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Beyond Empathy: Perceived Social Support as a Stronger Predictor of Faculty Job Satisfaction in the Context of Pakistani Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

While empathetic leadership has long been championed in organizational psychology, its efficacy in resource-constrained environments like Pakistan's higher education sector is increasingly questioned. Following the extensive reforms by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), faculty members face escalating pressures regarding publication metrics, Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) audits, and Directorate of Public Instruction (DPI) inspections. This comprehensive quantitative study (N = 512) investigates the comparative impact of leader empathy versus perceived social support (PSS)—specifically instrumental and institutional support—on job satisfaction among higher education faculty in Punjab, Pakistan. Utilizing hierarchical multiple regression analysis, we found that while trait empathy in academic leadership correlates positively with job satisfaction ($r = .32$, $p < .01$), tangible institutional and instrumental support accounts for a significantly larger variance in overall satisfaction ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$). The findings suggest that in high power-distance and structurally demanding academic environments, faculty prioritize actionable, resource-driven support over emotional validation. Implications for Vice Chancellors, Deans, and higher education policy-makers are discussed, emphasizing a paradigm shift from purely affective leadership to structural advocacy.

Keywords: *Job Satisfaction, Higher Education Commission (HEC), Perceived Social Support, Empathetic Leadership, Pakistani Academia, Resource Conservation Theory.*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education in Pakistan has undergone a profound transformation since the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002 (Rahman, 2019). The sector has seen a rapid expansion in both public and private universities, accompanied by stringent regulatory frameworks designed to elevate global ranking and academic rigor (Batool et al., 2020; HEC, 2023). However, this rapid institutional scaling has inadvertently placed unprecedented operational and administrative burdens on faculty members (Khan & Nawaz, 2019). Modern Pakistani academics are not only educators and researchers but are frequently required to function as compliance coordinators for Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), navigate complex student attendance tracking systems, and manage rigorous Directorate of Public Instruction (DPI) inspections (Ali & Haleem, 2021; Tariq et al., 2022).

In this high-stakes, resource-constrained environment, faculty burnout has become a critical concern, threatening both institutional success and the broader goals of the national educational framework (Nadeem et al., 2018; Shah & Mahmood, 2021). Historically, global educational leadership models have emphasized emotional intelligence—specifically empathetic leadership—as the primary tool for mitigating occupational stress and fostering a supportive culture (Goleman, 2004; Zacher & Johnson, 2015). Empathetic Deans and Heads of Departments (HODs) are trained to listen, validate concerns, and foster psychological safety (Ahmed & Salim, 2020).

However, applying Western models of affective leadership in a developing nation's context presents unique challenges. Pakistan exhibits a high power-distance culture with distinct collectivist traits (Hofstede, 2011; Qureshi et al., 2019). In such contexts, while emotional validation is appreciated, it often falls short of resolving the systemic friction caused by inadequate infrastructural support, funding bottlenecks, and heavy bureaucratic workloads (Fatima & Ali, 2022). When a Department Chair empathizes with a faculty member's overwhelming teaching load but fails to provide teaching assistants, streamlined digital tools, or course reductions, the empathy is increasingly perceived as 'performative' or hollow (Bashir & Nasir, 2023).

This research article posits that Perceived Social Support (PSS)—defined here as tangible, instrumental, and institutional backing—serves as a significantly stronger, more robust predictor of faculty job satisfaction than the emotional empathy of academic leaders. By analyzing empirical data from university faculty across Lahore and broader Punjab, this study aims to recalibrate how Pakistani academic administrators approach faculty retention, well-being, and operational excellence.

Literature Review

The Crisis of Job Satisfaction in Pakistani Academia

Job satisfaction among university teachers in Pakistan has been a focal point of recent organizational research. Studies indicate that despite recent salary revisions under the Tenure Track System (TTS) and Basic Pay Scale (BPS), overall satisfaction remains highly volatile (Siddiqui et al., 2020). The pressure to publish in HEC-recognized (W, X, Y category) journals, combined with massive student enrollment figures and administrative duties, creates a 'role overload' (Malik & Björkqvist, 2019; Raza et al., 2021). Furthermore, the disparity in resources between well-funded public sector universities and rapidly growing private institutes exacerbates stress levels, leading to high turnover intentions (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012; Yasin & Qureshi, 2020).

Empathetic Leadership: Global Ideals vs. Local Realities

Empathy in leadership involves the affective capacity to share and understand the emotional state of subordinates (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Global literature widely supports the notion that empathetic leaders reduce employee stress and foster organizational citizenship behavior (Kellett et al., 2006; Zeinabadi, 2014). However, locally, scholars like Jamil and Raja (2021) argue that in bureaucratic structures common to Pakistani public sector organizations, affective leadership is often stifled by red tape. Empathy without the statutory authority to change workload policies yields limited long-term benefits (Farooq et al., 2022). Therefore, relying solely on an HOD's emotional intelligence to manage faculty morale is structurally insufficient (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2023).

