

Integrating dynamics and agency: A mechanism for HR to enhance sustainable employee wellbeing for the common good[☆]

Rachel Nayani^{a,*}, Olga Tregaskis^a, Roberta Fida^b, David Watson^{a,c},
Marinella Paciello^d, Kevin Daniels^a

^a Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

^b Aston Business School, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

^c Essex Business School, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

^d Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

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ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that employee wellbeing is a pressing concern for HRM. Poor workplace wellbeing bears substantial societal costs; it is one of the roots of grand challenges of wellbeing and decent work. Enhancing sustainable employee wellbeing is therefore a way for HRM to contribute to the common good (CGHRM). There is a lack of understanding of how to practice CGHRM. Furthermore, existing HRM/wellbeing models lack attention to employee agency and fail to fully reflect the dynamics of the workplace. As such, their explanatory value is limited. To address this gap, drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as a middle-range theory and incorporating insights from multi-disciplinary research, we provide a theoretically grounded account of the explanatory mechanism of reciprocal determinism through which a HRM system of practices shapes sustainable employee wellbeing. Our framework highlights the interplay between the theorized causal mechanisms, CGHRM values and principles and an HRM system of practices, offering a dynamic, socially embedded, and agentic explanation. An applied example of a CGHRM system of practices for wellbeing illustrates the theorized mechanism. Our conceptualization and framework underscore the benefit of middle-range theorizing and a focus on explanatory mechanisms, which are largely overlooked in HRM research to date. We further suggest that middle-range theorizing can advance the field and help bridge the “knowing-versus-doing-gap”.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we draw on multi-disciplinary research, middle-range theorization and common good HRM (CGHRM) principles to offer a theoretically embedded framework of a system of practices for sustainable employee wellbeing, with HRM viewed broadly to encompass employment practices, work practices and line management. Sustainable employee wellbeing refers to employees' capabilities to intentionally act and exercise influence in managing their own wellbeing. Employee wellbeing is defined broadly as the

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* Corresponding author at: Norwich Business School, Thomas Paine Study Centre, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.

E-mail address: r.nayani@uea.ac.uk (R. Nayani).

“overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work” (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007, p. 52). It encompasses the employee's experiences at work that emphasize a sense of fulfilment and pleasure (i.e., a psychological dimension), bodily health the absence of exhaustion (i.e., a physical dimension), and the quality of their relationships with others (i.e., a social dimension). One of the most popular taxonomies of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) includes feelings of autonomy, mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Other authors consider that psychological well-being also includes markers of physical/psychosomatic health (Van Horn, Taris, Schaufeli and Schreurs, 2004). Moreover, there is evidence that lay understandings of wellbeing also encompass physical and especially mental health (Daniels et al., 2018).

Good employee wellbeing is recognized as an important concern for HRM in its own right (Guest, 2017) that is associated with enhanced individual and organizational success (Peterson, Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Zhang, 2011), better performance, and long-term value-creation (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Crucially, HRM's role in employee wellbeing is recognized as a pressing matter (Boxall, 2021; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019), and a way for HRM to contribute to contemporary societal challenges (Harney & Collings, 2021; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Lu, Zhang, Yang, & Li, 2025; Lu, Zhang, Yang, & Wang, 2023). CGHRM identifies potential contributions of HRM to ‘grand challenges’ (i.e., urgent complex problems of a global nature). CGHRM places equal attention on both positive societal and organizational interests (Aust, Cooke, Muller-Camen, & Wood, 2024; Aust, Matthews, & Muller-Camen, 2020) rather than being guided by a purely economic-based logic (see also Harney & Collings, 2021). It integrates a multi-stakeholder focus that recognizes the individual, collective, and reciprocal aspects of organizational activities, to consider how HRM can make positive contributions beyond the organization, for example to local communities and society (Aust et al., 2020). Key priorities for HRM to contribute are guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Aust et al., 2024).

In this article we consider the grand challenges of good wellbeing (SDG3) focused on the workplace, and the inter-related concept of decent work (SDG8), which reflects a heightened concern for wellbeing (Aust et al., 2024). The societal impacts of poor wellbeing at work are substantial: In a recent report, the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2026) found that 840,000 people die each year from health conditions linked to adverse workplace experiences such as job strain, long working hours, workplace harassment and bullying. Additionally, almost 45 million disability-adjusted life years are lost each year due to workplace psychosocial risks (ILO, 2026). In the UK, estimates of productivity loss to poor mental health in British NHS workers amounts to over £12 billion per annum (Daniels et al., 2022). Adverse workplace wellbeing also has generational impacts. For example, job stress may impact infertility (Dehkordi, Khoshakhlagh, Yazdanirad, Mohammadian-Hafshejani, & Rajabi-Vardanjani, 2025), and parents' poor job quality is associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties in their children (Strazdins, Shipley, Clements, O'Brien, & Broom, 2010). This evidence underscores that the impacts of adverse workplace wellbeing may be felt broadly: not only for employees concerned, but also their families, as well as economic and societal costs.

It is not surprising that the workplace has been singled out by the ILO as the root cause of these issues, as many people spend much of their time at work. This calls for ‘human-centered’ HRM to be embedded in all areas of business decision-making (Cooke et al., 2022) to contribute to the common good of better wellbeing and decent work for all employees. We suggest that an aim of CGHRM for wellbeing is a workplace that builds employees' wellbeing capabilities to foster their ability to be self-reliant, resilient, and able to withstand difficult situations (i.e., sustainable employee wellbeing). Doing so would reduce individual and societal costs associated with poor employee wellbeing. This has the potential to amplify the contribution of CGHRM because employee wellbeing and their wellbeing capabilities spillover beyond the workplace, for example, helping individuals in their non-work life. Furthermore, fostering a workplace in which employees are sensitive to each other's efforts to manage their wellbeing has positive impacts outside of the workplace. There is evidence of positive spillover effects from work to family (Haar & Bardoel, 2008), and upward spirals of wellbeing transferred from work to home on the partner, thereby increasing the couple's well-being (Sanz-Vergel & Muñoz, 2013). Interpersonal strategies with non-work connections (e.g., family members, friends) such as discussing positive work experiences amplifies the positive benefits for the employee concerned (Ilies, Bono, & Bakker, 2024) and attunes others' wellbeing awareness to contribute to a wellbeing-aware and wellbeing-capable society.

Although CGHRM research is developing at pace, there is a lack of understanding of the extent to which HRM policies and practices can be designed for greater good contributions beyond the organization (Aust et al., 2024). Some inroads have been made to understand the impacts of CGHRM on employee behavior (Pham et al., 2023), however how HRM informs employee behavior for the common good is less well understood. Allied to this, despite good wellbeing and decent work being common good challenges, there is a lack of explanation for how HRM systems of practices may achieve sustainable employee wellbeing. Instead, theorizing is limited to individual HR practices that may work individually, while how they work together for wellbeing is less clear. Addressing this gap contributes theoretically to knowledge-building by identifying explanatory mechanisms for HRM practice to contribute to the common good. It contributes practically by offering more concrete actions for HRM departments to work towards a greater good contribution of wellbeing.

