

Reconceptualizing High-Performance Work Practices as a Family-Resemblance Composite

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper addresses the persistent construct proliferation, definitional ambiguity, and measurement inconsistency surrounding High-Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) by proposing a more coherent conceptualization. *Methodology:* A conceptual theory-building approach is adopted, integrating HPWP scholarship with construct theory, family-resemblance concepts, and measurement theory. *Findings:* The paper argues that HPWP scholarship is constrained by an implicit essentialist assumption that a universally valid bundle of practices exists. It reconceptualizes HPWPs as a family-resemblance composite comprising mutually reinforcing HR practices that share overlapping performance-enhancing characteristics without requiring any practice to be universally present. This perspective accommodates multiple valid configurations while aligning conceptualization with composite and configurational measurement. *Originality/value:* The paper identifies essentialist thinking as the source of conceptual fragmentation, introduces a family-resemblance composite conceptualization, and provides a coherent foundation for construct definition, measurement, and cumulative theory development in strategic human resource management. *Practical implications:* The framework supports context-sensitive HR system design and encourages measurement approaches consistent with the constitutive nature of HPWPs.

Keywords: High-Performance Work Practices; Family-Resemblance Concepts; Composite Constructs; High-Performance Work Systems; Strategic Human Resource Management.

Introduction

Empirical Success, Conceptual Uncertainty

High-Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) occupy a central position in strategic human resource management (SHRM) research because they are widely regarded as one of the most influential mechanisms through which organizations enhance employee and organizational performance. Since Huselid's (1995) seminal study demonstrated that bundles of human resource practices can improve productivity, reduce turnover, and strengthen financial performance, HPWPs have attracted sustained scholarly attention and generated a substantial body of empirical research. Subsequent meta-analyses and reviews have consistently linked HPWPs and related systems to desirable outcomes such as employee commitment, engagement, innovation, productivity, and organizational effectiveness, contributing to their status as a dominant research stream within SHRM (Combs et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2012a; Posthuma et al., 2013).

Yet, despite this empirical success, scholars continue to disagree on what HPWPs actually are. The literature is characterized by multiple overlapping labels—including HPWPs, High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS), High-Involvement Work Systems (HIWS), and High-Commitment Work Systems (HCWS)—that often describe similar sets of practices while emphasizing different theoretical logics and organizational objectives. As a result, the field exhibits substantial conceptual fragmentation, unclear construct boundaries, and divergent definitions of what constitutes a performance-enhancing HR system. Researchers frequently agree that HPWPs matter, but not on their precise nature, composition, or conceptual status (Boon

et al., 2019; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Posthuma et al., 2013). This paradox of empirical consensus amid conceptual uncertainty provides the starting point for the present paper.

The Conceptual Puzzle

Despite their prominence, HPWPs are marked by three recurring problems. First, construct proliferation has produced a crowded field of overlapping labels HPWPs, HPWS, HIWS, HCWS, and strategic HR bundles often built from largely the same practices, such as training, staffing, participation, and information sharing (Boon et al., 2019; He, 2017). Second, definitional ambiguity remains: one review notes that HPWS is still used in ways that blur boundaries and mix the logics of performance, involvement, and commitment rather than identifying one stable domain (Boxall & Macky, 2009). Third, measurement inconsistency follows from this conceptual drift: studies alternately use reflective scales, additive indices, formative models, and configurational approaches, while a single reflective factor often fails to fit the pattern of HR practices (Marín-García & Conci, 2013; Boon et al., 2019). The result is not just technical disagreement but a field in which similar labels can mean different things, and different labels can refer to similar bundles.

Why the Problem Matters

This matters because conceptual slippage does more than create tidy terminology disputes; it shapes what the field can learn. When HPWPs are defined in different ways, studies cannot be easily compared, combined, or cumulated, so evidence accumulates in fragments rather than building toward a shared understanding (Bedford & Speklé, 2018; Lambert & Newman, 2023). It also weakens theoretical integration: if one study treats HPWPs as a latent essence, another as a formative bundle, and another as a configuration, the same findings may be interpreted through incompatible lenses. The result is a literature that is rich in findings but uneven in meaning, with measurement choices and construct definitions pulling the field in different directions. For that reason, the problem is not merely terminological; it affects how HPWP evidence is evaluated, compared, and used to build theory more reliably across studies and over time (Bedford & Speklé, 2018; Lambert & Newman, 2023).

Central Thesis

This paper argues that HPWPs are best understood as a *family-resemblance composite*: a category defined by overlapping performance-enhancing similarities rather than one universal essence (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Ma & van Brakel, 2016). On this view, practices such as staffing, training, participation, and rewards do not merely reflect an underlying system; together, they constitute it. That logic fits composite measurement better than reflective measurement, because the parts help define the whole rather than mirror it (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; Petter et al., 2007). The rest of the paper defends that claim and shows how it clarifies HPWP scholarship.

Contributions

This paper makes three contributions. First, it challenges the essentialist search for a single defining core and shows that HPWP confusion is partly an ontology problem (Cadogan & Lee, 2013; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Second, it reconceptualizes HPWPs as a family-resemblance composite, where practices overlap without needing to be universally present (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019). Third, it resolves the practical puzzle of how to define and measure the construct more coherently, improving theoretical clarity, comparability, and cumulative knowledge building across studies (Bedford & Speklé, 2018; Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). Better concept definitions help the field produce cleaner evidence and stronger SHRM theory.

The HPWP Conceptual Puzzle

Construct Proliferation

The literature on HPWPs has multiplied labels faster than it has stabilized boundaries. High-Performance Work Practices, High-Performance Work Systems, High-Involvement Work Systems, High-Commitment Work Systems, and Strategic HR Bundles are often presented as distinct, yet the retrieved studies show that they repeatedly draw from the same practice pool: staffing, training, participation, information sharing, autonomy, teamwork, and rewards (Ashkanasy et al., 2016; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Gkorezis & Theodorou, 2016; He, 2017; Posthuma et al., 2013). What varies most is not the practice content itself but the organizing logic attached to the label. HPWPs are framed around performance enhancement, HPWS around synergy and complementarity, HIWS around involvement and empowerment, and HCWS around trust and commitment (Boxall & Huo, 2020; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024; Wood, 2020, 2021). Even so, the literature frequently blurs these distinctions, using the terms interchangeably or combining them within a single account (Boon et al., 2019). Strategic HR Bundles further broaden the field by absorbing multiple “high-X” systems under one umbrella, including high-control, high-involvement, high-performance, high-commitment, high-reliability, and service-oriented variants (He, 2017). The pattern suggests not separate domains with clean borders, but a layered vocabulary for broadly similar performance-enhancing HR arrangements. In that sense, construct proliferation is less evidence of theoretical richness than a sign that the field has kept renaming an overlapping phenomenon without settling its conceptual core.

