The Relationship Between Ethical Climate and Pro-Social Silence

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Abstract. Based on the theories of organizational climate and employee silence, this paper studies the relationship between the organization climate and all variables of social silence, large number of studies have shown that pro-social silence is influenced by organizational ethical climate. We find that caring climate, law and code climate, rule climate and independence climate are positively associated with pro-social silence; instrumental climate is negatively associated with pro-social silence; at the same time, a high degree of obedience to authority will strengthen the rules climate and pro-social silence positive correlation.

1. Introduction

As the increasingly fierce competition between enterprises, unethical behavior occurs all the time while the enterprises seeking for lower cost and higher profits. Such behavior brought serious harm to the society and the enterprise itself. The unethical enterprises will eventually pay for their unethical behavior. If someone would report those unethical behaviors bravey then this kind of tragedy will be reduced, but why do employees keep silence about the unethical behavior in business, it worths our consideration.

Morrison and Milliken defined organizational silence as a collective phenomenon, which refers to the behavior of employees to keep personal opinion of the organization's potential problem, based on the framework of Pinder, according to the intrinsic motivation of employees to keep silent, Dyne seperated the silence into acquiescent silence, defensive silence and pro-social silence.

An organizational work climate is defined as the shared program, policy and practice view, formal and informal organization.

The ethical philosophy dimension includes three criteria: egoism, benevolence, and principle. Egoism refers to behavior that is concerned chiefly with self-interest. Benevolence is similar to utilitarianism, in that decisions and actions are taken to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Principle is similar to deontology, in that decisions are made and actions are taken in accordance with laws, rules, codes, and procedures. These three ethical criteria compose the ethical philosophy dimension of the ECT framework.

The sociological theory dimension also includes three loci: individual, local, and cosmopolitan. They refer to individuals making decisions based on their own personal beliefs and values, the organization itself, and the community or society external to the organization.

The intersections of these two theoretical dimensions of ethical climate result in nine theoretical climate types (see Figure 1): self-interest, company profit, efficiency, friendship, team interest, social responsibility, personal morality, company rules and procedures, and laws and professional codes.

Victor and Cullen’s (1988) pioneered the organizational ethical climate study. A widely cited definition of the authors on ethical work climate is “the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content constitute the ethical work climate”. Their theoretical framework revealed five dimensions of ethical climate as a result of the factor analysis in their study: instrumental, caring, independence, rules, law and code.

The pursuit of higher ethical standards can not only shape organizational image, but also improve organizational performance and even achieve organizational core competencies.
Employee silence and organizational climate theory can make some explanation for the staff’s unreport behavior, but the research about connection between the employee silence and the organization climate is very few, this is the reason why we write this paper.

Figure 1. Theoretical climate types [28].

1.1 Pro-social silence

Pro-social Silence: withholding confidential information based on cooperation to protect proprietary knowledge for the benefit of the organization [19].

1.2 Caring climate

Victor and Cullen (1990) provided that employees’ “major consideration is what is best for everyone in the organization” in the climate of caring. A caring climate is defined in this paper as the extent to which individuals perceive a particular setting to be interpersonally inviting, safe, supportive and capable of providing the experience of being valued and respected [20]. Individuals immersed in a caring climate perceive the organization as having norms that encourage ethical decision-making underpinned primarily by the notion of benevolence [17]. In the research of Anon Armstrong and Ronald Francis (2011), they found that “those whose decisions were influenced by caring for the well-being of others, were influenced by friendship, identifying with the team and at a societal level, were supporters of social responsibility issues”. In this atmosphere, individuals perceive that decisions should be made in accordance with concerns for the well-being of others in the organization or the community in general.

From those definitions of caring climate, we can conclude that this climate focuses on “other-oriented”, that means in this atmosphere, the employees will take more care about the interest of others in the organization.

Linn Van Dyne, Soon Ang and Isabel C. Botero (2003) proposed a figure about “employee motives as critical characteristics of silence and voice”, and they came up with the employees’ pro-social silence due to other-oriented (cooperation). Scholars assumed that employees were proactive, then they would be oriented by others (cooperation), because this reason, employees will make pro-social silence to protect the interest of organization.