To answer the *how* question, there is some guidance in the CGHRM literature. Showing a genuine willingness to engage in contributing to the common good (Aust et al., 2024) signals HRM intent to stakeholders. Viewing employee wellbeing as an outcome in its own right (Guest, 2017) shifts attention from pure productivity priorities. Advancing greater good HRM values around employee wellbeing (Cooke, 2025) focuses attention on the potential to contribute to society. At a more granular level the *World Health Organisation* (2010) specify a healthy workplace for wellbeing as characterized by managers and employees ongoing collaboration to protect and promote the wellbeing of all employees. This suggests that achieving CGHRM for wellbeing requires a shift from viewing employees as passive recipients to active co-architects of a dynamic and wellbeing-aware workplace. This cannot be achieved through single HRM practices, it requires attention to practices working in concert, i.e., a system of practices. A system of HRM practices is a combination of practices that together support each other's effectiveness for the given outcome(s) (Delery & Gupta, 2016) – in this case sustainable employee wellbeing. Examining combinations of HRM practices as systems recognizes that employees' experience HRM

practices simultaneously, rather than in isolation. It also directs attention on *how* the practices fit together, i.e., their internal fit to reinforce each other (Delery & Gupta, 2016; Kepes & Delery, 2006) for effective outcomes, although there is sparse evidence of how this happens (Delery & Gupta, 2016).

In this conceptual paper, we bring both agency and dynamics into focus by integrating social cognitive theory (SCT, Bandura, 2001) as a middle range theory with CGHRM principles (e.g., Aust et al., 2020) and contemporary HRM practices to propose a system of HRM practices for wellbeing. Focusing on wellbeing as malleable enables a dynamic and agentic framework to emerge of the conditions for enhanced sustainable wellbeing, enabled through HR. We bridge social science disciplines by drawing on findings from research examining how to improve health outcomes applying SCT. This learning enables us to integrate the theoretical principles of SCT to propose an application of reciprocal determinism (i.e., the tri-directional reinforcement between a person's personal factors, behavior and environment), and the construct of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001) to CGHRM for wellbeing. Applied as a middle range theory, SCT explains the dynamic interaction between environment (e.g., the workplace), the individual employee (e.g., their thoughts and feelings), and their behavior, to enhance employees' agentic capabilities for sustainable wellbeing. This approach accommodates both the social determining factors of wellbeing, and employee agency. By adopting this perspective and guided by the values and principles of CGHRM, we show how the theoretical principles of SCT may be integrated into HRM system components for sustainable wellbeing at a granular (i.e., practical) level.

The paper is organized as follows: first we make the case for middle range theorizing that focuses on explanatory mechanisms; in this section we introduce SCT as a suitable middle range theory to develop our conceptual framework. We then review existing HRM models and frameworks for employee wellbeing and highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses. We explain the theoretical principles of SCT, examining its application in the HR literature, and drawing comparisons with insights from health psychology research. We then present a conceptual framework that outlines how the causal mechanism of SCT can be applied to specify a mutually reinforcing HRM system of practices to enhance employees' agentic capabilities for wellbeing. A worked example that draws on contemporary HRM practices illustrates how the values and principles of CGHRM guide and are embedded into the system. Finally, we discuss the implications of our framework for CGHRM research and practice; wider HRM applications of the framework are also outlined.

2. The case for middle range theorizing of how HRM systems enable sustainable wellbeing

Despite research examining the relationship between HRM systems and wellbeing (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019), there remains a lack of application of theoretically informed, mechanism-based explanations for a system of HRM practices, that view wellbeing as an outcome. Such explanations would open avenues of research that move beyond working hypotheses (Kislov, Pope, Martin, & Wilson, 2019; Pinder & Moore, 1980) and potentially important discrete HRM practices for wellbeing (e.g., Guest, 2017) to identify a system of practices that optimises the mechanisms specified in the theory. Existing frameworks have been critiqued for being somewhat static and limited in coverage (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Nishii & Paluch, 2018; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019; van Veldhoven & Peccei, 2014), struggling to capture the dynamic nature of the workplace (Bleijenbergh, van Mierlo, & Bondarouk, 2021; van Mierlo, Bondarouk, & Sanders, 2018) and side-lining the organizational context (van Mierlo et al., 2018). Furthermore, employees tend to be viewed as passive recipients rather than active social actors, contributing to their own and others' wellbeing (Bannya, Bainbridge, & Chan-Serafin, 2023; Kaše et al., 2013). Part of the problem may be due to assumptions that interdependence between aspects of HRM system components (i.e., the ways components and elements are connected to each other) is constant (e.g., Jiang et al., 2012). This assumption may be responsible for HRM models and frameworks being somewhat static. Weick (1974) argues that assuming the system behaves in consistent ways obscures questions as to what conditions are necessary for valued outcomes and how these relate to observable patterns in organizations. To counter this, Weick argues for research to view interdependence as a variable. Viewing interdependence as a variable directs the focus to conditions for activating (or otherwise) mechanisms for sustainable wellbeing.

A shift to mechanism-based explanation calls for attention to the integration of middle range theorizing. Middle range theories bridge the gap between grand theories and a narrow focus of empirical observations by directing attention to causal mechanisms that explain a well-bounded range of phenomena i.e., sustainable wellbeing, as well as the conditions that trigger, enable, or prevent these causal chains (Pinder & Moore, 1980). Mid-range theorizing establishes the contextual conditions for these mechanisms, so accommodates agency and dynamics and is also valuable for informing actionable practical solutions (Bleijenbergh et al., 2021). The integration of middle-range theorizing into the HRM literature shifts attention to mechanism-based explanations and specifically, we introduce SCT as such a theory. While SCT is a universal theory that can be applied across numerous domains, in this paper we apply the theoretical principles of SCT to identify components of an HRM system of practices that will, through the mechanism of reciprocal determinism enhance employees' agentic capabilities for wellbeing. SCT can therefore be theoretically and practically informative in explaining how an HRM system of practices may enhance sustainable wellbeing.

We find that, although SCT features across a range of HR research, the theoretical principles are often assumed rather than applied. As a result, despite Gist's (1987) call that SCT is a suitable middle range theory for HR research, it has yet to fulfil its potential. Furthermore, the centrality of the social context in SCT aligns with the collective principles of CGHRM: Applying the principles of SCT attunes and sensitizes people to their social context - it makes them more aware of how their behaviors impact others and this lays the way to consider the impacts of their own (and colleagues') wellbeing and wellbeing capabilities outside the workplace. This makes it an ideal middle range theory for understanding the extent to which HRM practices can be designed for the common good, which is a known gap in the CGHRM literature (Aust et al., 2024). Before moving on to explain the principles and application of SCT, we strengthen the case for middle range theorizing by critiquing existing HR models that have been applied for employee wellbeing.

