). They represent communications and signals from the organization to employees about the organization's intentions and actions towards employees, and influence employees' perceptions of organizational climate (Bal & DeLange, 2015; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Chuang &



Liao, 2010). Further, HRM practices send signals to employees about the extent to which the organization values and cares about its employees (Allen et al., 2003).

Caring HRM practices are expected to influence employees' shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees through signalling theory. HRM practices shape employees' climate perceptions by sending signals to employees about what is important and valued by the organization, what is expected, how they should interact with each other, and the appropriate responses (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Chuang & Liao, 2010; Han et al., 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). A bundle of caring HRM practices forms a strong caring HRM system that will send signals to employees that the organization cares about employees and is concerned about their needs and well-being (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

The caring HRM practices described earlier represent a strong caring HRM system because they provide employees with tangible benefits that will help employees fulfill their basic psychological needs (e.g., competence, autonomy, relatedness) and improve employees work-life, mental health, and well-being as opposed to benefiting the organization by lowering costs, maximizing efficiency, or improving firm performance (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

In accordance with signalling theory and one of the primary objectives of a system of internally aligned HRM practices (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008), a system of caring HRM practices is expected to send signals and a consistent message to employees that the organization cares about employees as the caring HRM practices represent tangible benefits and valuable resources for employees. As a system of practices, they demonstrate to employees that the organization invests in employee development (e.g., training and development, career development programs) and employee health and well-being (e.g., work-life balance, health and wellness programs) (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). When organizational members are exposed to a coherent set of caring HRM practices they will form common and shared perceptions that the organization cares about employees, that a caring relationship with employees is valued and important, and caring behaviors are expected and rewarded. Further, the combination of caring HRM practices will result in a strong and consistent message to employees that will result in favorable employee attributions that the organization cares about employees and their well-being (Nishii et al., 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). These shared perceptions and caring attributions will result in an organizational climate of care and concern for employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Chuang & Liao, 2010).

While each of the caring HRM practices might be positively related to employee shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees, the strongest effects are expected when an organization uses a bundle or system of interconnected caring HRM practices (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Subramoney, 2009). This follows from the SHRM literature with respect to a system view of HRM that involves a holistic bundle of interrelated and internally consistent HRM practices (Boon et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2013; Takeuchi et al., 2009). A bundle of caring HRM practices or a caring HRM system is expected to lead to higher shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. This is based on the notion that a bundle of interrelated HRM practices create synergistic effects that are much greater than individual HRM practices and more likely to be correctly interpreted and acted upon (Alfes, Shantz, et al., 2013; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). This is also consistent with Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) notion that strong HRM systems are most likely to result in agreement across employees about organizational climate (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Thus, a strong caring HRM system made up of a coherent set of caring HRM practices will send a strong signal that the organization cares about employees, and this will result in shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees.

Therefore, based on HRM system strength and signalling theory it is expected that a system of caring HRM practices will have a positive effect on employees' shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees:

**Proposition 1.** A caring HRM system will be positively related to employees' shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees.

### 5.3. Employee caring and engagement

According to social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity, individuals develop obligations that stem from a series of mutual interactions between parties that are in a state of reciprocal interdependence such that individuals feel obligated to help those who have helped them (Allen et al., 2003; Chuang & Liao, 2010). As described by Jiang et al. (2013), "when organizations value employees' contribution and care about their well-being via investment in HR systems, employees are expected to reciprocate by exerting positive work attitudes and behaviors towards organizations" (p.1452).

In their review of social exchange theory, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) noted that "social exchange relationships evolve when employers 'take care of employees,' which thereby engenders beneficial consequences" (p.882). Social exchange has been shown to be an important mechanism in the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance (Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang, & Takeuchi, 2007).

Social exchange theory has also been used to explain employee engagement (Bailey et al., 2017). According to Saks (2006), "when employees believe that their organization is concerned about them and cares about their well-being, they are likely to respond by attempting to fulfill their obligations to the organization by becoming more engaged" (p.605). Thus, when employees feel that their organization cares about them, they are likely to reciprocate and respond in a positive manner, and one way for employees to reciprocate is through caring for their organization and greater engagement in their job (Saks, 2006; Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011).