Definitional Ambiguity

Beyond the proliferation of labels, the HPWP literature also suffers from persistent definitional ambiguity. Although researchers broadly agree that HPWPs involve human resource practices intended to improve employee and organizational performance, there is little agreement on what the construct actually includes or where its boundaries lie (Boon et al., 2019; Boxall & Macky, 2009). As shown in Table 1, different traditions define performance-enhancing HR arrangements in markedly different ways. HPWPs are commonly described as sets of practices that build employee capability, motivation, and commitment, whereas HPWS emphasizes the synergistic effects of integrated practice bundles. HIWS focuses on participation, autonomy, and employee influence, while HCWS prioritizes trust, commitment, and long-term relational exchange. Strategic HR bundles extend the concept even further by grouping multiple HR system types under a broader strategic framework. Despite these distinctions, substantial overlap exists among the constituent practices associated with each label.

The ambiguity becomes even more apparent when examining the practices themselves. Posthuma et al. (2013) identified 61 distinct practices across 193 studies, illustrating the extraordinary variation in what scholars classify as HPWPs. Training and development, selective staffing, performance appraisal, participation, information sharing, and incentive compensation are frequently included, yet none appears consistently across all studies. Some frameworks treat employee involvement and autonomy as central elements, while others view them as optional or peripheral. Similarly, performance-based pay is considered a core practice in some performance-oriented models but is omitted or even rejected in certain high-commitment approaches. Researchers also disagree on whether work design, employment security, and broader organizational features should be included within the construct. Consequently, the same practice may be categorized differently across studies, while different bundles may be described using the same label. Table 1 highlights this pattern of conceptual fragmentation and demonstrates that the field has not converged on a single definition, a stable set of practices, or a clear set of construct boundaries.

Search for the “Correct” Bundle

A recurring theme in the HPWP literature is the search for a universal or best-practice bundle. Many studies begin with the assumption that there must be a core set of practices that “counts” as HPWPs everywhere, regardless of industry or context. Posthuma et al. (2013) made one of the most ambitious attempts to organize

Table 1. Competing Conceptualizations of HPWPs in the Literature

Construct	Primary Logic	Typical Practices	Structure	Main Issue	Sources
HPWPs	Performance enhancement via a bundle of progressive HR practices	Staffing, training, performance pay, information sharing, teamwork, empowerment, flexible work design	Practice bundle	Wide variation in practice lists; no stable practice set	Ashkanasy et al., 2016; Gkorezis & Theodorou, 2016; Mathew & Rani, 2026; Posthuma et al., 2013
HPWS	Synergy among interrelated HR practices	Staffing, training, involvement, pay, autonomy, information sharing	Integrated system	Definitional ambiguity; inconsistent operationalization; mixed outcomes	Boon et al., 2019; Boxall & Huo, 2020; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Meuer, 2017; Shih et al., 2007; Weller et al., 2020
HIWS/ HIWPs	Participation, autonomy, and involvement	Participation, power, information sharing, rewards, knowledge/ training, communication, decentralization, teams, employment security	Involvement architecture	Conflated with HPWS; unclear boundaries; measurement inconsistency	Marín-García & Conci, 2009; Mendelson et al., 2011; Rana, 2015; Song et al., 2020; Wood, 2020, 2021; Wei & Fu, 2026
HCWS	Trust-based exchange and commitment	Job security, autonomy, developmental evaluation, training, trust-based exchange	Commitment architecture	Boundary issues with HPWS; hybrid commitment-control variants	Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024; Su & Wright, 2012
Strategic HR bundles	Strategic alignment across HR system archetypes	Varies by bundle; may combine high-control, high-performance, high-involvement, high-commitment, high-reliability, and service-oriented practices	Meta-configuration	Label proliferation; unclear boundaries; inconsistent measurement	Boon et al., 2019; He, 2017

Note. The table shows that the main differences across constructs lie less in wholly distinct practice sets and more in the organizing logic used to group overlapping HR practices: performance, involvement, commitment, or strategic bundling. That pattern underpins the family-resemblance argument.

this terrain, identifying 61 practices across 193 studies and grouping them into broader categories. Even so, their review did not settle the question of which practices are essential; instead, it showed just how wide the variation is. Other studies try to narrow the field by proposing sector-specific bundles, such as healthcare-focused, hospitality-focused, or lean-service bundles, but these too are context-bound rather than universal (Gkorezis & Theodorou, 2016; Murphy et al., 2018; Zirar et al., 2021).

The problem is that every attempt to identify a “correct” bundle runs into the same difficulty: the bundle changes as soon as the setting changes. In small firms, resource limits shape a leaner set of practices (Kroon et al., 2013). In cross-cultural settings, what looks like a high-performance bundle in one country may not travel cleanly to another (Baniski et al., 2019; Nadeem & Nasir, 2024). In high-reliability work, the goal is not general performance alone but safety, so the practice set is redefined accordingly (Kellner et al., 2023). Configurational studies add another challenge by showing that more than one bundle can work, and that success may even depend on leaving some practices out (Meuer, 2017). Taken together, these studies do not converge on a single universal set. They show instead that HPWP composition is variable, contingent, and shaped by strategic intent, resources, and context.

Measurement Inconsistency

Measurement inconsistency follows directly from conceptual variation. Once HPWPs are defined differently, researchers naturally measure them differently. Some treat HPWS as a reflective latent construct whose indicators should move together and reflect one underlying system (Boon et al., 2019; MacKenzie et al., 2005). Others use additive indices, formative models, composite measures, or configurational approaches (Hauff et al., 2025; Jiang et al., 2012b; Petter et al., 2007; Rehmani et al., 2021), each assuming a different relation between practices and the construct they are meant to represent. That is why the same field produces incompatible operationalizations.

