

Psychosocial Predictors of Job Autonomy in Pakistani Personnel

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Abstract

Job autonomy plays an important role in employee well-being, satisfaction and motivation but the psychosocial factors that can affect them have limited research in Pakistani context. This qualitative study aims to explore the psychosocial factors of job autonomy from the perspectives of employees. 15 interviews were conducted and data was collected from employees of different occupations through semi-structured interviews analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings indicated that psychosocial factors that can affect job autonomy are based on three levels (individual, interpersonal and organizational) psychosocial factors. Alongside, participants' results also reported that autonomy can be experienced positively, negatively and excessively. This indicates that effective job autonomy is not only the result of individual capability but also based on a supportive interpersonal and organizational environment. These strategies can provide strategies for organizations which can better employees autonomy and overall workplace well-being.

Keywords: Psychosocial, predictors, job autonomy, Pakistani, personnel.

Introduction

Now-a-days, workplaces are changing rapidly (Dhal et al., 2021). Hybrid work, digitalization, technological advancements and changing employee expectations has influenced the way organizations work (Kraus et al., 2023). To focus only on organizational productivity, and not employee well-being and positive experiences would be a disservice to an important aspect of organizational success (Boccolli et al., 2022). In this changing environment, it is important to consider the factors that impact employee motivation, performance and mental health (Ghalib & Juhari, 2024). Among these factors, job autonomy is an important one, giving freedom to employees to take decisions related tasks, manage their work schedule and to perform task in their own way (Clausen et al., 2021). Job autonomy is considered as a basic job resource in work design theories and organizational psychology which provides a sense of control and ownership to their work, improving employees' motivation, engagement and performance (Terry, 2022). Contemporary research considers autonomy as a multidimensional construct (Malik et al., 2026), including but not limited to decision-making autonomy (freedom to decide their work), scheduling autonomy (freedom to schedule or organize their work) and work-method autonomy (freedom to perform their task and select related strategies).

Research in the recent years have explored the psychosocial antecedent factors of job autonomy, which may be arranged at three levels. Individually, the most relevant predicting factor is self-efficacy i.e., the belief in one's ability to effectively complete tasks and make judgements (Hanedar & Lomardi, 2026). Self-efficacious employees seek higher job autonomy (Sheng et al., 2022), which is a bidirectional relationship where confidence and autonomy feed off one another by providing opportunities for mastery and self-regulation (Cho & Jung, 2025). Another important factor is the locus of control, the degree of one's belief that conditions are contingent to personal actions and not outside forces beyond one's control. An employee with an internal locus of control has higher motivation, higher sense of personal agency, and a higher desire for autonomy while one with an external locus of control might perceive autonomy as a lack of direction and hence anxiety, especially in conditions where other forms of support are also absent (Terry, 2022).

On an interpersonal level, Pakistan's collectivistic culture is one of the salient shapers of autonomy. Pakistan falls among the higher-ranking cultures for power distance (Nadeem & De Luque, 2020), i.e., the degree to which unequal power is expected and accepted, and deference to authority is the norm (Islam, 2004). In such work settings, autonomous employees might not be a resource but a challenge to the hierarchical authority (Dai et al., 2022). Psychological safety is another factor, the degree to which employees feel safe speaking up and taking risks (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When supervisors provide conditions for autonomy such as democratic decision-making and goal-setting, employees gladly take the opportunity (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Gender dynamics is another culturally important factor, as female employees are especially vulnerable to barriers such as harassment and stereotypes that might hinder their autonomy (Ahmed et al., 2025; Ali & Syed, 2016).

On an organizational level, one of the main factors is workplace culture as contextual values and norms define the governance of work and whether autonomy is expected, granted or punished (Caiado et al., 2024; Lee, 2025). The role of recognition and feedback is a closely related one, as it reinforces autonomy by making employees feel safer exercising their discretion in the future (Ulrych, 2021). Workload might also be a contributing factor (Nabi, 2025), but autonomy can act as compensation for high workload, when not restricted by structural or cultural context (Wei et al., 2025).