2.1. HRM practices for employee wellbeing

HRM research examining employee wellbeing has predominantly examined relationships between practices (such as training, equal pay), individual wellbeing, and performance outcomes (e.g., [Alfes, Shantz, & Truss, 2012](#)), although some researchers (e.g., [Guest, 2017](#)), argue for the need to consider employee wellbeing as an outcome in its own right. Linking HRM practices to employee wellbeing presents several challenges. Firstly, the sheer number of potential HRM practices across the literature obscures rather than clarifies which practices may be effective. This is borne out by [Bhoir and Sinha \(2024\)](#) whose systematic literature review of research examining HRM practices for wellbeing identified that over 70 dimensions or practices for wellbeing (such as training, development, providing challenging jobs and supervisor support among many others) had been applied by researchers. They also found a lack of agreement, clarity, and precision in identifying relevant practices.

Secondly, there is a lack of agreement concerning the utility of examining systems of HRM practices for wellbeing. Some HRM researchers suggest that the systems approach is problematic because they assume that it does not identify specific HRM practices (e.g., [Lai, Lin, Saridakis, & Georgellis, 2025](#)). However, this assumption may be due to a lack of academic attention on how HRM practices may function systemically (i.e., how they reinforce each other) for employee wellbeing ([Delery & Gupta, 2016](#)), which has limited its potential. We strengthen our case for middle range theorizing by highlighting the strengths and limitations of three influential models linking HRM practices to employee wellbeing: AMO, mutual gains and JD-R.

While primarily a model of performance, the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) framework ([Blumberg & Pringle, 1982](#); [Harrell-Cook, Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2001](#)) identifies employee wellbeing as a by-product of AMO's impact on performance, rather than an outcome in its own right ([Boxall, Guthrie, & Paaauwe, 2016](#)). Although the AMO model provides a logical heuristic for organizing, it lacks coherent attention to the mechanisms explaining how HRM systems and practices influence outcomes ([Jiang et al., 2012](#); [Marin-Garcia & Tomas, 2016](#); [Renwick, Redman, & Maguire, 2013](#); [Vermeeren, 2017](#)). Furthermore, it considers employees as passive recipients, rather than social actors, with concurrent lack of attention to the dynamic interactions between individuals, practices, and the social environment of work (i.e., the social aspects of the workplace). Additionally, the *how* is not clearly articulated: the mechanisms through which this occurs and the focus on agency and dynamics are overlooked.

In contrast, the mutual gains perspective argues that HRM systems and practices that are geared towards employee wellbeing can foster a broad range of reciprocal exchange (e.g., [Huettermann & Bruch, 2019](#); [Li, Fu, Chadwick, & Harney, 2024](#)). Employee wellbeing can be viewed as an outcome in its own right; there has been some progress linking HRM practices theorized as antecedents that contribute mutually to the employment relationship and employee wellbeing ([Guest, 2017](#)). However, how the practices support each other (i.e., function as a system) is less clear, and as with AMO the role of employee agency is lacking. Although the social environment of work is an important mediator between HRM systems and practices and employee wellbeing ([Cooper, Wang, Bartram, & Cooke, 2019](#)), explanatory mechanisms for how this happens are less clear.

Unlike AMO and mutual gains, the job demand resources model (JD-R), based on conservation of resources theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)) is wellbeing-centric. It provides a broad heuristic framework ([Schaufeli & Taris, 2014](#)) that illustrates how combinations of individual's personal resources, work resources and job demands influence wellbeing. However, the model has been criticized for a lack of applicability above the individual level ([Schaufeli & Taris, 2014](#)), which limits its application in how a HRM system of practices may enhance employee wellbeing. This has been borne out empirically, for example, [Li et al. \(2024\)](#) examined HRM practices associated with the three dimensions of wellbeing. Their mixed results led them to suggest that applying the JD-R model and the HRM systems approach may not be adequate for understanding individual-level wellbeing.

JD-R research does however offer insights into the critical role of a key principle of SCT - self-efficacy (which is one of many personal resources identified within the JD-R model, [Schaufeli & Taris, 2014](#)). Self-efficacy stimulates employee behavior, which in turn increases their self-efficacy (termed resource gain spirals, e.g., [Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015](#)). For example, [Mañas Rodríguez, Estreder, Martínez-Tur, Díaz-Fúnez, and Pecino-Medina \(2020\)](#) found positive spirals: self-efficacy stimulated extra-role behaviors which had a significant impact on subsequent self-efficacy. In the next section we expand on the role of self-efficacy in SCT and relate this to an HRM systems of practices for sustainable wellbeing.

3. Social cognitive theory: employee agency, self-beliefs, and reciprocal determinism

The central principles of SCT are reciprocal determinism, employee agency, and self-efficacy. *Reciprocal determinism* refers to the dynamic interplay between the individual, their behavior, and the work and social environment ([Bandura, 1986](#)). These dimensions influence one another tri-directionally with each element reinforcing the others, such that all three must work in concert for the optimal development of an employee's agentic capabilities (i.e., for wellbeing). Crucially, the employees' social context is central to SCT: "Many of the things they seek are achievable only through socially interdependent effort." ([Bandura, 2001](#), p. 13). This emphasis on the social aspect of work resonates with contemporary definitions of employee wellbeing, which highlight the importance of social interdependence and connectedness (e.g., [Grant et al., 2007](#)). It also aligns with the collective values that are central to CGHRM ([Aust et al., 2020](#)).

Reciprocal determinism is enacted because employees have agentic minds (e.g., belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities) that enable them to intentionally act and exercise influence ([Bandura, 1997](#)). They are both producers and the products of their environments; their behavior reflects their cognitive and affective processes as well as the constraints and opportunities they encounter. At the same time their actions feed back into the self and the environment, enabling self-reflection and change. Employee self-efficacy - perceived 'capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' ([Bandura, 1997](#), p. 3) is a key aspect of employee agency. Importantly, self-efficacy is malleable. Since wellbeing is also malleable, self-efficacy for wellbeing can

be strengthened—and thereby employees' agentic capabilities for wellbeing enhanced—through appropriate systems of CGHRM practices for wellbeing. Reciprocal determinism is the theoretical mechanism that connects HRM practices together into a system for wellbeing, as we show in our proposed framework. First, we explore applications of SCT for wellbeing.