Reflective scales are attractive because they are simple and familiar, but they often fit poorly when practices do not strongly correlate (MacKenzie et al., 2005; Boon et al., 2019). Formative and composite approaches are more suitable when the practices help define the system rather than simply reflect it, but they require careful content coverage and clear theoretical justification for what should be included (Petter et al., 2007; Hauff et al., 2025). Configurational approaches go even further by treating HPWS as a set of interdependent combinations rather than a single score, which fits equifinality but makes comparison across studies harder (Rehmani et al., 2021). The result is not random measurement noise; it is a direct expression of deeper disagreement about what HPWPs are supposed to be. Until the field agrees on whether the construct is latent, formative, composite, or configurational, measurement will continue to vary widely and evidence will remain difficult to synthesize (Boon et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2012b).

Underlying Assumption

The deeper problem is that much HPWP scholarship still assumes there is a single, stable essence waiting to be found: a core set of practices that defines the construct everywhere and for all cases. That assumption is visible in efforts to identify “the” right bundle and to represent HPWPs as a fixed set of necessary and sufficient elements (Goertz, 2006; Harney, 2014). Yet the concept-formation literature warns that such essentialist thinking is often a poor fit for complex social constructs, because it forces rigid boundaries onto phenomena that vary across context, purpose, and use (Podsakoff et al., 2016; Harney, 2014). The ontology argument in the HPWP literature points in the same direction: what matters is not only whether HPWPs predict outcomes, but what kind of thing HPWPs are in the first place (Gruber, 1993; Harney, 2014). That question matters because it changes how the construct should be defined and measured. From here, the logical next step is to treat HPWPs not as an essence to be discovered, but as a family of overlapping practices better captured through a family-resemblance logic.

Reconceptualizing HPWPs as a Family-Resemblance Composite

Why Essentialism Fails

An essentialist definition assumes that HPWPs have a stable core: a set of practices that is necessary, sufficient, and present in every valid case. That logic is attractive because it promises clarity, but it does not fit the HPWP literature well. The ontology-focused review of HPWPs argues that the field has long neglected the basic question of what HPWPs are, even though that question shapes both definition and measurement (Harney, 2014; Gruber, 1993). The same review also notes that HPWPs are better treated as a construct with a family-resemblance structure rather than as a category built around one fixed essence (Goertz, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2016). In practice, this means no single practice appears everywhere, no single bundle captures the whole field, and attempts to force a universal checklist keep running into exceptions (Goertz, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2016).

The broader concept-formation literature points in the same direction. Essentialist categories are built on necessary-and-sufficient conditions, but complex social constructs often resist that kind of definition because they are shaped by context, purpose, and interpretation rather than by one immutable core (Podsakoff et al., 2016; Harney, 2014). HPWPs are a good example. One study may emphasize staffing, training, and pay, another may stress participation and autonomy, and a third may highlight commitment or learning, yet each

still claims to study HPWPs. That kind of variation is not a minor technical issue; it shows that the construct does not behave like a rigid natural kind. Instead, the parts change across settings while the broader family resemblance remains visible. Concept formation research warns that when scholars insist on a single essence, they often end up narrowing the construct too far in some studies and stretching it too far in others, which only deepens confusion about what counts as the phenomenon itself (Harney, 2014; Goertz, 2006). For HPWPs, the better move is to abandon the search for one universal bundle and accept that the construct is held together by overlapping similarities, not by an essential core. That shift opens the way to a family-resemblance solution.

Family-Resemblance Concepts

Family resemblance offers a simple way to think about categories that do not have one fixed core. In this view, members of a category are linked by overlapping similarities, not by a single defining essence (Ma & van Brakel, 2016). Some members share one feature, others share another, and the pattern of resemblance is enough to hold the category together. The edges are therefore “blurred,” because there is no strict boundary that cleanly separates all insiders from outsiders (Fermendois, 2022). That is why family resemblance is useful when a concept varies across cases but still remains recognizable.

For management readers, the key point is practical: family resemblance does not ask scholars to find the one correct definition. Instead, it asks them to examine patterns of similarity, variation, and recurring examples (Fermendois, 2022). This makes the approach especially helpful for concepts that are broad, evolving, and used differently across studies. In the social sciences, family resemblance has been used to explain concepts that rely on multiple sufficient pathways or mixed structures, rather than on one shared essence (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019). It has also been applied to concepts such as power, where different uses remain related even though they are not identical (Haugaard, 2010).

The value of this idea is that it preserves conceptual unity without forcing rigid sameness. A family-resemblance concept can be coherent even when its members are not interchangeable and even when some members sit closer to the center than others. That is why the approach fits HPWPs so well: it allows the field to recognize overlap, variation, and context without pretending that every valid case must look the same.

HPWPs as a Family-Resemblance Concept

HPWPs begin to look like a family-resemblance concept once the practice lists are compared across studies. The central pattern is not that the same practices always appear, but that a recognizable cluster of practices recurs in different combinations. Reviews show that scholars do not agree on a single universal practice set, and taxonomy work has identified a very large number of distinct practices across the literature (Bayo-Moriones & Merino-Díaz-de-Cerio, 2001; Posthuma et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2018). That means HPWPs are held together by overlap, not by a fixed checklist.

Training and development is the clearest example of this pattern. It appears in many HPWP and HPWS lists and is often treated as a core practice, but not every study gives it the same weight or meaning (Posthuma et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2023; Jyoti & Rani, 2017). In some sectoral bundles, training is central; in others, it is only one part of a broader package, and in a few it is not emphasized much at all (Murphy et al., 2018; Tomar & Dhiman, 2013). Participation shows a similar pattern. It is often included through employee involvement, voice, empowerment, or decentralization, yet some traditions make it the heart of the system while others treat it as optional or secondary (Marín-García & Conci, 2009; Mendelson et al., 2011; Yang, 2012).

The same variation appears with incentive compensation and performance appraisal. Incentive pay is common in performance-oriented accounts, but it is less welcome in high-commitment traditions that stress trust and relational exchange instead of economic control (Meuer, 2017; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024; Rubel et al., 2021). Performance appraisal is also widely used, but its meaning shifts across studies: in some cases, it is developmental, in others evaluative, and in still others tied to control or reward systems (Ekrot et al., 2016; Salin et al., 2023). Human resource practices in HPWS therefore do not behave like a set of universal ingredients. Rather, they behave like a family of related practices in which some members are common, some

are optional, and some appear only under particular theoretical or sectoral conditions (Vlachos, 2008; Wood & Wall, 2007). This is why the family-resemblance idea fits HPWPs better than the search for one fixed bundle.