In modern work environment, innovation and employee empowerment are the new hot topics for organizations, and autonomy is considered an important factor for both sustainable organizational growth and employee well-being (Akhtar et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2023). Autonomy has several benefits, higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions (Qureshi et al., 2022), increased motivation (Khalid et al., 2020), improved performance, innovation and problem solving (Suhail & Steen, 2026), work engagement (Jaleel & Sarmad, 2024), and employee's psychological well-being, life satisfaction and resilience (Mushtaq et al., 2026). In Pakistani context, the context of autonomy has greater significance. With its diverse sectors and hierarchical structures, decision-making authority is centralized towards senior management which can affect employee autonomy (Baig et al., 2022). Alongside, the growth of globalization and modern management practices directs Pakistani organizations to employee centered approaches. As such, it is important to understand the cultural nuances of autonomy among Pakistani employees (Tariq et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework – Job Demands-Resource (JD-R) Model

All predicting factors can be understood by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2023), which bifurcates working conditions in two categories; job demands that require effort and incur psychological costs, and job resources that compensate for the loss incurred by the demands. As such, JD-R allows autonomy and its related factors to be examined at multiple levels in a singular, coherent framework, and most importantly, leaves the space for contextual grounding within Pakistan's specific culture.

Objectives

Despite the growing literature, researches remain skewed towards Western or East Asian contexts (Cho & Jung, 2025; Lee, 2025), with limited deep dive into South Asian or Pakistani contexts. Additionally, research is dominated by quantitative approaches (Alshammari & Ali, 2025), which produce generalizable findings but ignore subjective nuances, especially particular cultural contexts. Pakistan, with its diverse formal and informal workforce, distinct socioeconomic context and pronounced hierarchal appeal may operate under a different priority order of psychosocial factors or different mechanisms to the ones compared to Western countries (Ahmad et al., 2021). As such, the objective of the present study is to explore the psychosocial factors that predict job autonomy among Pakistani employees, and understand how these individuals experience autonomy within the workplace.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani employees conceptualize job autonomy in their workplace?
2. What psychosocial factors predict job autonomy among Pakistani employees?
3. What are the perceived consequences of job autonomy?

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design within a constructivist framework. The study aimed to gather a breadth of experiences to examine the Pakistani workforce's experiences and perception of job autonomy. As such, a semi-structured interview guide was constructed with open-ended questions to allow for participants' detailed experiences and perceptions. Additionally, basic demographic information was also collected.

Participants

A total of 15 participants were recruited via purposive sampling. Participants were drawn from multiple sectors; to generate a broad understanding of psychosocial predictors of autonomy across the Pakistani workforce. The inclusion criteria were full-time employees within formal organizational setting in Pakistan, with a minimum of 6 months of work experience. Participants represented a range of departments including finance, education, corporate and support staff, with 13 from the private sector. The sample included 4 male and 11 female participants, experience ranging from 1-32 years skewed towards the younger end.

Data Collection and Analysis

Based on participant preference and accessibility, interviews were conducted both face-to-face and through online video-conferencing, ranging in duration from 20-50 minutes. A bilingual format was used during the interviews and verbatim transcripts to maintain participant ease and linguistic integrity. Data was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA follows six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, after which codes were discussed and themes were generated by mutual discussion.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers maintained ethical standards throughout the research process. Prior to interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants, after explaining the study's purpose and their rights. Participants were assigned identifier codes P-x to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Recordings/transcripts were stored securely and accessible only by the research team.

Results

The following themes and subthemes were identified:

Table 1: Identified themes and supporting quotes

Organizing Theme	Themes and Subthemes	Verbatims
Conceptualization of Job Autonomy	Control Over Work	"When employees are-...given a certain criteria for everything, it's not autonomy" [P5]
	Task Execution Autonomy	"There should be freedom...Like people use different approaches to close deals" [P7]
	Initiative/ Creative Freedom	"I don't have to be answerable to anyone...until I am providing results" [P10]
	Client Management	"Final decision require approval. But I manage the daily activities myself" [P10] "Company has given us power... We don't have to take instructions from anyone" [P11]
	Scheduling Flexibility	"I decide my own schedule.... What work to do at what time" [P11]
	Work-time	"I don't have to work 9 to 5... until I am doing my assigned tasks" [P10]
	Breaks	"We have to take permission even for lunch or a short break" [P9]
	Day-offs	"If I arrive late in the morning, I can just do extra work in the evening" [P11]
	Burden of Autonomy	"It is important for a job holder to have certain responsibility on him/her" [P4]
	Accountability	"There is a written proof I have prepared... My coach knows what I'm doing" [P5]
	Ownership	"I am accountable for the results. That is autonomy for me" [P10]
	Responsibility	"If you leave them all on their own, they might ignore their responsibilities" [P15] "-give them decision power, they will take it as a responsibility and do good work" [P11] "Freedom should be granted, and the receiver shouldn't take it as rebelliousness" [P3]