In addition, a warm, friendly, supportive, and cooperative climate—that is, a pro-social climate probably induces individuals to behave more pro-socially [3]. Caring has been cited as a strong motive for pro-social behavior.

2. The Relationship Between the Organization Climate and all Variables of Social Silence

Caring climate leads to other-oriented, and other-oriented leads to pro-social silence. As a result of the discussions given above, the following proposition can be stated:

\[ P_1: \text{There is a positive relationship between caring climate and pro-social silence.} \]
2.1 Law and code Climate

Law and code climates are associated with the principle construct and the cosmopolitan locus of analysis [1]. When a law and code climate is the most dominate climate in an organization, employees make decisions based on external codes to the organization such as the law, the bible, the religious codes, or standards set forth by a profession [28]. A Law and code climate would require employees to obey the codes and regulations of their profession or government. Individual who is in a professional association, just like Lawyers Association, Psychological Associations, would be consider the following professional codes in order not to break the codes in the professional association or lose respect for his or her organization.

Wimbush, Shepard and Markham (1997) corroborated the earlier model and found that ethical climate dimensions were related to ethical behavior, and they asserted employees in workplace characterized by law and code dimension was more likely to behave ethically. Law and code were associated with ethical behavior, law and code dimensions are in the highest proportion and it would be associated with ethical behavior [11]. Tsai and Huang (2008) asserted that benevolent climates and principled climates (i.e., caring, independence, rules, and law and code) had a positive association with work. The essential theme emerging from this stream of research is that benevolent and principled climates are the climates associated with positive outcomes [26]. It is no doubt that law and code climate was negatively associated with unethical behaviors.

Prosocial silence is based on prosocial motives, and procial silence is proactive, other-oriented, altruism and cooperation [10]. Generally, prosocial silence has unethical issues, but it also has ethical issues. The unethical issues of prosocial silence are about ethical or equity issues, such as unprofessional behavior and discrimination [23]. Fletcher & Watson (2007) asserted that ethical issues of prosocial silence are the positive function in the organizations, such as protect confidential information and other’s privacy. In the paper, we just study the part of ethical prosocial silence, and the relationship between law and code and ethical prosocial silence. The ethical issues of prosocial silence, we can regard it as ethical behavior.

We could find that law and code climate was positively associated with prosocial silence. Because we just discuss the ethical prosocial silence. If the law and code climate is the most dominate climate in an organization, the members may consider their acts binding by a social, legal, or moral and they would like to do some ethical prosocial silence. They focus on the other-oriented, and do not divulge confidential information and protect other’s privacy. Therefore, we can conclude a logically valid proposition as follow.

\[ P_2: \text{Law and code climate was positively associated with prosocial silence.} \]

2.2 Independence climate

Independence climate indicates that the individual is encouraged to make decisions based upon his or her own personal moral code. Individuals are free to make decisions based upon an individualized set of principles unique to the person and with little consideration of external forces or outside influence [17]. Individual principles are assumed to have been derived through considerable thought and introspection [25], and individuals are presumed to have set of individual moral convictions in line with Kohlberg’s (1969) notion of post-conventional level of moral development.

Many researchers found that independence climate have a profound influence with individual behavior and moral orientation, at home and abroad. A researcher named Renwei Zhang from Taiwan, ever have a research of securities marketing personnel, he found that employee would be higher self-discipline, the possibility of doing something that do not conform to the organization behavior rules will be reduced, in independence climate (2004). Winbush (1997) have a research of 525 sale store employees, which found that independence climate was negatively associated with employee theft, deception, and was contrary to the procedures of the articles of association, and these unethical practices. Yingjun Zhu (2011), in the study of organization ethical climate, found that if organizational ethical climate was given priority to with independent oriented atmosphere, then employees would be easier get information ethical behavior. A useful mechanism for
illustrating how the dimensions differ with respect to decision-making and behavior is to use an example given by Cullen et al. (1989: 59). In the example, a friend offers a stockbroker illegally acquired insider information. This is both illegal and unethical. But, the broker must decide whether or not to use the information. According to the concept of ethical climate, the broker working in a firm that reflects “caring” and “independence” dimensions of ethical climate would probably counsel the friend to stop such activities. A permanent halt would be demanded because the ethical theory upon which these dimensions are based promotes consideration of the impact an ethical decision has on all people affected by the action. This would reflect in the workplace norms, policies, and practices which would emphasize a high regard for the interests of the firm’s constituents. Thus, the broker would find her friend’s behavior objectionable. So, we can know that in the influence of independence climate, individual ethical behavior would be improved. Workforce engagement with organization will be improved. For other’s benefit, they will keep relevant information and opinions, will not reveal the company or others information.