Family Resemblance to Composite Representation

The family-resemblance viewpoints naturally to a composite representation of HPWPs. In measurement terms, the key distinction is simple: reflective constructs are reflected by their indicators, formative constructs are constituted by their indicators, and composite constructs are weighted summaries of their indicators (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2005; Petter et al., 2007). Reflective models fit cases where the indicators behave like symptoms of one underlying trait, so they should move together and be interchangeable. That logic does not fit HPWPs well, because practices such as training, participation, rewards, and staffing do not behave like interchangeable symptoms of one hidden essence (MacKenzie et al., 2005; Boon et al., 2019). Instead, the practices are the substance of the system itself. Removing one practice changes what the system is, which is why HPWPs are better understood as constitutive rather than reflective (Hauff et al., 2025; Petter et al., 2007).

This is where the family-resemblance argument becomes important. If HPWPs are held together by overlapping similarities rather than by a single essential core, then the construct cannot sensibly be treated as something that exists independently of its practices. The practices do not merely point to HPWPs; they help make HPWPs what they are. That is exactly the logic of a formative or composite construct: the indicators are not interchangeable signs of the construct, but the building blocks through which the construct is assembled (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; Hauff et al., 2025). A composite reading also fits the way HPWP studies are actually done. Researchers usually combine selected practices into an index, bundle, or higher-order system measure because no single practice defines the construct on its own and because different combinations can still represent a meaningful HPWP arrangement (MacKenzie et al., 2005; Boon et al., 2019).

So, the move from family resemblance to composite representation is not a technical afterthought. It follows logically from the conceptual claim that HPWPs are a family of overlapping practices. If no single practice is universal, then the construct is best captured by how the practices are combined, not by assuming that they all reflect one latent thing.

A New Conceptualization of HPWPs

HPWPs are best understood as a family-resemblance composite comprising mutually reinforcing HR practices that share overlapping performance-enhancing characteristics without requiring any particular practice to be universally present (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Ma & van Brakel, 2016). Existing definitions typically identify HPWPs by enumerating constituent practices. The proposed definition instead specifies the principle that qualifies practices for inclusion within the category. Consequently, the construct is defined by the organizing logic that unites diverse practices rather than by a fixed inventory of constituent practices. This distinction accommodates differences in bundle composition while preserving a common conceptual identity across studies. The analytical focus therefore shifts from identifying a universally valid set of practices to specifying the characteristics that determine family membership.

The proposed definition comprises five interrelated elements, each addressing a limitation identified in earlier sections. The concept of family resemblance accounts for variation in practice composition by treating category membership as a function of overlapping similarities rather than a single defining essence (Fernandois, 2022; Haugaard, 2010). The term composite indicates that HPWPs are constituted by their practices rather than reflected by them, implying that constituent practices define the construct instead of serving as interchangeable manifestations of an underlying latent entity (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; Petter et al., 2007). The phrase mutually reinforcing captures the systems perspective that the contribution of individual practices depends on their complementarity and internal fit within the broader HR architecture (Kang et al., 2024; Subramony, 2009). Performance-enhancing characteristics provide the substantive basis for category membership by requiring that practices contribute to organizational performance through mechanisms such as capability, motivation, opportunity, or strategic alignment (Jiang et al., 2012; Obeidat et al., 2016). Finally,

the absence of any requirement that a practice be universally present rejects the essentialist assumption that a single practice or bundle defines the construct across all organizational contexts.

This formulation also provides a parsimonious account of the relationship among the principal performance-oriented HR constructs. Labels such as High-Performance Work Practices (HPWPs), High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS), High-Involvement Work Systems (HIWS), and High-Commitment Work Systems (HCWS) need not be treated as conceptually independent constructs requiring separate definitions. Instead, they can be interpreted as alternative configurations or theoretical emphases within a broader family of performance-enhancing HR arrangements. Distinguishing family membership from bundle composition allows conceptual diversity to be recognised without generating unnecessary construct proliferation or requiring convergence on a single preferred configuration.

Alternative conceptualizations address parts of the HPWP problem but do not resolve it in its entirety. Prototype approaches accommodate central and peripheral category members, yet they provide limited guidance on how constituent practices collectively define the construct (Meuer, 2017; Posthuma *et al.*, 2013). Formative and composite specifications improve the correspondence between conceptualization and measurement, but they do not by themselves explain why diverse practices belong within the same conceptual category (Juarez-Tarraga *et al.*, 2016; Van Beurden *et al.*, 2026). Likewise, second-order HR system models describe structural relationships among HR practices without specifying the conceptual basis on which category membership is determined (Boon *et al.*, 2019; Hauff *et al.*, 2025; Jiang *et al.*, 2012b). The family-resemblance composite framework integrates these perspectives by combining a theory of category membership with a constitutive view of construct representation. It therefore provides a coherent account of why diverse HR configurations can belong to the same conceptual family while remaining amenable to composite and configurational forms of measurement.

Taken together, these elements provide a coherent basis for conceptualizing HPWPs. Defining the construct through shared membership criteria rather than a universal inventory of practices accommodates contextual variation while maintaining stable conceptual boundaries. The resulting conceptualization is consistent with the constitutive nature of HPWPs, aligns more closely with contemporary approaches to construct specification and measurement, and provides a common framework within which alternative HR configurations can be examined. Accordingly, the central question for HPWP scholarship becomes not which practices constitute the universally correct bundle, but what characteristics qualify diverse practices for membership within the same conceptual family.

Conceptual Proposition

The Proposition: High-Performance Work Practices are most coherently conceptualized as a family-resemblance composite whose constituent practices qualify for membership through overlapping performance-enhancing characteristics rather than universally shared attributes.

Membership Criteria

The question is no longer “Which practices are HPWPs?” but “What qualifies a practice for inclusion in the HPWP family?” The literature suggests that a practice belongs in that family when it contributes to one or more of the classic performance pathways: capability, motivation, opportunity, complementarity, and strategic alignment (Jiang *et al.*, 2012; Kang *et al.*, 2024; Lepak *et al.*, 2006). Capability is built through selection, training, and development because these practices raise employee skill and human capital (Jiang *et al.*, 2012; Lewin & Teece, 2019). Motivation is strengthened through rewards, appraisal, and recognition because these practices shape effort and commitment (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2018). Opportunity is created through participation, autonomy, and involvement because these practices give employees room to contribute (Jones *et al.*, 2010).