Psychological Predictors of Autonomy	Capability	“If you want to change something in system, you need to know the system first” [P2] “First...how much experience you have, how much competency for that task” [P10]
	Competency	“They are quite confident, which is why they have freedom” [P9]
	Experience	“They do not have confidence... they are dependent on other people” [P7]
	Self-Efficacy	“For more experienced people-....they are given a lot of autonomy” [P15]
	Personality & Disposition	“Girl has to be independent... I prefer that I do (my work) on my own” [P7]
	Independence	“If I am extroverted and I like to put my case forward, it is easier for me to engage” [P10]
	Integrity	“We have taken a stand for ourselves... we do it without asking anyone” [P9]
	Coping Strategies	“I try take initiatives...make the process easier for my other colleagues” [P13]
		“Their willingness to learn... trust from the leadership” [P10]
		“-what little time is left, you have to spend it in your learning or own grooming” [P2]
		“I feel responsible for the outcome... I am more committed to achieve my targets” [P10]
		“I don’t think they have a personal vision. They’re not there to serve the kids....The vision is...I think that’s why we go the extra mile” [P5]
	Cultural Internalization	“When your upbringing is that, you have to shove everything down, you have to be obedient, you have to say yes to anything, everything” [P3]
	Obedience	“My friends and family have an effect on my career decisions” [P10]
	Emotional suppression	“There is a generational difference in Pakistani culture... today’s youth does not perceive decision making like before” [P10]
	Bare-minimum norms	“They’ve just been directed from childhood what to do and what not to do” [P3]
		“People feel autonomous about their own work... when it’s about taking risks or challenges, they forget it and remember hierarchy” [P1]
	Perceived Work Structure	“The job is like so- there cannot be any creativity of yours in it” [P4]
	Job descriptions and tasks	“There is no better department than sales... you get results according to your work” [P7]
	Workload and Pace	“My role is fast-paced so every day is not the same, there are some days where the workload is high, some days are little light” [P10]
	Constitutional Structure & Bounded Autonomy	“We have to follow lesson plans, but we can make some changes in the activities” [P9]
		“We work according to the instructions given by the company” [P11]
		“For sure, we are given a deadline... but how I complete is totally my decision” [P12]
		“Let the employee work in their own way, there should be trust” [P3]
Social Predictors of Autonomy	Supervisor Relationship	“The most important...directors should have faith in their employees” [P11]
	Supervisory Style	“Its upto you... you have my support; I have your back” [P12]
	Supervisor Communication	“My management is more than open to hear that feedback and to work on that... Communication should be so much better... with the supervisor” [P4]
	Power distance/hierarchical orientation	“If you are micromanaged, you cannot bring the right talent... Instead of controlling every process...tell employees their weak areas” [P10]
		“Their seniors are quite rude, they pressurize the lower staff to work their way... and they do not have enough powers to challenge their seniors” [P9]

Consequences of Autonomy	Peer/Colleague Relationships	“There are very few companies in Pakistan, where they give full decision power” [P11]
	Collaboration & team-work	“Communication should be so much better... with your team” [P4]
	Peer Communication	“It’s basically a collaborative decision” [P10]
	Peer recognition and support	“We all three teachers discuss and decide, how we will carry the lesson” [P12]
		“No one minds if you help another team... everyone helps out without any greed” [P7]
		“Whenever I’ve asked any fellow for help, they’ve always taken time out of their busy schedules... encourage me and... share their ideas. They provide a lot of guidance” [P5]
	Consumer Relationships	“My students encourage me to be more creative by not engaging with them at regular times” [P5]
	Consumer as constraint	“There are some people who have had certain dealings in the past... they expect that we will also deal with them in that way, and we have to take precautions against it” [P7]
	Consumer validation	“So many opportunities are not given to women, just because they are women and they have other responsibilities at home” [P2]
	Gendered Constraints	“Girls have to do it themselves, define their own boundaries...” [P4]
	Employee Outcomes	“Our department gives girls a lot of respect and safety-... Like I am a female, the only one on my staff, so they give me a lot of relaxation” [P6]
	Motivation & engagement	“When you have freedom, you do your work without pressure...and perform well” [P11]
	Creativity & innovation	“If there is autonomy, then engagement in the work is also increased” [P9]
	Personal meaning & professional development	“Being creative is what I think is what can drive towards betterment” [P3]
	Wellbeing & mental health	“If you can work as you like, you would want to give the organization your 110%” [P4]
		“We are encouraged to plan differently...make the learning environment more fun” [P5]
		“I end up finished my work before time...” [P12]
		“If you add an element of micromanagement in it...it becomes unbearable” [P4]
		“In that situation, the person works extra hard...and even gives extra hours for the betterment of the company” [P11]
		“When you are given freedom by the company, you have peace of mind” [P11]
	Organizational Outcomes	“-I have experienced it and the stress, I am so bad at my work then” [P3]
	Performance/achievement	“Where you don’t have even this little freedom... you get depressed very easily and you cannot work like that...you will get exhausted by that job...and leave the job” [P4]
	Turnover	“They become very robotic when they don’t have any kind of autonomy” [P5]
	Social disruption	“When there is no freedom, and you have to take approval on every little thing, there is a lot of pressure and stress...if I don’t get autonomy, I will feel very frustrated” [P13]
		“If freedom is not given, employees do not develop self-belief... their performance won’t be good...they will only work for salary, and they will not care about the company’s benefit or loss” [P11]

Discussion

The study explored three central threads of inquiry, namely how autonomy is defined and perceived, what are the psychosocial factors that shape it, and the associated outcomes.