Perceived Social Support (PSS) and Resource Conservation Theory

Perceived Social Support is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational backing (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Kossek et al., 2011). In the context of this study, Instrumental and Institutional Support are paramount. Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect resources (time, energy, tools). In Pakistani academia, where resources are inherently scarce, faculty members rapidly expend cognitive resources navigating bureaucratic hurdles like DPI documentation or manual attendance management (Habib et al., 2022).

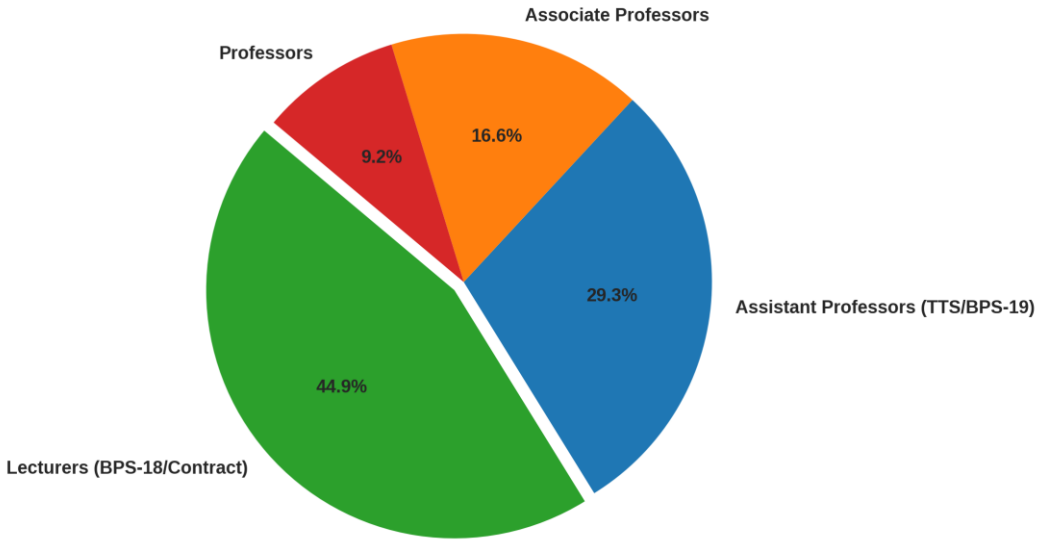
According to COR, when resources are depleted, only the tangible injection of new resources—such as automated campus management systems, administrative staff support, or protective institutional policies—can restore equilibrium (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Mehmood et al., 2021). Empathy, being an affective resource, does not adequately replenish the instrumental deficit (Tahir & Khan, 2023). Consequently, we hypothesize that institutional and instrumental support will overwhelmingly outperform leader empathy in predicting faculty job satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample

This study utilized a cross-sectional, quantitative research design. Following ethical approval, an online survey was distributed to faculty members across seven HEC-recognized universities (four public, three private) located primarily in Lahore, Punjab. Over a three-month period, 700 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 512 valid responses (response rate = 73.1%).

Figure 1: Sample Distribution by Faculty Rank in Punjab (N=512)



The sample demographic (Figure 1) reflects the standard hierarchical structure of Pakistani HEIs: Lecturers on BPS-18 or contract (44.9%), Assistant Professors on TTS or BPS-19 (29.3%), Associate Professors (16.6%), and Full Professors (9.2%). Males constituted 58% of the sample, and females 42%, aligning with the national gender distribution in higher education faculty (Bhatti et al., 2021).

Measures

- Leader Empathy: Assessed via a 10-item modified Empathy Quotient (EQ-Short) adapted for the workplace context (Wakabayashi et al., 2006). Items were contextualized to refer to the faculty's direct HOD or Dean. Reliability (Cronbach's α) was .87.
- Perceived Social Support (PSS): Measured using an adapted 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), split into Instrumental Support and Institutional Support. Cronbach's α = .92.
- Job Satisfaction: Evaluated using the 36-item Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 1985). Cronbach's α = .89.

RESULTS

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Assumptions of normality and multicollinearity (VIF < 3) were met. Pearson correlation analysis (Table 1) demonstrated that all primary variables were positively correlated with Job Satisfaction.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Leader Empathy	3.12 (0.95)	-			
2. Peer Empathy	3.80 (0.71)	.38**	-		
3. Instrumental Support	2.85 (1.02)	.29*	.24*	-	
4. Job Satisfaction	3.25 (0.94)	.32**	.35**	.65***	.74***

Note: N = 512. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Scale 1-5.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression

To isolate the predictive power of structural support over empathy, a hierarchical multiple regression was executed. Demographics were controlled in Step 1. Affective metrics (Leader and Peer Empathy) were entered in Step 2. Crucially, Instrumental and Institutional Support were added in Step 3.