3.1.1. Application of SCT in the HRM literature

The potential of reciprocal determinism for HRM research has been discussed by Gist (1987, see also Gibson, 2004; Gist & Mitchell, 1992) but has not to our knowledge been applied in-depth in relation to wellbeing, nor to an illustrative example of an HRM system of practices. In the HRM literature, research tends mainly to focus on the relationship between self-efficacy and performance outcomes (Judge & Bono, 2001; Stajkovic, Lee, & Nyberg, 2009; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Where SCT is drawn upon, the principles of reciprocal determinism are typically assumed rather than researchers mapping out how the elements of reciprocal determinism might specifically relate to the characteristics of HRM systems and practices (Chan et al., 2016; Montani, Boudrias, & Pigeon, 2020). Research has also tended to side-line the 'social' or contextual aspect that is core to Bandura's theory (Yoon, 2019).

3.1.2. The application of SCT in the Health Psychology research

SCT has been adopted extensively in health psychology research, so provides an ideal example for understanding how self-efficacy can be developed to drive behavior that improves health and wellbeing (O'Leary, 1985). There is clear evidence of the positive role of self-efficacy in fostering adjustment and individual growth in health and wellbeing (Barbaranelli, Fida, Paciello, & Tramontano, 2018; Fida et al., 2022). Developing self-efficacy can improve wellbeing and health (e.g., Machtinger et al., 2015; Merluzzi et al., 2019; Saita & Acquati, 2020; Sheehy, 2013). Self-efficacy proves to be particularly helpful in addressing chronic illness (Marks & Allegrante, 2005; Ng et al., 2013), health problems related to aging (Tan et al. 2020), and serious disease (Huang, Shiyanbola, & Smith, 2018; Lev et al., 2001; Michaelis, Niedermann, Reuber, Kuthe, & Berger, 2018), but also in the case of temporary stress-related health problems (Hahn, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2011; Mailey & McAuley, 2014) and as a protective factor during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Fida et al., 2022).

In line with SCT, self-efficacy interventions for wellbeing in the health context generally focus on the enhancement of individual mastery through goal setting techniques, positive feedback or/and role modelling; and promotion of a supportive and positive environment (Cameron et al., 2018; Dionigi, 2007; Hendrix, Landerman, & Abernethy, 2013). This approach allows the creation of positive person-context dynamics by operating directly on the sources of self-efficacy (mastery experience, vicarious experience, persuasion, improving positive emotions). Indeed, studies have highlighted that others such as role models, emotional supporters or persuasive leaders play a crucial role in individual self-efficacy beliefs and behavioral change (Deforche & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2000; Dionigi, 2007; Pérez-Cruzado & Cuesta-Vargas, 2016). These findings highlight the conditions whereby the sources of self-efficacy are provided and reciprocal determinism is triggered.

Taking this learning, in the next section we offer a framework that, according to the theoretical principles of reciprocal determinism builds employees agentic capabilities for wellbeing. In turn this contributes to the common good of wellbeing by enhancing positive

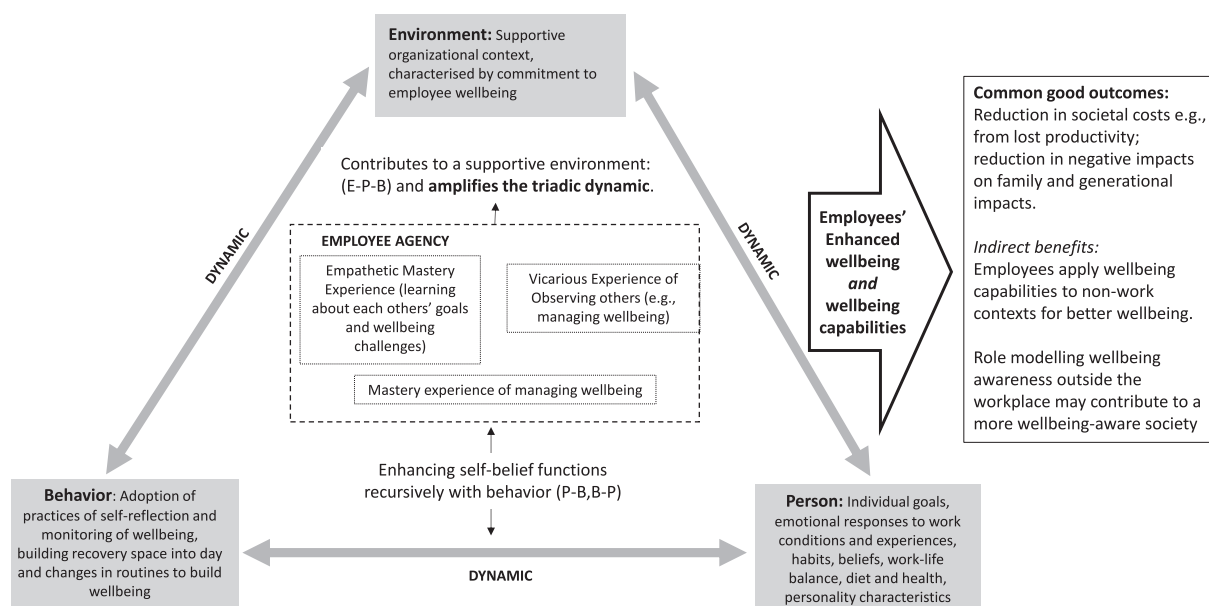


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework: Applying the principle of reciprocal determinism to enhance employees' wellbeing capabilities.

wellbeing outcomes directly (e.g., reduced costs of adverse wellbeing for the employee concerned) and indirectly (through spillover effects that enhance the wellbeing of e.g., partners and family).

4. Framework: HRM system of practices for enhancing agentic capabilities for wellbeing

The framework requires two dynamic interactions: the *generation* of sources of self-efficacy and the *activation* of reciprocal determinism. In contrast to prior HRM for wellbeing research, our conceptualization accommodates dynamics, agency, and the social context. Hence our framework sets out a collective mechanism for sustainable employee wellbeing that transverse the individual to the system of practices. Viewing these practices as a system for wellbeing highlights their inter-dependencies, while reciprocal determinism explains how these interdependencies function dynamically through mutual reinforcement. Wellbeing gains are theorized to be achieved through enhancing employees' agentic capabilities for wellbeing (i.e., for the enhancement of overall experience and functioning of an employee at work). Hence, we conceptualize how an HRM system for employee wellbeing can create and sustain wellbeing through building employees' wellbeing self-efficacy, and in turn lead to positive wellbeing outcomes for the employee, organization, and society. Fig. 1 visualizes the theoretical framework.