A second criterion is fit. HPWP membership is stronger when practices reinforce one another and support a clear strategic purpose rather than functioning as isolated HR activities (Kang *et al.*, 2024; Kepes & Delery,

2008; Prifti et al., 2025). This is what separates strategic HR from routine HR. Routine HR tasks such as payroll, scheduling, record-keeping, and compliance are necessary, but they mainly support administrative efficiency rather than competitive advantage (Atay et al., 2025; Selmer & Chiu, 2004). Strategic HR practices, by contrast, are designed to build human capital, shape behavior, and support long-term organizational goals (Lepak et al., 2006; Rogers, 2012).

Taken together, these criteria show that HPWPs are not defined by one fixed bundle. A practice qualifies when it helps the system perform through ability, motivation, opportunity, and alignment with other practices and strategy. That shift makes the construct broader than any single checklist, but narrower than ordinary HR activity.

Boundary Conditions

Not every HR activity belongs in the HPWP family. The negative case matters because it keeps the concept from expanding until it means almost anything. Routine administrative work—such as payroll, scheduling, record-keeping, policy enforcement, and basic compliance—supports organizational functioning, but it does not qualify as HPWPs unless it is intentionally tied to capability, motivation, opportunity, or strategic fit (Atay et al., 2025; Selmer & Chiu, 2004). Likewise, HR tasks that are purely reactive or maintenance-oriented remain outside the family even when they are necessary for day-to-day operations (Atay et al., 2025). The same caution applies to digital HR tools: an e-HRM system used only to process transactions more efficiently is not, by itself, a high-performance work practice (Oehlhorn et al., 2020). HPWPs begin where administrative efficiency ends and performance-oriented design begins—where practices are selected because they help build human capital, shape behavior, and support long-term strategic goals (Lepak et al., 2006; Snow & Snell, 2012). This boundary is important because it prevents the construct from swallowing ordinary HR administration and keeps the family defined by performance-enhancing intent rather than by the mere presence of HR activity.

The preceding discussion highlights the conceptual foundation of the paper by identifying the limitations of essentialist definitions, introducing family resemblance as the basis of category membership, specifying a composite representation of HPWPs, and defining the criteria that govern inclusion within the HPWP family. Figure 1 synthesizes this progression. It summarizes the sequence of arguments that links the diagnosis of the conceptual puzzle to the proposed reconceptualization and prepares the reader for the integrative model presented in the following section.

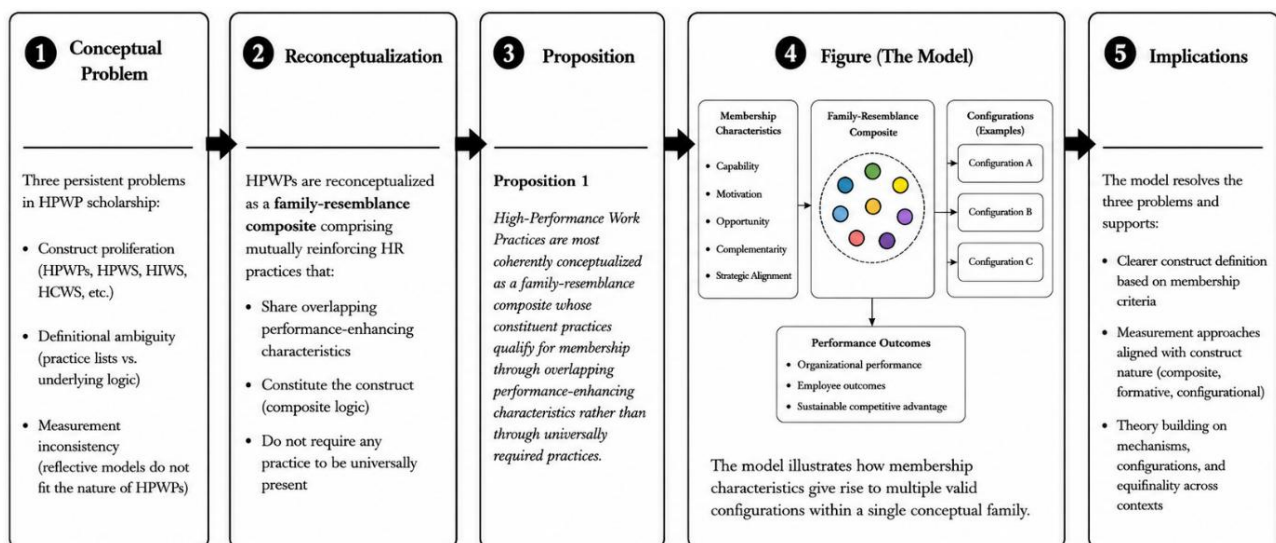


Figure 1. Conceptual Progression of the Proposed Framework

The Family-Resemblance Composite Model of HPWPs

Introducing the Model

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the Proposition by illustrating how membership characteristics give rise to multiple configurations within a single family-resemblance composite. It presents the paper's central theoretical contribution: HPWPs as a family-resemblance composite rather than a fixed bundle of universally required practices. The model begins with a broad repertoire of HR practices from which organizations draw and shows how these practices may be organized through different underlying logics—performance, involvement, and commitment. These logics generate familiar constructs such as HPWPs, HIWPs, HCWPs, and their corresponding system-level variants, illustrating why the literature has produced multiple “High-X” labels over time (Boxall & Macky, 2009; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024; Wood, 2020).