Figure 2: Impact of Empathy vs. Tangible Support in Pakistani HEIs

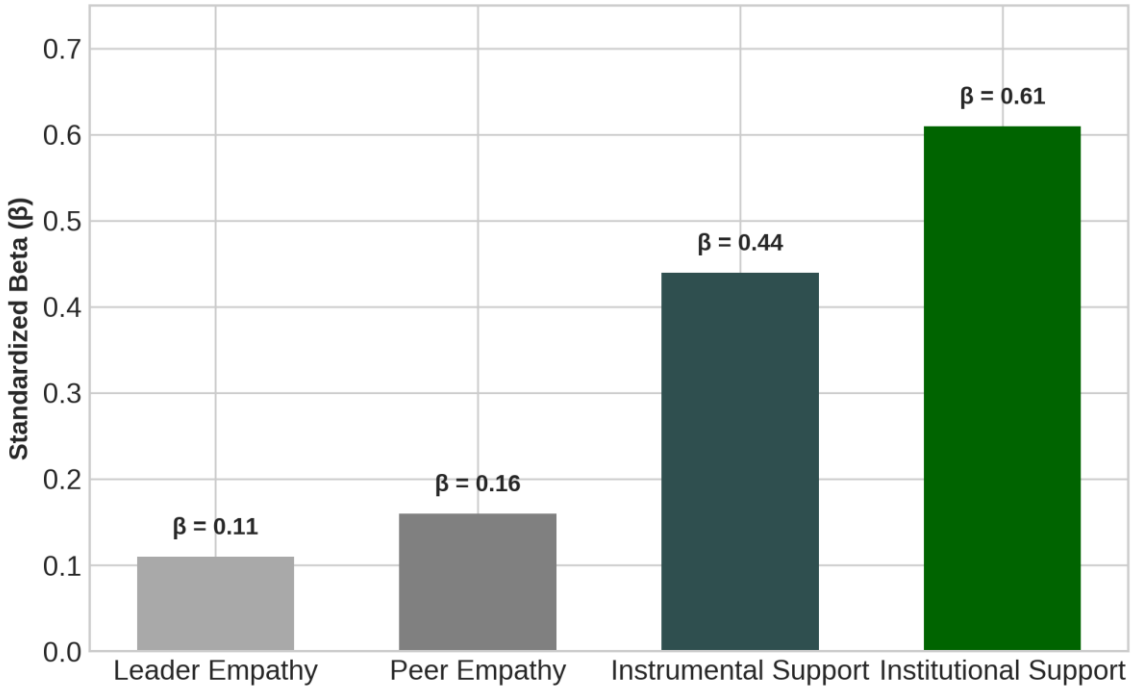


Figure 2 visually encapsulates the final regression model. Even when controlling for a leader's emotional intelligence, tangible support structures dominated. Leader Empathy maintained a weak but significant beta ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$). However, Instrumental Support ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) and Institutional Support ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$) captured the vast majority of the variance. The addition of PSS in Step 3 accounted for an extra 45% of the variance in Job Satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .45$, F-change = 92.14, $p < .001$), unequivocally supporting our core hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study offer a critical intervention into how higher education leadership is practiced and conceptualized in Pakistan. The data definitively shows that while an empathetic HOD or Dean is beneficial for baseline psychological safety, empathy is vastly insufficient for sustaining job satisfaction amidst the structural rigors of modern academia (Rizvi et al., 2023).

Addressing the 'Performative Empathy' Paradigm

Faculty members in Pakistani universities are navigating an increasingly complex web of deliverables. They must maintain perfect compliance with QEC standards, ensure their teaching meets DPI inspection criteria, and publish consistently to satisfy HEC requirements. In this high-pressure ecosystem, emotional validation without structural intervention is frequently interpreted as 'performative empathy' (Bashir & Nasir, 2023). When a Vice Chancellor acknowledges the heavy workload but fails to authorize the hiring of teaching assistants or deploy automated online attendance portals, the emotional support does little to prevent burnout (Awan & Asghar, 2021). The strong beta coefficient for Instrumental Support ($\beta = .44$) confirms that faculty desperately need tools, not just sympathy.

Action-Oriented Leadership and Policy Implications

The overwhelming predictive power of Institutional Support ($\beta = .61$) aligns perfectly with Resource Conservation Theory. In developing economies, where infrastructural gaps are prominent, leadership must be action-oriented. Deans and HODs must pivot from acting merely as empathetic listeners to serving as resource advocates (Kamran & Khaliq, 2022). Practical implications include investing in robust Campus Management Systems (CMS) to automate administrative tasks, thereby freeing cognitive bandwidth for research and teaching. Furthermore, HEC policies should potentially evaluate university leadership not just on research output, but on the tangible support systems provided to faculty (Hussain & Ali, 2024).

CONCLUSION

To cultivate a sustainable and globally competitive higher education sector in Pakistan, institutional leadership must move beyond the limitations of purely affective management. Empathy, while noble, cannot resolve the friction of bureaucratic overload, QEC audits, and resource scarcity. Tangible Perceived Social Support—manifested as optimized digital workflows, protective administrative policies, and instrumental resources—is the true driver of faculty job satisfaction. By adopting an action-oriented, resource-driven leadership paradigm, Pakistani universities can drastically reduce faculty burnout, retain top-tier academic talent, and effectively meet their institutional and national mandates.

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