Thus, when there is a strong organizational climate of care and concern for employees, employees will have a felt obligation to care about the organization and to help it reach its goals and objectives in accordance with the norm of reciprocity (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Employees will then demonstrate and enact their care for the organization with higher levels of engagement given that care is positively related to employee engagement and being highly engaged is a meaningful way for employees

to help their organization achieve its goals and objectives (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2018; Kahn, 1993; Schneider et al., 2018; Vinarski-Peretz & Carmeli, 2011):

**Proposition 2.** An organizational climate of care and concern for employees will be positively related to employee caring for the organization and employee engagement.

**Proposition 3.** Employee caring for the organization will be positively related to employee engagement.

As shown in Fig. 1, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees is the mechanism through a caring HRM system is translated into employee caring for the organization and employee engagement. In other words, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees mediates the relationship between a caring HRM system and employee caring for the organization and employee engagement:

**Proposition 4.** An organizational climate of care and concern for employees will mediate the relationship between a caring HRM system and employee caring for the organization and employee engagement.

Finally, employee caring for the organization is the mechanism that links an organizational climate of care and concern for employees to employee engagement. In other words, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees leads to higher levels of employee engagement because it enhances employee caring for the organization:

**Proposition 5.** Employee caring for the organization will mediate the relationship between an organizational climate of care and concern for employees and employee engagement.

#### 5.4. Boundary conditions

While it is expected that a system of caring HRM practices will be associated with an organizational climate of care and concern for employees, it is important to recognize that such a universal perspective might not be warranted. Clearly, many organizations have HRM practices similar to those that I have described as caring but employees might not perceive these practices as caring and they might not result in an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Thus, the extent to which a system of caring HRM practices is related to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees will very likely depend on or be contingent on organizational contextual factors.

Given the important role that leaders and managers play in implementing HRM policies and practices and in facilitating a strong HRM system (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016), and that HRM practices are less likely to have a strong impact on climate perceptions when leadership is poor (Chuang & Liao, 2010), two contextual factors that are expected to be especially important are the leadership style of senior leaders in an organization and the behavior of employees' immediate manager.

First, the effect of a system of caring HRM practices on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees will depend on the extent to which the senior leadership and top management of an organization places a high value on caring for organizational members. According to Peus (2011), leadership is likely to play a crucial role in the creation of caring organizations. In his study on caring in a social service agency, Kahn (1993) found that one of the reasons that the caregiving system of the agency was inefficient and irrational was due to the executive director withholding care from others in the organization including social workers, their supervisor, and the office manager.

According to Peus (2011), authentic leadership is particularly likely to facilitate caring in organizations because authentic leaders express what they genuinely feel and the ethic of care is a defining characteristic of authentic leadership (Atwijuka & Caldwell, 2017). Other forms of leadership that have an ethical and moral component and involve caring for organizational members such as ethical, spiritual, transformational, and servant leadership are also likely to facilitate caring in organizations and employee engagement (Carasco-Saul, Kim, & Kim, 2015; De Clercq, Bouckeoghe, Raja, & Matsyborska, 2014; Houghton et al., 2015; Peus, 2011).

Given that trust in business today is very low and this lack of trust stems from the perception that business leaders make decisions based on a lack of caring about the welfare of employees (Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2020), the leadership of an organization is expected to be an important boundary condition for the effects of a caring HRM system on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Caring HRM practices are not likely to have a positive effect on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees if the leadership of an organization is perceived by employees as not caring about the welfare and well-being of organizational members.

As indicated earlier, some organizations consider care to be a guiding principle and a core organizational value. When leaders espouse values and principles regarding their care and concern for organizational members and behave in ways and make decisions that show that they care about employees' health and well-being, a system of caring HRM practices is most likely to have a positive effect on employees' climate perceptions.

Thus, a caring HRM system is most likely to have a positive effect on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees when the leadership of an organization is caring towards members of the organization:

**Proposition 6.** Caring leadership will moderate the relationship between a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees such that the positive relationship between a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees will be stronger when caring leadership is high and weaker when caring leadership is low.