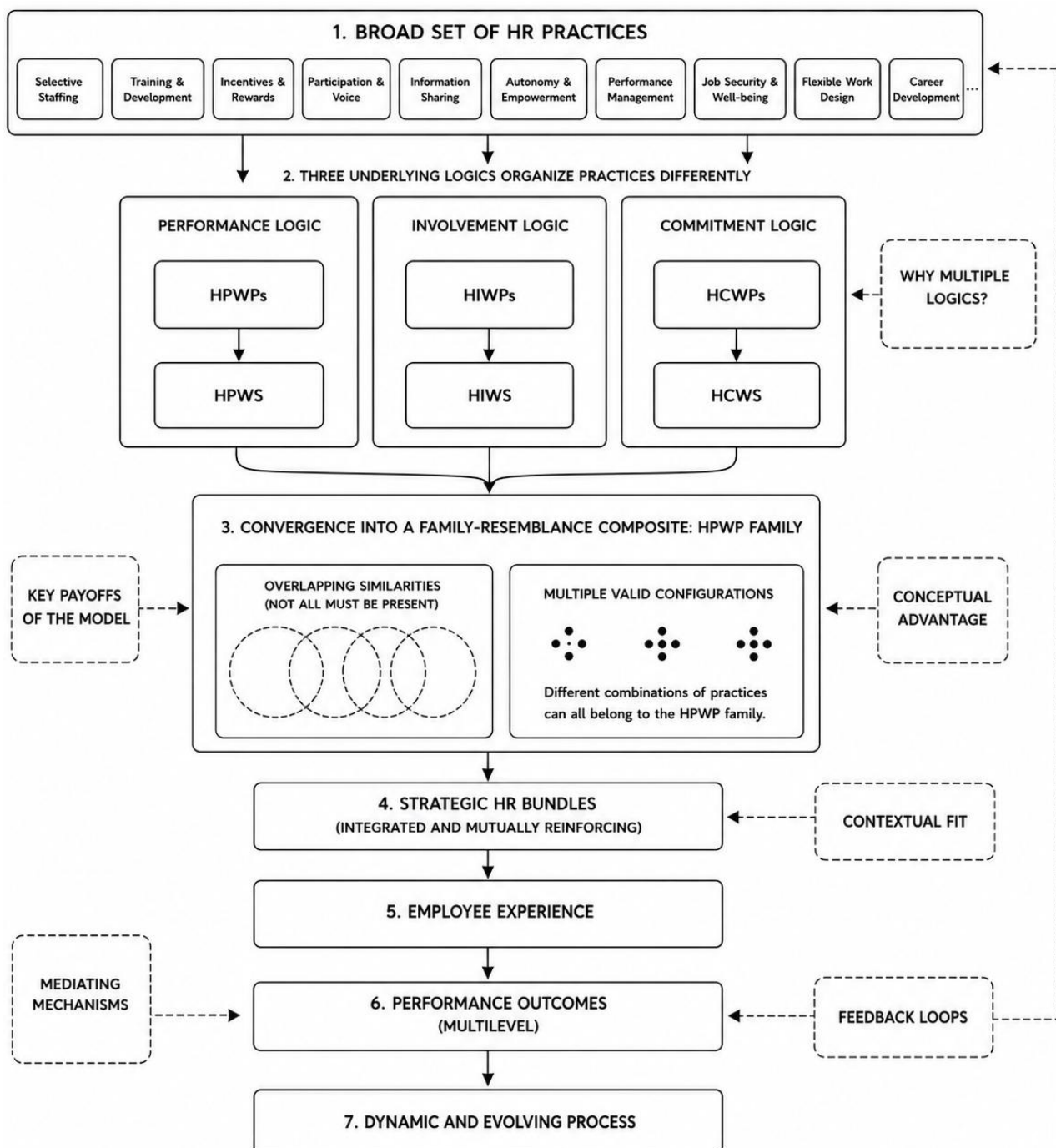


Figure 2. The Family-Resemblance Composite Model of High-Performance Work Practices

The model's central insight appears in the convergence stage. Rather than treating these labels as separate conceptual domains, Figure 2 proposes that they belong to a broader HPWP family characterized by overlapping similarities and multiple valid configurations. Membership in this family does not depend on the presence of any single practice. Instead, practices belong because they share performance-enhancing characteristics and can be combined in different ways while remaining recognizably part of the same conceptual family (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Posthuma et al., 2013).

The model further shows how family membership gives rise to strategic HR bundles that shape employee experience and, ultimately, multilevel performance outcomes. Contextual fit, mediating mechanisms, and feedback loops explain why bundle composition varies across organizations and evolves over time. In this way, Figure 2 visually integrates construct proliferation, contextual variation, and performance outcomes within a single family-resemblance framework.

How the Model Resolves the Puzzle

The family-resemblance composite model resolves the three problems identified at the beginning of this paper (i.e., construct proliferation, definitional ambiguity, and measurement inconsistency) by changing the way HPWPs are conceptualized. First, it addresses *construct proliferation* by treating HPWPs, HPWS, HIWS, HCWS, and related labels as members of the same conceptual family rather than as entirely separate constructs. Family-resemblance frameworks allow categories to exhibit variation while retaining conceptual coherence because membership depends on overlapping similarities rather than identical characteristics (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019). This shifts attention away from debates over labels and toward the common performance-enhancing logic that unites different HR configurations.

Second, the model resolves *definitional ambiguity* by replacing universal practice lists with criteria-based inclusion. Instead of asking whether a particular practice must be present in every HPWP bundle, the model asks whether the practice contributes to capability, motivation, opportunity, complementarity, or strategic alignment. This approach preserves conceptual discipline while accommodating contextual variation. It also reduces the tendency toward concept drift because membership is governed by explicit principles rather than by ad hoc practice selection (Lambert & Newman, 2023; Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019).

Third, the model resolves *measurement inconsistency* by aligning operationalization with conceptualization. If HPWPs are understood as composites constituted by practices, then composite, formative, and configurational approaches become more appropriate than reflective models that assume a single underlying essence (Jiang et al., 2012; Boon et al., 2019). This alignment reduces the mismatch between theory and measurement that has characterized much of the literature. Rather than forcing diverse practices into a reflective structure, researchers can model HPWPs in ways that reflect their multidimensional and configurational nature. In short, the model provides three connected payoffs: family membership replaces label proliferation, criteria-based inclusion replaces definitional uncertainty, and measurement alignment replaces conceptual–operational mismatch.

Taken together, these changes reorient the conceptual foundations of HPWP scholarship. The central task is no longer to identify a universally valid bundle of practices, but to specify the principles that govern membership within the HPWP family and the configurations through which those principles are expressed. From this perspective, diversity in HR practice bundles is not evidence of conceptual fragmentation but an expected feature of a family-resemblance composite. Conceptual coherence is therefore achieved not by imposing uniformity on practice composition, but by establishing a common set of membership criteria capable of accommodating multiple valid configurations.

Illustrative Taxonomy

Table 2 translates the family-resemblance argument into a practical classification of HPWPs. It is presented as an illustrative taxonomy, not as a definitive or exhaustive list of practices. This distinction is deliberate because the evidence consistently shows that no universally valid bundle of HPWPs exists. Instead, practices

vary in how frequently they appear, the roles they perform, and the contexts in which they are applied (Posthuma et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2018).