4.1. HRM system of practices for wellbeing: reciprocal relationships between environment (E), behavior (B) and person (P)

To mobilize the sources of self-efficacy and trigger reciprocal determinism requires foundational constituents derived from workplace experiences of modelling, reinforcement, and imitation: progress towards mastery (e.g., goal setting, self-reflection on progress), vicarious learning (e.g., observing others), and verbal persuasion (e.g., encouragement to maintain self-confidence and motivation). We outline the principles that underpin the theorized relationships (Fig. 1). Behaviorally directed HRM practices establish conditions for self-awareness, self-reflection, goal setting and action planning around wellbeing (E-P), supported by regular feedback and feedforward on wellbeing-related behaviors (E-B). These conditions encourage healthy practices such as diet and exercise, personal goal setting, monitoring and improving one's own wellbeing, and supporting colleagues' wellbeing, such as by creating space in the working day or promoting work-life balance. Such behaviors, in turn, provide mastery experiences (B-P). Because mastery experience is a key source of self-efficacy (P), enhanced self-belief interacts recursively with behavior (P-B, B-P).

Interrelated with behaviorally directed HRM practices, personal development practices create conditions for role-modelling and for a supportive organizational context in which wellbeing can be openly discussed (E-P). These practices provide employees with an enabling environment to reflect on their own wellbeing behaviors and capabilities (P-B). Through vicarious experience, observing others' behaviors and their outcomes, employees gain a critical source of self-efficacy (E-P), which in turn enhances self-belief and shapes subsequent behaviors (P-B). In this way, personal development practices contribute to reinforcing cycles of self-efficacy and wellbeing.

Through processes of social learning, modelling, and shared persuasion, groups develop collective self-efficacy—a belief in their joint capability to organize and execute courses of action required to achieve common goals (Bandura, 1997, 2000). This construct emerges from the dynamic interplay between individual agency and the social environment, whereby members' behaviors and beliefs reinforce one another through reciprocal determinism. To activate the reciprocal principle, it is crucial to create conditions in which HRM practices and behaviors are visible and socially shared, for example through group-based activities and discussions about wellbeing aims and challenges. By learning about one another's goals and experiences (E-B/P; P-E) employees gain empathetic mastery experience, a key source of self-efficacy (E-P). These interactions contribute to a supportive environment (P-E) and further amplify the triadic dynamic. The social dimension is therefore essential for reciprocal determinism to function effectively. SCT this integrates the social environment with individual agency, underscoring the inherently dynamic nature of the triadic principle.

4.1.1. Potential cross-level effects

A deeper application of SCT highlights that wellbeing develops not only at the individual level but also through collective processes. Bandura (1986) argued that through social learning and shared experience, a *collective capability* can emerge that is greater than the sum of individual efforts. In organizations, this means that when employees interact around wellbeing—by observing, modelling, and supporting one another—their actions and beliefs can reinforce each other, generating multi-level effects that extend beyond the individual to the group and organizational system (Bandura, 2023).

These processes are systemic: employees' reflections, choices, and behaviors interact with HRM practices and with each other, creating virtuous circuits. Positive circuits arise when HRM practices encourage openness and visibility around wellbeing, enabling employees to learn from each other, build confidence, and strengthen their own sense of capability. In this way, the self-beliefs and actions of one employee can spill over to others through role modelling, persuasion, and mutual encouragement, amplifying both personal and shared agency in the pursuit of wellbeing. Over time, these dynamics give rise to collective self-efficacy—the group's shared belief (Bandura, 2000) in its ability to foster and sustain wellbeing. Collective self-efficacy reflects more than aggregated individual confidence: it emerges through reciprocal influence between individuals and their social and work environment, and it helps shape the broader organizational climate for wellbeing. Higher levels of collective self-efficacy have been linked to stronger morale, resilience, and performance, underscoring its value as an organizational resource and an exemplar of HRM for the common good (Stajkovic et al., 2009).

The implication is that wellbeing initiatives should not only focus on strengthening individual behaviors, and self-efficacy, but also be systemically designed to build shared mindsets and reinforcing practices. By making HRM practices visible, encouraging group-based activities, and fostering open dialogue about wellbeing goals and challenges, organizations can activate both individual and

collective capabilities. This creates a supportive environment where reciprocal influences at the individual, group, and organizational levels align to enhance wellbeing outcomes.

4.2. Applied example of a CGHRM system of practices for employee wellbeing

In this section we draw on our observations of practice to illustrate the application of the framework with a worked example of an HRM system of practices that functions systemically (i.e., reinforce each other inter-dependently) to provide the conditions for self-efficacy and stimulate reciprocal determinism *and* integrates the aims, values and design principles of CGHRM (Aust et al., 2020) tailored to contribute to SDGs 3 and 8. We specify a guiding philosophy that reflects the ‘outside in’ perspective, system objectives and values, which we align with contemporary HRM practices that work together to activate the mechanism. To activate the mechanism to its full potential, we suggest that all the practices (or theoretically functionally equivalent ones) are required; the specific elements of each of the HRM practices as they relate to the theoretical mechanism are shown in an Applied Framework in Fig. 2 and described below.

4.2.1. Guiding CGHRM aims and values for the system of practices for wellbeing

According the HRM system theory, the organization's unifying HRM philosophy guides system fit (Kepes & Delery, 2006): horizontal fit across systems of HRM practices and vertical fit with CGHRM values and principles. A CGHRM for wellbeing philosophy places primacy on employee wellbeing and its role in contributing to the common good. This signals intent (Aust et al., 2024) and encourages organizational members to focus on investing in their wellbeing as an outcome in its own right. Placing collective interests on an equal footing to individual or organizational interests (Aust et al., 2020) fosters a socially engaged mindset in the workplace (Matthews & Muller-Camen, 2025). This philosophy is elaborated through a system objective that operationalizes CGHRM intent to contribute to common good wellbeing, by enhancing employees' sustainable wellbeing capabilities. An example objective is: To embed a workplace that recognizes the reciprocal, individual, and collective elements (Aust et al., 2020) to build employees' wellbeing capabilities to foster their ability to be self-reliant, resilient, and able to withstand difficult situations that translates both in the workplace and outside it. Meeting this objective reduces the societal impacts of poor workplace wellbeing, enhances employees' experiences in their working life and equips them with the abilities for wellbeing management beyond the workplace.

In line with the CGHRM perspective, the system of practices is unified by common good values (Cooke et al., 2022). In our example, we propose four values that reflect CGHRM: reciprocity, respect, democracy, and authenticity. These guide alignment of the practices with CGHRM principles and are enacted through the example system practices, as described in the sections that follow. The values are elaborated into the following criteria for the system practices: (1) Through HRM practices, employees are sensitive to each other's efforts to manage their wellbeing; (2) all organizational members are active agents in protecting and promoting the wellbeing of *all* employees (WHO, 2010) to instill collective efforts towards the common good; (3) democratic approaches are underpinned by respect for employee agency in protecting and enhancing their own wellbeing; and, (4) genuine engagement in contributing to the common good (Aust et al., 2024) and authenticity in its pursuit (Järleström, Saru, Viitasari, & Akrivou, 2024; Nayani et al., 2022). Authentic action reflects an openness to non-business objectives (Aust et al., 2020), such as prioritizing individual needs above business targets.