Second, the effect of a caring HRM system will also depend on the extent to which the immediate manager or superior of employees engages in caring behaviors with employees. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of manager caring. For example, Kroth

and Keeler (2009) discussed the importance of the manager-employee caring relationship and developed a recursive model of manager-employee caring and how managerial caring behaviors are antecedents of employee attitudes and behaviors.

In addition, Kahn (1993) found that the presence and absence of caregiving from superiors influenced social workers experiences. When employees felt that they were cared for they were able to care for others. When superiors withheld care, employees felt frustrated and angry, and they withdrew physically and emotionally when care was repeatedly withheld leading to burnout and turnover. As stated by Kahn (1993):

Hierarchical superiors, by definition, represent their organizations to their subordinates. When superiors give or withhold care, subordinates experience it as systematic as well as personal. They feel cared for or withheld from by their organizations, as represented in the persons of their formal superiors...(p.561).

It is unlikely that a system of caring HRM practices will have a strong effect on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees if the immediate manager of employees is not caring towards employees or even worse is abusive given that abusive supervision is related to a variety of negative outcomes (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017).

Thus, a caring HRM system will be most likely to have a positive effect on an organizational climate of care and concern for employees when the immediate manager engages in caring behaviors with employees:

**Proposition 7.** Manager caring behavior will moderate the relationship between a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees such that the positive relationship between a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees will be stronger when manager caring behavior is high and weaker when manager caring behavior is low.

In summary, the model of caring HRM and employee engagement indicates that a caring HRM system will lead to employee shared perceptions of an organizational climate of care and concern for employees and the strength of this relationship will depend on the extent to which the senior leadership of the organization values and promotes care and concern for employees, and the extent to which employees' immediate manager engages in caring behaviors with employees. When employees perceive a strong organizational climate of care and concern for employees they will respond and reciprocate by caring for the organization and with higher levels of engagement. Thus, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees is the theoretical process or the mediating mechanism through which a system of caring HRM practices will lead to employee engagement.

## 6. Discussion

Although there is some evidence that HRM practices are related to employee engagement, it is not clear what HRM practices or systems are most important for employee engagement or the theoretical mechanisms involved in translating HRM practices into employee engagement. In this paper, I have described how a system of caring HRM practices might be among the most important HRM systems for facilitating employee engagement and that an important mechanism through which caring HRM practices influence employee engagement is an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Thus, an important contribution of this paper is clarifying the HRM practices and system that are most likely to lead to higher levels of employee engagement and explaining the mechanisms involved in this process or the "black box" that links HRM practices to employee engagement (Jiang et al., 2013).

Given the potential for employee engagement to provide organizations with a competitive advantage, this model represents a very practical way for organizations to create more caring organizations and higher levels of employee engagement. In addition, because of the limited research on HRM and employee engagement and on organizational caring, this paper makes a meaningful contribution to the literature on HRM and employee engagement and organizational caring. It introduces the notion of caring HRM practices and organizational care to the literature on employee engagement and it provides a new model of how a system of caring HRM practices relates to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees and employee engagement. This paper also contributes to the literature on positive organizational scholarship as a strong climate of care and concern for employees can contribute to making organizations more positive places for employees to work.

It should be noted that the model of caring HRM and employee engagement incorporates aspects of both the JD-R model and Kahn's (1990) model of personal engagement. With respect to the JD-R model, HRM practices are organizational resources which have been found to be related to employee engagement and collective organizational engagement (Barrick et al., 2015; Boon & Kalshoven, 2014). In addition, caring HRM practices include job resources such as autonomy, participation in decision making, training, and job characteristics that have been found to be positively related to employee engagement (Crawford et al., 2010; Saks, 2006). Furthermore, care itself can be considered a resource that provides employees with the means to cope with job demands and stressors (Wang et al., 2019).