Table 2. Illustrative Family Members of the HPWP Concept

Membership Characteristic	Representative Practices	Pattern Across Traditions	Role in Family	Sources
Capability	Staffing, recruitment, training, development	Recur across HPWPs, HPWS, HIWS, and HCWS	High-frequency family members	Posthuma et al., 2013; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Marín-García & Conci, 2009; Gkorezis & Theodorou, 2016
Motivation	Performance pay, incentive compensation, recognition, developmental appraisal	Common in HPWPs and HPWS; present in many HCWS formulations	High-frequency family members	Posthuma et al., 2013; Shih et al., 2007; Nadeem & Rahat, 2021; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024
Opportunity	Participation, empowerment, information sharing, teamwork, decentralization, voice	Highly prevalent in HPWS and HIWS; frequently incorporated into HPWPs	High-frequency family members	Boxall & Macky, 2009; Rana, 2015; Song et al., 2020; Wood, 2020
Commitment	Job security, career development, internal promotion, trust-based employment	Stronger in HCWS and some HPWS variants than in all HPWP formulations	Tradition-specific family members	Su & Wright, 2012; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024; Rubel et al., 2021
Learning	Knowledge sharing, organizational learning, collaborative learning systems	Frequent in learning- and innovation-oriented systems, but not universal	Moderate-frequency family members	Jyoti & Rani, 2017; Song et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018
Well-being	Work-life balance, supportive work environments, wellness practices	Present in some contemporary formulations; absent from many traditional models	Moderate-frequency family members	Babic et al., 2019; Salin et al., 2023; Loughlin & Mercer, 2014
Digital	Digital HR practices, AI-enabled HR systems, analytics-supported HRM	Emerging in digital-era systems; not yet stable across studies	Context-specific family members	Wei & Fu, 2026; Mathew & Rani, 2026
Industry	Safety systems, customer-service practices, patient-centred HR, high-reliability adaptations	Depends on sectoral performance requirements	Context-specific family members	Chuang et al., 2012; Tomar & Dhiman, 2013; Murphy et al., 2018
Institution	Culture-sensitive bundles, nationally adapted systems, trust-oriented reforms	Varies across national and institutional contexts	Context-specific family members	Nadeem & Nasir, 2024; Øygarden et al., 2023; Su & Wright, 2012
Resource	SME-tailored bundles, minimalist capability systems, customized HR configurations	Appears where resources constrain implementation	Context-specific family members	Bhardwaj & Jain, 2022; Hansen et al., 2025

Note. This is an illustrative classification, not a definitive one. It does not assume that any practice is universally required for HPWP membership. Instead, it shows that HPWPs are linked by overlapping performance-enhancing characteristics, with some practices recurring frequently and others appearing only under particular strategic, institutional, technological, or industry conditions. That pattern is consistent with a family-resemblance conceptualization.

The taxonomy groups practices into core, peripheral, and context-dependent family members. Core members occupy the centre of the HPWP family because they recur across HPWPs, HPWS, HIWS, and HCWS

despite differences in terminology and theoretical emphasis. These include selective staffing, training and development, employee participation, information sharing, performance appraisal, rewards, and job design (Rubel et al., 2021; Vlachos, 2008). Their repeated appearance suggests broad agreement about their strategic importance, even though none is individually required in every valid configuration (Posthuma et al., 2013).

Peripheral members are less consistently represented. Practices such as job security, career development, recognition, knowledge management, work–life balance, and transformational leadership feature prominently in some frameworks but receive little or no attention in others (Mendelson et al., 2011; Ra Jâa & Mekkaoui, 2024). Their inclusion reflects particular theoretical perspectives rather than universally accepted characteristics.

Context-dependent members define the outer boundary of the family. Their relevance depends on sectoral requirements, organizational strategy, national institutions, technological conditions, or resource constraints. Healthcare service practices, lean- or ISO-oriented HR systems, culturally adapted bundles, SME-specific configurations, and digitally enabled HR practices illustrate this category (Bhardwaj & Jain, 2022; Meuer, 2017; Nadeem & Nasir, 2024). As these conditions evolve, practices may move between categories. The taxonomy should therefore be read as a flexible organizing framework that accommodates diversity while preserving conceptual coherence rather than as a permanent classification.

Multiple Valid Configurations

One of the strongest implications of the family-resemblance composite model is that different HPWP bundles can be equally valid representations of the same conceptual family. This is the principle of equifinality: organizations can achieve comparable performance through different combinations of HR practices rather than by implementing one universally superior bundle (Meuer, 2017; Subramony, 2009). Configurational and systems research consistently shows that effectiveness depends on how practices complement one another, not on whether every organization adopts the same practices.

Evidence from set-theoretic studies reinforces this conclusion. Research has identified multiple high-performing configurations across manufacturing firms, public organizations, SMEs, and other contexts, with each configuration combining practices in different ways while still producing strong organizational outcomes (Assanti, 2025; Cheng et al., 2025; L'Écuyer & Raymond, 2023; Meuer, 2017). Likewise, meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that HR bundles generally outperform isolated practices, but no single bundle consistently outperforms all others (Combs et al., 2006; Subramony, 2009).

This perspective changes how variation should be interpreted. Differences in HPWP composition are not signs of conceptual failure or poor measurement. Rather, they are expected consequences of organizations adapting their HR systems to different strategies, institutional environments, cultures, technologies, and resource constraints (Kang et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2012; Nadeem & Nasir, 2024). In other words, variation is not a defect of the construct—it is part of its structure. Recognizing multiple valid configurations therefore strengthens, rather than weakens, conceptual coherence by explaining why diverse HR bundles can legitimately belong to the same HPWP family while remaining responsive to different organizational contexts.

Implications for HPWP Scholarship

Implications for Construct Definition

The reconceptualization advanced in this paper changes the way HPWPs should be defined. Rather than defining the construct by a fixed list of practices, scholars should define it by the criteria that qualify practices for membership in the HPWP family. This shifts the emphasis from asking *Which practices are HPWPs?* to asking *What characteristics make a practice a member of the HPWP family?* Such an approach is consistent with research showing that concept formation should focus on the underlying logic of category membership rather than on rigid necessary-and-sufficient conditions, particularly for multidimensional and socially constructed phenomena (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Lambert & Newman, 2023).