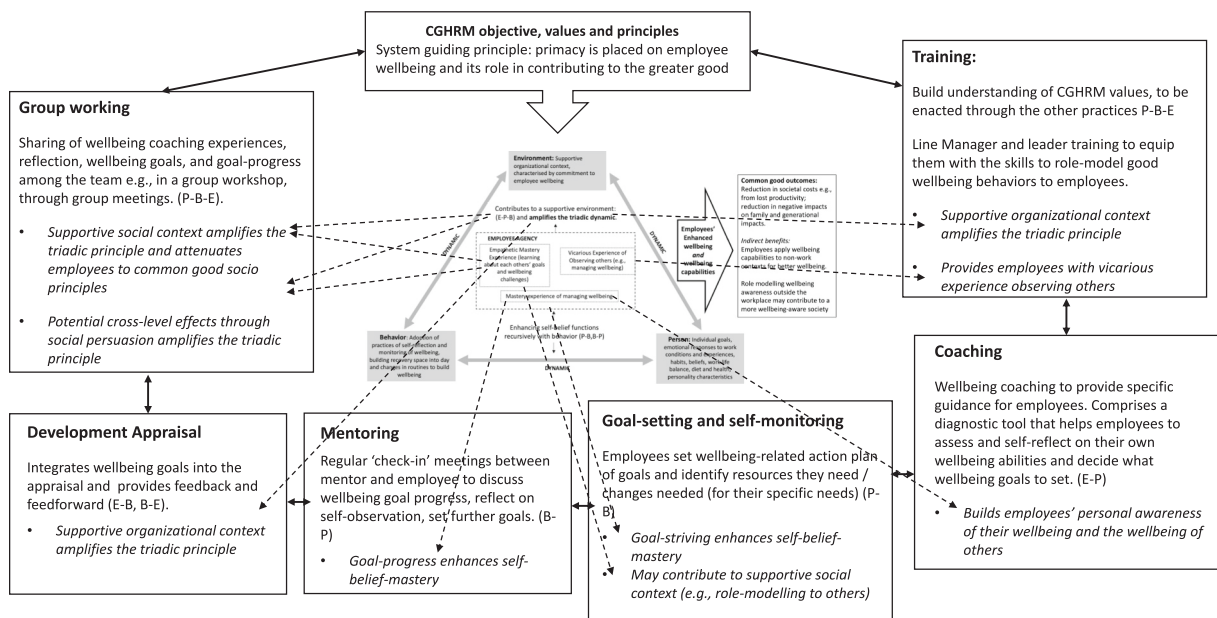


Fig. 2. Applied Framework: System of HR Practices for Employee Wellbeing.

4.2.2. Contemporary HRM practices: horizontal fit to activate the theorized mechanism and vertical fit to CGHRM principles

Our example comprises six inter-connected HRM practices that align horizontally with each other to activate the theorized mechanism and vertically with the system values: wellbeing awareness *Training* (for all, and additional skills-building training for leaders and line managers), *coaching*, *goal setting and self-monitoring*, *mentoring*, *developmental appraisal*, and *group development*. Aside from leader and manager specific training and in line with the system values, all practices are enjoyed by all employees. These practices work in concert (i.e., systemically) to build employees capabilities for wellbeing as follows: -.

Training for all embeds the CGHRM for wellbeing values. These values are enacted through the other practices in the system (P-B-E). Manager and leader specific training builds skills in developmental appraisal and role-modelling. Although wellbeing is viewed as an outcome in its own right, the associations between employee wellbeing, organizational effectiveness and societal outcomes are explained to create mental bridges between the system aims and values, organizational outcomes and the contribution to societal benefits. Coaching promotes self-observation and guides learning how to manage one's own wellbeing through reflection on workplace experiences (E-P). Employees try out and reflect on this learning through wellbeing management goal-setting and self-monitoring (P-B). Mentoring reinforces this goal progress and learning; it provides a vehicle for self-observation and identification of new challenges and wellbeing-management goals (E-B, B-P). Developmental appraisal integrates wellbeing management goal progress with work performance and personal aims (i.e., how improvements in wellbeing management relate to job performance, employees' personal development goals and ambitions) (E-B and B-E). The 'social' aspect is reinforced through wellbeing-based group work in which coaching diagnostics, personal wellbeing preferences are shared, goals are refined and focused on working well together for a healthy workplace (E-B-P; P-E). Because all organizational members experience the same practices, it attunes everyone's wellbeing-awareness (E-P, P-E). Details of each practice are set out below.

Training (or a facilitated event) embeds CGHRM for wellbeing objectives and values (e.g., Järlström et al., 2024) and is therefore foundational in shifting employees, managers, and leaders to a common good mindset. We suggest two levels of training: training for all and targeted skills-building training for managers and leaders. Training for all signals intent, sets expectations, explains how the system of practices work in concert to enhance wellbeing capabilities, and introduces the skills required to participate. Skills building geared towards self-leadership skills (Tenschert, Furtner, & Peters, 2025) is suitable because it is defined by personal responsibility and initiative, which aligns with the system objectives and values. *Line manager and leader wellbeing-specific training* equips them with the novel skills to role-model good wellbeing behaviors to employees. Positive role-modelling provides employees with the vicarious experience of observing how others manage their own wellbeing. It helps employees to become more assertive about what they need to change to improve their wellbeing and in asking for help (e.g., to deal with stressor, whether related to their work or spilling over from their non-work life). It also provides managers with the skills to undertake developmental appraisal in line with the system values. Since line managers play an instrumental role in setting the tone for a work area, it contributes to building a supportive environment, which amplifies the triadic dynamic.

Coaching and mentoring are contemporary HRM practices in the CGHRM system for wellbeing that enable experimental learning for employees – trying out learning and reflecting upon it (Järlström et al., 2024). **Coaching** is collaborative, reflective, conversational and goal-oriented approach that helps employees to understand how their emotional and cognitive reactions can interfere with their experience of work and their behavioral responses (Dolot, 2017; Skoumpopoulou, 2017). It is an effective HRM practice for enhancing employee wellbeing (Grant, Curtaeyne, & Burton, 2009). To activate E-P wellbeing-specific coaching could comprise a diagnostic tool that helps employees to assess and self-reflect on their own wellbeing abilities, for example by reflecting on recent workplace experiences (E) and their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to this (P-B). The coaching process is focused on how the employee could enhance their overall experience of work and identify wellbeing-management goals to work towards. To align with the system value that organizational members are active agents in protecting and promoting all employees' wellbeing, all organizational members, including leaders, employees and managers undertake coaching. This helps to build a wellbeing-attuned social environment. HRM investment in contemporary wellbeing-related practices reinforces the system philosophy of prioritizing employee wellbeing. Wellbeing-focused coaching enables employees to become more aware about themselves at work. This enhances their capability for self-observing in different situations both in and outside the workplace, which in turn influences their wellbeing behaviors and provides the basis for reflection on goals and goal-progress.