Conceptualization of Job Autonomy

Employees' ideas of job autonomy combined on a multidimensional account, defining autonomy in terms of control over work, scheduling flexibility, and most interestingly, the burden attached to the freedom. This approach extends traditional conceptualizations of job autonomy in organizational psychology literature. Participants' reports of autonomy in terms of control over their work and time flexibility mirrors traditionally defined job autonomy, as outlined by the self-determination theory, as a volition and choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and as a resource that affects employee well-being and performance (Deci et al., 2017).

One new pattern was framing autonomy as ownership of the work, differing from the resource-centered framing of the self-determination theory. This may be grounded in Pakistan's power-distant culture, where employees defer to authority to work inside narrow boundaries (Kirkman et al., 2009). Against this, being 'allowed' autonomy may carry symbolic weight, i.e., not a default, rather an exception, a favor or a luxury granted by the authority. Therefore, the favor must be maintained by accountability as an adequate social exchange, or it may be revoked (Blau, 1964). Participants also brought up 'too much autonomy' as non-disciplinary, that autonomy without proper scaffolding can shadow its pros (Mehmood et al., 2026). This strain reflects emerging literature on the dark side of job autonomy leading to stress and burnout (Kubicek et al., 2017), reinforcing the importance of attending to cultural reality of autonomy being simultaneously a resource and a demand.

Psychological Predictors of Autonomy

At the psychological level, autonomy was credited as a function of internal resources such as capability and personality. This individual-level focus aligns with the person-environment fit theory, that congruence between individual preferences and work environment is a determinant of work outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and that proactive behaviors (such as dispositional independence and integrity) are a pre-requisite to effectively exercising autonomy (Doblinger, 2023). Culture was brought up as a background factor, where patterns of obedience and suppression are developed from a young age (Zaman, 2013). These internalized cultural schemas shape employee's orientations in the South Asian workforce, like self-imposed chains to autonomous actions (Ayman et al., 2000; Ranautta et al., 2026). This can be seen in passive coping strategies (compliance or deference), a function of Pakistan's collectivistic culture (Aka, 2023). Super's (1980) life-space theory of career development is relevant here, which posits career attitudes (e.g., autonomy) as outcomes of experiences across an individual's life roles and not just inherently fixed qualities, thus having implications for career counselling and addressing cultural nuances on autonomy.

An organizational factor overlapping here was the perceived nature of the job, how much job design, workload and policy were seen as practical constraints that bound the realistic execution of autonomy. This is in line with the concept of tied autonomy, where formal work discretion is restricted by a number of relational and organizational procedures even if broader latitude exists

(Vaananen & Toivanen, 2018), i.e., structure functions as a precursor to the development of autonomy (Hernaus et al., 2025). Notably, participants did not necessarily perceive the limits as wrong, but a rational and even important feature of work design, implying that procedurally justified limitations are acceptable.

Social Predictors of Autonomy

Social factors included predictors of an interpersonal nature, where the most consistent predictor was the role of supervisor, i.e., participants working within a cooperative, trustworthy, friendly relationship with higher-ups reported higher freedom and satisfaction. This aligns with the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, positing that high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships, embedded with mutual respect, trust and transparency, permit higher self-influence (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This is a particularly grounded finding in Pakistan's power-distant culture, which also emerged as a notable organizational constraint (Morrison et al., 2011). Participants shared how bureaucratic structures limit autonomy even with a cooperative supervisor (Jiang et al., 2026), but one participant reversed it, suggesting that a cooperative supervisor can compensate for red tape, in line with the resource substitution hypothesis (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

The supervisors' temperament plays a big role in driving the workplace culture and setting the precedent for collaborative peer relationships (Guohao et al., 2021; Tabassi et al., 2024). However, a two-sided dynamic emerges, that while collaboration, communication and recognition support autonomy, too much autonomy might lead to laziness/ exploitation, which impacts the whole dynamic and emerged as a constraint seldom discussed in Western research (Bakker et al., 2023). Consumer relationships was another layer, serving as both constraints and validation. Emotional labour literature provides similar conceptualization (Grandey & Melloy, 2017), but the dimension itself is not commonly theorized in JD-R literature and warrants theoretical attention, particularly in service economies.