In terms of Kahn's (1990) model of personal engagement, an organizational climate of care and concern for employees is likely to make employees feel safe, provide them with meaning, and to represent an important resource that will improve their availability to engage in their job and work roles. As indicated earlier, Vinarski-Peretz and Carmeli (2011) found that care felt was positively related to Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions for engagement. Thus, the model of caring HRM and employee engagement is consistent with the JD-R model and Kahn's (1990) model in that caring HRM practices represent resources and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees is expected provide employees with the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

### 6.1. Implications for research

The caring HRM and employee engagement model provides a set of testable propositions that involve the relationships indicated in the model. Thus, future research should test these propositions. Although previous research has tested the relationship between high-performance work systems and a climate of concern for employees, research is needed on the relationship between caring HRM practices and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees and employee engagement. Future research should also investigate the extent to which an organizational climate of care and concern for employees mediates the relationship between a caring HRM system and employee caring for the organization and employee engagement.

Future research should also investigate the extent to which caring leadership and manager caring behaviors moderate the relationship between a caring HRM system and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. With respect to caring leadership, future research might consider testing the various forms of leadership that have a caring or moral component to them such as authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, and servant leadership as these types of leadership might be especially likely to moderate the relationship between a caring HRM system and a climate of care and concern for employees.

Although a caring HRM system that consists of a bundle of caring HRM practices should be most strongly related to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees, it is possible that some caring HRM practices will be more important than others and more strongly related to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Therefore, future research is needed to identify those caring HRM practices that are most important and strongly related to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees as well as those HRM practices that make up the most effective and strongest caring HRM system. In addition, given that HR attributions play an important role in linking perceived HR practices and systems to employee engagement (Alfes et al., 2020; Guest et al., 2020), future research should measure the extent to which caring HRM practices and a caring HRM system are related to HR caring attributions. HR caring attributions might be an important mechanism that links a caring HRM system to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees.

Future research should also consider the effects of a caring HRM system at multiple levels of analysis (Jiang et al., 2013). For example, a caring HRM system is expected to influence employee's perceptions (psychological climate) and an organizational climate of care and concern for employees. Further, individual psychological climate perceptions can be aggregated to represent business-unit and organizational climates (Jiang et al., 2013). Thus, future research can be conducted at the individual, business-unit, and organizational level as well as across levels with respect to the relationship between a caring HRM system and a climate of care and concern for employees. Furthermore, it is possible that an organizational climate of care and concern for employees within a business unit or organization will result in higher levels of employee engagement as well as collective organizational engagement. Thus, the model of caring HRM and employee engagement can be tested at different levels of analysis as well as across levels of analysis. Future research should investigate cross-level relationships between a caring HRM system, a climate of care and concern for employees, and employee engagement.

Future research might also consider the potential for caring spillover effects. Just as employee engagement can produce contagion effects (Barrick et al., 2015), caring might also have contagion effects (Houghton et al., 2015) such that caring for employees on the part of the organization might facilitate employee caring for each other and for organization clients and customers. That is, if employees respond to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees with more care towards the organization, this might spillover to caring towards co-workers as well as customers and clients of the organization. Furthermore, it is also possible that employees will become more caring in their personal and private lives if they experience more care at work from their organization and co-workers. Thus, future research might consider these spillover effects of caring that go beyond caring for the organization and beyond the workplace.

With respect to employee engagement, the focus of engagement research has been on work or job engagement. In this paper, the argument is that when employees care about their organization, they will be more engaged in their job. However, engagement is a role specific construct which means that employees can vary in the extent to which they are engaged in various roles in addition to their job or work role (e.g., organization and group role; Rothbard, 2001; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Thus, it is possible that an organizational climate of care and concern for employees will also facilitate employee engagement in other roles. That is, employees who care about their organization might also become more engaged in their role as a member of their organization (organization engagement) and their work group (group engagement). Future research should consider the extent to which the relationships in the model operate for different targets of employee engagement.

### 6.2. Implications for practice

The development of a highly engaged workforce has become a high priority for human resource practitioners (De Clercq et al., 2014). The model of caring HRM and employee engagement has several practical implications for how organizations can develop two important elements of an effective, positive, and healthy organization: an organizational climate of care and concern for employees and employee engagement. As indicated earlier, care related constructs such as organizational care, care felt, and a climate of concern for employees have been found to be positively related to employee work outcomes. Furthermore, employee engagement has also been found to be related to employee and organizational outcomes. Thus, both employees and organizations stand to benefit by creating more caring organizations.