To activate P-B requires an HRM practice of **goal setting and self-monitoring**. In this, employees set a wellbeing-related action plan of goals, and identify resources they need, or changes needed (for their specific wellbeing needs). By goal setting, employees express their agentic capabilities for behavioral change which builds their self-efficacy for wellbeing. Examples of wellbeing goals could include working on breaking an unhelpful cycle of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reaction to stressful work situations by being mindful of what triggers these responses. Or there may be particular colleagues or customers that are central to stressful experiences - an employee could set a goal of 'putting themselves in the other person's shoes' to instill empathy. This would align with the system values by encouraging sensitivity to others and promoting collective efforts. Goals may also be longer term (e.g., around personal career aims for work meaning and life satisfaction). This contributes to sustainable wellbeing capabilities because goal striving enhances mastery experience and so employees become more assertive about what they need to change for improving their wellbeing. Setting and achieving goals also enhances their self-belief which interacts recursively with behavior. Trying out learning about wellbeing management also provides a road map for employees to practice their wellbeing capabilities in non-work contexts.

Mentoring enables employees to reflect on day-to-day challenges and their wellbeing goal progress (i.e., B-P). This practice could comprise regular 'check-in' meetings between mentor and employee to discuss wellbeing goal progress, reflect on self-observation, and set further goals. Regular meetings provide an arena for employees to discuss wellbeing concerns and aims, and for the mentor to provide constructive feedback and encouragement which makes employees feel more confident in the pursuit of their wellbeing goals. Opportunities for personal growth can happen any time, so informal giving feedback and having discussions should be when needed

rather than on a specific point in the calendar (Venne & Hannay, 2018).

Employee appraisal is cornerstone for the enactment of CGHRM for wellbeing values and an opportunity for an employer to demonstrate authentic intent by placing emphasis on the system objective of building employee wellbeing capabilities. However, performance appraisal practices have been widely criticized as perceived negatively (Iqbal et al. (2015), ineffective (Venne & Hannay, 2018; Cappelli & Tavis, 2016) and associated with an increase employee dissatisfaction (Iqbal et al., 2015). These findings run counter to the CGHRM for wellbeing system values. Venne and Hannay (2018) suggest separating developmental from administrative appraisal to allow employees to reflect openly and express their agency without fear of it impacting their performance assessment. **Developmental appraisal** provides feedback and feedforward (E-B and B-E). It enables employees to make connections between their wellbeing goals, their work aims and how they go about their work, it also provides an opportunity to consider contributors to good wellbeing such as work meaningfulness and thriving. Linking the prioritization of wellbeing into the appraisal contributes to creating a supportive work environment which amplifies the triadic dynamic.

The social environment is a critical component in SCT and reflects the CGHRM values. A suitable system practice is **group development** focused on employees sharing their wellbeing coaching experiences (e.g., personal diagnostic results), reflection, wellbeing goals, and goal-progress among the team e.g., in a group workshop or through group meetings. A group-based practice encourages employees to become more aware about their colleagues and the broader social context in which they operate. This also enhances mutual understanding among teams and creates an open environment for discussing wellbeing, while gaining feedback and encouragement from colleagues builds empathetic mastery and contributes to a supportive environment (i.e., P-B-E). This in turn amplifies the triadic dynamic.

4.2.3. Closely aligned HRM practices

Some HRM practices may be closely aligned with the HRM system of practices for wellbeing, i.e., they are not within the system, but their horizontal alignment may be desirable. Examples may include the provision of career planning for employees who would like to identify (and act) on their longer term aims that enhance their wellbeing, and flexible working that can be utilized by employees to meet individual and short-term wellbeing-related needs.

While it is not the main focus of our conceptual contribution, we suggest HRM actors also engage in the aim of building and sustaining CGHRM wellbeing capabilities at the organizational level to ensure continuing contribution to the common good. This can be pursued through democratic principles of CGHRM and comprises learning and continuous improvement (see Daniels, Tregaskis, Nayani, & Watson, 2022 for an example) by HRM professionals responsible for overseeing the system of practices and respective policies.

Taken together, our conceptual framework and practice-based example provide theoretical rigor and a workable example for how HRM policies and practices can be designed for greater good contributions beyond the organization, which is a recognized gap in the CGHRM literature (Aust et al., 2024). Applying SCT as a middle range theory and integrating CGHRM values and principles enables us to bridge this gap and shed light on how HRM can contribute to the common good through building its employees' capabilities for wellbeing.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we explore the black box of how HRM may contribute to the greater good through enhancing employees' sustainable wellbeing. Our application of a middle range theory, SCT, as a mechanism for an HRM system of practices for sustainable employee wellbeing reflects 'soft' HRM, which emphasizes social purposes of HRM (Aust et al., 2020). Building employees' sustainable wellbeing capabilities not only benefits employees directly by contributing to enhancing their work experience, it may also contribute to common good sustainable development goals 3 and 8. Furthermore, applying these capabilities has the potential to generate positive spillover effects in employees' dealings with others outside the workplace and more broadly as members of society. Therefore, by building employees' agentic capabilities for wellbeing, HRM may produce lasting positive effects that contribute to the greater good in numerous ways.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This paper makes three contributions. First, our conceptual framework and worked example contributes to the CGHRM literature (see Aust et al., 2024) by being one of the first to our knowledge to show at a granular level of detail how HRM practices can be re-designed to address the grand challenge of good wellbeing (see Taylor & Earl, 2023 for CGHRM principles with respect to age management). We suggest that focusing on enhancing employees' wellbeing capabilities amplifies HRM's contribution to SDGs 3 and 8 by reaping indirect spillover benefits outside the workplace in *addition* to reductions in societal costs associated with poor workplace wellbeing. Furthermore, since good workplace wellbeing is associated with positive organizational outcomes, a CGHRM system of practices for wellbeing is not necessarily incongruent with organizational performance goals and therefore strategic alignment may be possible.

The theoretical principles of SCT are applicable across contexts and therefore in principle our CGHRM for wellbeing framework could be applied irrespective of organization type and size, i.e., it is generalizable across contexts. However, there are practical implications: Larger organizations may have formal HR departments to execute the practices but have challenges in ensuring consistency in activating the theorized mechanism across sites. Smaller organizations and start-ups may find consistency easier to achieve but need to acquire additional HRM skills to execute contemporary practices such as coaching. Sectors and organizations that have identified

employee wellbeing challenges (i.e., costs to the organization) are also contributing more heavily to societal costs, so may be particularly suited to the CGHRM system of practices for wellbeing, because the wellbeing and organizational aims are likely to align. In contrast, it is also well suited to organizations that value social responsibility highly irrespective of size or sector, because of alignment with CGHRM values.