On the basis, we get the hypothesis:

\( P_3: \) Independence climate is positively associated with pro-social silence.

2.3 Instrumental climate

About Instrumental Climate, it has been defined firstly since 1988. Victor said “put forward five different ethical climate include instrumental climate.” [28]. Two years later, in 1990, Wimbush mentioned that “instrumental climate that base on egoism lead to unethical behavior.” So the author thinks that source of instrumental climate in egoism from people’s value in the same organization.

In addition, Wimbush and Shepard raised an objection that “in an ethical climate based on the ‘instrumental’ dimension, organizational members look out for their own self-interest, first and foremost, to the exclusion of the interest of others who may be affected (even adversely) by their decisions. Even on occasion when it might appear that the egoist is caking the interest of others into account, this could actually be only a short-term means to attain the long-term end of satisfying his or her own exclusive self-interest.” [30]. Instrumental, corresponding to the degree to which employees look out for their own self-interest. [6]

Instrumental climates are associated with the egoism construct and the individual and local loci of analysis. As such, employees operating in instrumental climates tend to see their organizational unit as having norms and expectations that encourage ethical decision making from an egoistic perspective. Behavior that promotes self-interest is the norm even to the possible detriment of others. [1]

Based on the above evidence, the author thinks instrumental climate is self-interest of organizations. To maximize his/her own benefit is the basic purpose serving the department.

“Egoistic climates are primarily based upon the maximization of self-interest. The decision-maker usually seeks the alternative with the consequences that most satisfies his/her needs, ignoring the needs or interests of others. Egoism postulated that one should choose those actions that result in the maximum of good for oneself”, “maximized one’s own interests to the extent of disregarding the well-being of other people”, “a climate that is more instrumental encourages egoism in employees” [10].

“Undesirable climates, reflecting an instrumental climate associated with egoism, were related to staff turnover, absenteeism, stealing, lying, falsifying reports and accepting gifts. Desirable ethical climates were related to various factors including the commitment to the organization, quality of working life and performance.”

“This results in being too strongly wedded to one’s goals. In business, the goals are likely to be exclusively profit and competitive advantage. Board decisions in such a climate would be based on serving the organization’s interests or providing personal benefits.”

“A climate reflecting egoism, labeled instrumental, was characterized at the individual level by self interest and put instrumental values such as profits before anything else.

As detachment is similar to egoism, a paper mentioned that, “‘detachment’ is the inability to acknowledge or embrace the larger scheme of social and ethical values which ought to be expressed
in one’s decision making. This results in being too strongly wedded to one’s goals. In business, the goals are likely to be exclusively profit and competitive advantage. Board decisions in such a climate would be based on serving the organization’s interests or providing personal benefits.” [2]

Because pro-social silence is based on helping others, protecting others or organization’s benefits, without concerning self-interest, this is the opposite of the egoism context. It means that, instrumental climate is negatively related to pro-social silence. Furthermore, this is confirmed by recent research that suggests that more unethical environments (egoist ethical climates) are negatively related to pro-social behaviors such as helping others, and positively related to deviant behaviors such as bullying and organizational misconduct [17].

**P: Instrumental climate is negatively related to pro-social silence.**

### 2.4 Rules climate

Organizations featuring rules climates have a strict focus on following formal organizational policies and procedures [5]. In this environment, adherence to local rules and codes of conduct is the overarching norm in the organization [4]. Although regular climates have been shown to curb deviant behaviour, such as bullying or common rule breaking [7]. Right and wrong are defined strictly by the rules of the organization. Normative pressures resultant from rules climate makes breaking organizational rules, even with good intentions, unthinkable. [15] According to the literatures we know the rules climate have right or wrong different, then this paper we set the rule climate are right and ethical. So we think a right rule climate can effectively regulate the organization, so that employees comply with the rules. Eventually be able to effectively prevent the occurrence of deviant behavior.