HR professionals play an important role in facilitating and improving employee engagement in organizations. However, prior research on HRM and employee engagement does not provide concrete guidelines for how to use HRM to improve employee engagement. The main practical implication of this paper is that a system of internally consistent and coherent caring HRM practices

that are driven by an HRM policy that focuses on employee needs, health, and well-being will result in more caring and engaged employees.

Given that HPWS have been found to be positively related to a climate of concern for employees, it is expected that a strong caring HRM system made up of caring HRM practices will be even more strongly related to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees given that HPWS tend to include only a few caring HRM practices (e.g., training and development) and focus more on enhancing employee and firm performance rather than employee well-being. Thus, the most important practical implication is for organizations to implement a caring HRM policy and system if they want to develop a strong organizational climate of care and concern for employees and higher levels of employee engagement. Furthermore, given that an organizational climate of care and concern for employees can be developed within business units and organizations, it is also possible that a climate of care and concern for employees might also result in higher levels of collective organizational engagement.

Another practical implication is for organizations to review their HRM practices to identify the extent to which they are providing caring HRM practices. The results of an HRM-caring review can identify caring HRM practices that are absent and those that deserve attention such as providing flexible work arrangements, opportunities for learning and career development, or perhaps employee health and wellness programs. In addition to the availability of caring HRM practices, organizations should also examine employees' HR attributions to determine if they are making HR caring attributions. Thus, it is important to ensure that employees perceive the availability of caring HRM practices and that they make HR caring attributions.

Not all employees will perceive and interpret HRM practices in the same way and some might not make caring attributions in response to a caring HRM system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Thus, organizations and managers might want to ensure that a caring HRM policy and practices are clearly communicated to employees so that they are accurately perceived and understood, and that employees make HR caring attributions (Alfes et al., 2020). This should be accompanied by organization values and principles that focus on employee care and well-being. Thus, organizations and management should ensure that employees are aware of caring HRM practices, and that such practices are aligned and linked to an HRM philosophy and policy that focuses on caring about employees' needs and well-being.

Finally, it is worth noting that caring HRM practices are relevant for sustainable HRM (e.g., flexible work arrangements), especially with respect to the social dimension of Triple Bottom Line HRM and managing an organization's social goals (Bush, 2020). One area of research concerns how HRM systems can improve social sustainability and contribute to the well-being of employees (Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2020). Given that caring HRM practices focus on the needs of employees and their health and well-being, a system of caring HRM practices can help organizations develop more sustainable HRM systems and contribute to an organization's social goals and promote more sustainable organizations. Furthermore, caring HRM practices might also facilitate employee engagement in corporate sustainability (CS) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and activities (Stahl et al., 2020).

## 7. Conclusion

A great deal of research has been published on employee engagement not to mention numerous review articles and meta-analyses, special journal issues, and books. However, much less research has examined the role of HRM for developing employee engagement or the mechanisms through which HRM might lead to higher levels of employee engagement. As a result, we know relatively little about what HRM practices are most likely to drive employee engagement and the mechanisms involved in this process.

In this paper, I have provided a model of HRM and employee engagement that revolves around the notion that caring is a fundamental factor when it comes to employees' willingness to fully invest their full and complete selves into the performance of their job and work roles. Along these lines, I have suggested that an HRM system made up of a coherent set of caring HRM practices based on an HRM policy of caring for employees can lead to an organizational climate of care and concern for employees, and that in such a climate, employees will reciprocate and respond by caring more about their organization and by being more engaged in their job and work roles.

In conclusion, the model of caring HRM and employee engagement suggests that caring is a key mechanism that links a caring HRM system to employee engagement. This model offers researchers a new approach for studying HRM and employee engagement and provides organizations and HRM professionals with a clearer picture of how to improve employee engagement. It is my hope that this will result in more research on HRM and employee engagement, and it will also help to create more caring HRM systems and organizations.

## Author statement

This manuscript was written and prepared entirely by Alan M. Saks.

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