This perspective also requires a clear distinction between family membership and bundle composition. Family membership concerns whether an HR practice possesses the performance-enhancing characteristics that justify its inclusion in the HPWP family. Bundle composition, by contrast, concerns which of those eligible practices are combined within a particular organizational context. The first is a matter of construct definition; the second is a matter of empirical configuration. Treating these two questions separately prevents the common mistake of assuming that one observed bundle defines the construct itself. It also accommodates the diversity of HPWP configurations without sacrificing conceptual clarity (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019).

More broadly, this reconceptualization encourages scholars to abandon the search for a universally correct bundle and instead develop explicit membership criteria grounded in theory. Doing so reduces construct proliferation, minimizes definitional drift, and promotes closer alignment between conceptualization and operationalization (Lambert & Newman, 2023). As a result, HPWPs become a concept defined by a coherent set of organizing principles rather than by a permanently fixed inventory of practices, providing a stronger foundation for cumulative theory development and more consistent empirical inquiry.

Implications for Measurement

The proposed conceptualization has a direct implication for how HPWPs should be measured. If HPWPs are a *family-resemblance composite*, then measurement should represent the construct as a system *constituted by* its practices rather than as a latent variable reflected by interchangeable indicators. This means that composite, formative, and configurational operationalizations are generally more appropriate than conventional reflective models (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; Petter et al., 2007). Reflective specifications assume that practices should covary because they are manifestations of a single underlying construct, yet evidence from HPWP research repeatedly shows that many practices do not exhibit this pattern (Jiang et al., 2012; Marín-García & Conci, 2013).

Composite and formative approaches better capture the idea that each practice contributes a distinct element to the HR system and that removing a practice changes the meaning of the construct itself (Hauff et al., 2025; Petter et al., 2007). Configurational methods provide a further advantage by recognising that different combinations of practices can produce similar outcomes through complementarity and equifinality rather than through simple accumulation (Hauff, 2021; Assanti, 2025).

This does not imply that one measurement approach should replace all others. Reflective models may remain appropriate when the object of interest is employees' shared perceptions of an HR system rather than the HR system itself (Li et al., 2011). However, when the construct being measured is HPWPs as defined in this paper, operationalization should follow the construct's constitutive logic. Aligning conceptualization and measurement in this way will improve construct validity, facilitate comparison across studies, and strengthen cumulative knowledge development.

Implications for Theory Building

The family-resemblance composite framework has implications that extend beyond construct definition and measurement to the way HPWP theory is developed. Rather than treating competing perspectives as mutually exclusive, the framework provides a common conceptual foundation within which they can coexist. Universalistic, configurational, systems, and AMO perspectives can therefore be understood as offering different explanations of how members of the HPWP family generate performance, rather than as proposing fundamentally different constructs (Boon et al., 2019; Ketchen, 2013).

This reconceptualization also supports cumulative knowledge development. A major obstacle to synthesis has been the tendency to compare studies that employ different conceptualizations while assuming they examine the same construct. By distinguishing family membership from bundle composition, researchers can compare alternative configurations without first forcing them into a single universal template. Variation in practice combinations becomes theoretically informative rather than a source of conceptual confusion (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Lambert & Newman, 2023).

The framework further encourages theory building around mechanisms instead of inventories of practices. Future research can examine how different HPWP configurations create capability, motivation, opportunity, complementarity, and strategic fit under varying organizational conditions, while recognising that multiple pathways may lead to similar outcomes through equifinality (Grandori & Furnari, 2013; Meuer, 2017). This shift allows scholars to theorize why alternative bundles succeed rather than to debate which bundle is universally correct. In doing so, the field can move from recurring disputes over construct boundaries toward a more coherent programme of theory development that accommodates diversity without sacrificing conceptual clarity.

Synthesis

Collectively, these implications reposition HPWP scholarship from the search for universally valid practice inventories toward the study of membership principles, complementary configurations, and context-sensitive implementation. Construct definition is reframed around the criteria that qualify practices for inclusion within the HPWP family, measurement is aligned with the constitutive nature of the construct, and theory development is redirected toward explaining how alternative configurations generate performance under different organizational conditions. This integrated perspective provides a common conceptual platform on which future research can develop more coherent constructs, adopt measurement approaches consistent with conceptual assumptions, and accumulate knowledge across diverse HR configurations without requiring convergence on a single universal bundle (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Lambert & Newman, 2023; Meuer, 2017).

Conclusion

Revisiting the HPWP Conceptual Puzzle

This paper began by identifying three persistent challenges in HPWP scholarship: construct proliferation, definitional ambiguity, and measurement inconsistency. The literature has generated multiple overlapping labels for performance-enhancing HR systems, no universally accepted definition of HPWPs, and diverse operationalizations that often reflect competing assumptions about the construct itself (Boon et al., 2019; Boxall & Huo, 2020). At the same time, evidence consistently shows that constituent practices vary across studies and contexts, with no universally shared practice set and multiple effective configurations of HR practices (Murphy et al., 2018; Posthuma et al., 2013; Meuer, 2017). Rather than attempting to resolve these issues by identifying the one correct bundle, this paper addressed them by changing the conceptual lens. Viewing HPWPs as a family-resemblance composite explains diversity without sacrificing coherence, thereby resolving the conceptual puzzle that has constrained cumulative progress in the field.

Core Contribution

The central contribution of this paper is the reconceptualization of High-Performance Work Practices as a *family-resemblance composite* rather than an essentialist construct defined by a universally valid bundle of practices. This perspective recognizes that HPWPs derive their identity from overlapping performance-enhancing characteristics instead of a shared essence, allowing diverse configurations to remain conceptually coherent (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Fermandois, 2022). At the same time, representing HPWPs as a composite acknowledges that the construct is constituted by its practices rather than reflected by interchangeable indicators, bringing conceptualization into closer alignment with measurement (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011; Hauff et al., 2025). Together, these insights provide a clearer conceptual foundation for future HPWP research while preserving diversity without sacrificing theoretical coherence.

Final Reflection

Progress in HPWP scholarship will depend less on discovering a universally correct bundle of practices than on understanding the principles that unite diverse performance-enhancing HR configurations within a

common conceptual family. By replacing essentialist thinking with a family-resemblance composite perspective, researchers can accommodate contextual variation while preserving conceptual discipline and theoretical coherence (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019; Lambert & Newman, 2023). This shift opens the way for more cumulative research, more appropriate measurement, and richer theorizing about how different HR configurations create value. Future advances are therefore likely to come from explaining why different bundles work, rather than debating which single bundle is correct.

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