When the pro-social silence are ethical behavior it may also have a chilling effect on rule breaking that is well-intended. Organization members embedded in organizations featuring a rules climate will likely be reluctant to break rules even in situations where rule breaking would be beneficial for the organization. [15]

**P \_5a:** Rules climate is positive associated with Pro-social Silence.

### 2.5 Obedience to authority

Obedience is an important aspect of social life and it plays a key role in maintaining social order and stability, which serves the purpose of either maintaining group norms (social control) or changing group norms (social change) [27]. Thus, every type of collective life is based on a system of authority, which can be more or less institutionalized or hierarchicalized. Some levels of responsibility and obedience to authority are essential for the existence of every social community [8]. According to previous studies, we believe that obedience to authority not only apply to society level but also are apply to the organizational level.

The legitimacy of the authority largely depends on the identification with ingroup norms, goals and values. Kelman (2006) proposed a model that people feel obliged at different levels to behave as demanded by the authority, depending on what they base the authority relationship on: i.e. rules, roles or values. The most important step is set rules and laws defining obedience and disobedience are established and a system of sanctions is provided. So, when a legitimate authority issues a legitimate and acceptable demand, all three types of citizens are inclined to obey.

Moral inclusion and social responsibility contribute to distinguish between what we can define as anti-social (destructive) and pro-social (constructive) disobedience. Disobedience becomes pro-social when it is enacted for the sake of the whole society, including all its different levels and groups. Pro-social disobedience promotes social change addressed to everyone. Pro-social disobedience promotes a social change addressed to society as a whole [27]. So, we can understand pro-social disobedience is ethical pro-social behavior. Pro-social silence is also ethical behavior. The two ethical prosocial behaviors have the purpose of safeguarding the interests of organizations.

**P \_5b:** A high degree of Obedience to Authority will strengthen the Rules climate and Pro-social Silence positive correlation.
3. Conclusion

A large body of research indicates that pro-social silence is largely influenced by ethical climate. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between ethical climate and pro-social silence. Overall, the findings as following: caring climate, law and code climate, rule climate and independence climate are positively associated with pro-social silence; instrumental climate is negatively associated with pro-social silence; at the same time, a high degree of obedience to authority will strengthen the rules climate and pro-social silence positive correlation.

This result reveals that it will strength the caring climate, law and code climate, rule climate and independence climate, when the organization want to encourage pro-social silence; besides reducing the instrumental climate in the organization.

Some scholars state that pro-social silence is for withholding confidential information based on cooperation and protecting proprietary knowledge to benefit the organization [19], They believe that this is a positive factor in organizations and societies, but there are also negative aspects of Pro social reticence, for example, the energy magnate - Enron. Many employees have been aware of organized financial crimes, but they remain silent about the profits of the organization. So we should push organization climate in a positive direction.

As pro-social silence this definition is not long, the research of past to pro-social behavior and pro-social silence is not a lot, then we are on the basis of combining the predecessors’ research giving a clear definition of pro-social silence, and make contributions to the research of pro-social silence. Homologous, the study of relationship between pro-social silence and ethical climate is more of less, our research has made up this blank, we collated and summarized the related literature, inference that the influence of ethical climate on pro-social silence, give our view about the relationship between them.

Studies have shown that culture is an important factor to affect the employees to express their views or to remain silent. In Chinese culture, human’s feelings and face are very important, so different cultural or national staff remain silent are not the same, the influence degree of the ethical climate for pro-social silence is different, so organize cross-cultural studies of silence is very necessary.

4. Limitations

The paper is based on literature and valid deduction as a consequence. We conclude the relationship between the ethical climate and prosocial silence. It is a logical argument, but lack of figures. It involves many complicated and difficult questions both of theory and practice, and they cannot be answered merely by quoting from books by our predecessors. If the figures support the proposition, it would be more scientific, objective, complete and accurate to prove the relationship between the ethical climate and prosocial silence.

There are few scholars and literatures about procial silence, because it is a comparative flesh concept. So there is certain limitation in the paper. The other side is seen in the following, we choose the positive aspects of procial silence to study and ignore the negative about procial silence. We may continue to study the question about the relationship between ethical climate and unethical prosocial silence.

References