Our second contribution is to show how to harness the potential of middle-range theorization for HRM, by relating SCT directly to an HRM system of practices for sustainable employee wellbeing. SCT is an appropriate middle range theory to examine questions of how CGHRM is practiced because of its collective lens (i.e., achievements are made through socially interdependent effort). This resonates with the core principles of CGHRM as multi-stakeholder and socio-ecologically focused. Applying the principles of SCT attunes and sensitizes people to their social context - it makes them more aware of how their behaviors impact others, and this lays the way to consider the impacts of their own (and colleagues') wellbeing and wellbeing capabilities outside the workplace. The system of practices that we present shows how this attuning can happen through HRM, while our framework shows the pathway to common good wellbeing outcomes beyond the organizational boundary. Furthermore, our conceptualization accommodates dynamics, agency, and the social environment of work. This shifts attention to a broader acknowledgement of the social aspect into future CGHRM research and HRM research more generally. It also responds to a longstanding identification that SCT is potentially beneficial for HR research (Gist, 1987), but has not been fully realized. Our novel approach of working from the theory 'outwards' is well suited to research examining how systems of HRM practices function in concert because it focuses attention on the interdependencies and mutual reinforcement between system components, rather than treating them as stable. Overall, middle range theorizing provides a theoretically robust explanation of internal fit between system practices at a granular and actionable level, while the integration of GCHRM aims, principles and values ensure vertical fit.

Our third contribution addresses the gap in the HRM wellbeing literature by providing clarity on how HR practices work together for wellbeing, and contributes to the HR systems literature by showing how to construct a system of practices. It also highlights how contemporary HRM practices may be tailored to be congruent with CGHRM aims, values and principles. Our conceptualization provides a theoretically robust way to move from the general (i.e., the multitude of HRM practices linked to employee wellbeing, see Bhoir & Sinha, 2024) to the specific (i.e., which precise practices, and how they mutually reinforce) by showing the utility of the HRM system of practices approach, which has been subject to debate (e.g., Lai et al., 2025). Working from the theory 'outwards' focuses our attention on which HRM practices may, in concert mutually reinforce (i.e., function systemically) to activate the theorized mechanism and generate the desired outcome of sustainable employee wellbeing. This invites us to consider contemporary HRM practices (as called for by Harney & Collings, 2021) as well as nuances, and key features within the practices themselves that may be required for mutual reinforcement. Aligning between theory and practice in this way provides an explicit bridge between the research-practice "knowing-versus-doing-gap" (Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, p. 138; Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2022).

Our conceptualization, framework and applied example lend themselves to future research into HRM practice for common good. For example, research could examine the theorized HRM system of practices, mechanisms for wellbeing, and outcomes of interest (i.e., enhanced sustainable wellbeing and agentic capabilities for wellbeing) in a practice-setting. Future research could empirically test the theorized relationships for sustainable employee wellbeing set out in the framework. It could also explore wellbeing gain spirals at higher levels (i.e., sustainable employee wellbeing as a multi-level construct), for example through longitudinal designs. Research could examine common good spillover effects by broadening measures of wellbeing-related outcomes to their employees and e.g., their partners and families. Furthermore, scholars have recently argued for attention to the micro-foundations of HRM (Rofcanin & Budhwar, 2025): the application of SCT and mechanisms described here reflect a bridge between micro-theorization (e.g., employees' thoughts, feelings, and experiences) and HRM practices. Therefore, future research could examine the enhancement of self-efficacy and reciprocal mechanism through the lens of the employee experience; this may lend itself to several methods such as diary studies, longitudinal qualitative interviews, or combinations of methods. Finally, the construct of sustainable employee wellbeing capabilities may benefit from closer conceptual attention and examination in CGHRM practice scholarship and HRM-wellbeing research.

The collective lens of SCT lends itself to the practice of CGHRM research. Therefore, future research could tailor and test our framework and conceptualization for other common good contributions such as environmental sustainability. Similarly, our line of reasoning could be applied to other mid-range theories for practical HRM applications. Future research could explore middle range theories, such as social identity theory, social exchange theory etc., linking theory to practice in an applied way for HRM and desirable outcomes, as we have done in this article. For example, the reciprocal underpinnings of social exchange theory may lend themselves to CGHRM practice. A more sophisticated development would be to examine if and how multiple mid-range theories could be applied simultaneously within the same HR system, for example SCT along with social identity theory. Applying multiple theories could identify areas where one practice activates mechanisms embedded in more than one theory, as well as areas of antagonism such as where a practice activates mechanisms embedded in one theory but suppresses mechanisms embedded in others.

5.2. Practical implications

A benefit of middle range theorizing is that it is closely tied to empirical application. Therefore, our proposed framework and practice-example are actionable. For example, the practice example could have a direct application for practice (e.g., to serve as a blueprint for HRM practitioners looking to enhance sustainable employee wellbeing). The reinforcing elements of reciprocal determinism set out in the framework also provide a template for evaluating existing HRM systems for enhancing sustainable employee wellbeing. For example, practitioners could assess whether the components of the HRM system of practices are indeed mutually reinforcing, identify where reciprocal determinism is not activated or falling short, and investigate why sustainable wellbeing is not

achieved. Moreover, it provides practitioners with a theoretically informed approach to enhancing HRM practice for sustainable wellbeing that can guide practices and interventions. Whilst it may be unrealistic to develop HRM practices that speak to all parts of the framework, taking forward the central mechanism of reciprocal determinism enables practitioners to consider how HR practices may be influential in the dynamic between individuals, their behavior and their environment. This knowledge can underpin actions and practices that support wellbeing self-efficacy among employees.

6. Conclusion

In this conceptual article, we indicate how an organization can take a mid-range theory, SCT and work to identify a set of HRM practices that optimise the mechanisms specified in the theory. Specifically, we undertake a close examination of the principles of reciprocal determinism and demonstrate the value of SCT in providing theoretical explanations for how a HRM system of practices may enhance agentic capabilities for wellbeing. We argue that sustainable wellbeing capability enhancement offers several ways in which HRM may contribute to the common good. The benefits of employee wellbeing are well established and are a major concern for HR; however how this may be achieved has received little theoretical articulation. By applying SCT as a middle explanatory range theory, we elucidate the conditions created by HRM and the theoretical mechanisms through which those conditions provide sources of self-efficacy and stimulate the dynamics of reciprocal determinism. Overall, our conceptualization shows the value of middle range theorization that shifts the focus to interdependencies and provides explanation-based mechanisms for CGHRM through sustainable employee wellbeing.

Author statement

We confirm that the work has not been submitted or is under consideration elsewhere. All authors have made substantial contributions in the manuscript and there are no conflicts of interests. There was no use of generative AI in the production of this manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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