Gender dynamics emerged as a relatively thin theme, a notable finding which may be reflecting a normalization of gender-based dynamics, rather than the absence of them (Khalil & Warner, 2025). Accounts included limited opportunities for women on assumption of domestic labour, reflecting patterns of discrimination in Pakistani workforce (Ahmed et al., 2025), or the burden of self-protective boundaries falling on the woman herself, reflecting the informality of safety procedures (Ali & Syed, 2016). On the opposite hand, one participant brought up extended accommodation by her male colleagues. This, however, may be consistent with Glick and Fiske's (1996) benevolent sexism, where paternalism presents a positive image, but reinforces women as needing special treatment rather than equal partners.

Consequences of Job Autonomy

Participants highlighted consequences at both the employee and organizational level. For employees, when given the freedom to make work decisions, it enhances productivity, motivation and engagement, as they feel a sense of ownership towards the work and hence, produce better outcomes. Alongside, autonomy improves problem solving and innovation, consistent with the componential theory that autonomy is an important precursor to creative output (Amabile & Pratt, 2016), as well as JD-R support for autonomy fueling employee motivation for innovative work behaviors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Additionally, autonomy

was linked with personal meaning and professional development as suggested by the self-determination theory's need for competence and growth (Deci et al. 2017), and strongly supports well-being (Sharma & Sharma, 2024).

Similarly, organizational-level outcomes were highlighted, and autonomy was linked with improved performance and productivity, both in terms of quality and quantity of the work completed (Humphrey et al., 2007), and turnover and social disruption as consequences for a lack of autonomy. Social disruption is particularly grounded, with its collectivistic workplaces where interdependence, team cohesion and harmony is valued (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2021). Collectively, we can say that the autonomy is not beneficial only when present, but the execution of the resource by the organization matters as well, and a balance is required for optimal benefit (Moe et al., 2021).

Job Demands-Resource Framework Theory

The findings can be explained via the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theoretical framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). JD-R splits work conditions into job demands that require effort and have costs, and job resources that buffer demands and facilitate growth. Traditionally within this framing, autonomy is a job resource with motivational value and acts as a buffer against the adverse effects of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). We propose a slightly distinct framing of autonomy, not as a freestanding resource, but a mediating one conditional to the existence of other demands and resources. Findings suggested that autonomy was most likely utilized in the presence of other resources such as supervisor trust, transparent communication, and supportive social climate. However, when demands such as rigid structure and low hierarchical trust were present, autonomy was subdued even if not formally restricted. Thus, autonomy is not a fixed job-characteristic, but an outcome enabled by a broader resource environment. This framing holds implications for organizational design and an argument for holistic work reform to provide supportive conditions for autonomy, especially indigenously where relational and structured constraints to autonomy are heavily pronounced.

Limitations and Suggestions

The use of qualitative design limits the generalizability of findings, and future work with longitudinal, mixed-method designs would better capture its developmental and dynamic nature. The sample was drawn from mid-level employees and skewed towards a younger, female demographic, and the themes may not fully represent the whole Pakistani workplace. Future research should employ larger diverse samples, drawing on cross-level, cross-sector or cross-generational comparisons to contribute more nuanced findings. Lastly, the reliance on self-report interview data opens the door for possible social desirability bias, and employees may have moderated their experiences/ opinions. Future work focusing on a multi-method approach by including observations or peer-reports may improve validity.

Implications

The findings highlight the importance of job autonomy in Pakistani workplace context. It highlights the dynamic nature of autonomy, as it is not only limited to decision making power but build upon complex psychosocial factors. It expands on traditional conceptualizations of job autonomy but incorporating cultural nuance in light of the JD-R model, thus making a significant

contribution to the literature corpus. It may provide guidance to organizations and managers, to provide a work environment where employees get trust and accountability, supportive leadership, and effective communication, so employees can fulfil their duties effectively and utilize their skills. The findings of the study may also be beneficial for HR professionals and policy makers, to inform policies that help maintain balance between autonomy and accountability.

Conclusion

Job autonomy is a multidimensional concept whose understanding and experience influenced by different interpersonal, individual and organizational factors in Pakistani workplace context. findings also reveal that a balanced autonomy enhance performance, productivity and well-being of employees whereas a restricted autonomy cause stress, turnover, frustration and poor performance. Collectively, this study is an important foundation to understand autonomy in Pakistani workplaces and to develop effective workplace practices.

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