

Ethical Work Climates: Comparing Top Managers in Public and Private Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study of sector differences related to ethical work climates, an emerging research area of organizational ethics. A national sample was conducted of top managers from three different regions of the United States, using ethical measures from previous ethical climate research. The analysis indicates that public managers generally perceive the ethical climates of their organizations less favorably than do their private sector counterparts.

As we approach our passage to the twenty-first century, John Rohr asks us to appreciate the demands of group morality—taking care of our own first—while not abdicating the more universal character of morality. He asks that we not take ourselves or our politicians too seriously and remain true to the principles and values at the heart of a civilized and constitutional community. An ancient tension is revealed in the Rohr perspective, a tension between universalism and relativism, between morality as social contract of communities and morality as grounded in more absolute values and principles. A successful transition to the next century and a cooperative global community will surely involve finding an acceptable balancing, if not a resolution, of these perspectives and tensions.

Another tension exists between the view that moral and ethical behavior in organizations is a function of individual choices, values, and characteristics and the view that organizational characteristics and environments are critical factors that influence individual choices and behavior. The research reported in this article explores one of the organizational factors that is

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thought to be important for the creating of more-ethical organizations and the fostering of more-ethical behavior among members of organizations in the next century, namely ethical climates of organizations.

BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The study of ethical work climates—their dimensions and their impact on behaviors and organizational outcomes—is an emerging area in organizational ethics. Such study recognizes that ethical behavior is a function of organizational issues and managerial practices as much as it is a function of personal values. As evidence, the new federal sentencing guidelines reflect a recognition of the importance of organizational and management influences by their linking of corporate fines to organization design and management practices—in part at least, the ethical climate of the organization. Strategies for creating ethical climates are now being advocated and implemented (Paine 1994).

Theoretical and empirical research in organizational ethics have recognized that both individual and environmental factors affect ethical behavior (Jones 1991). One recent area of research has focused on ethical climate as a critical variable in understanding organizational ethics.

Conceptualizing Ethical Climate

Ethical climate has been developed as an organizational construct. Both the conceptual and empirical research on ethical work climates have been most fully developed by Victor and Cullen (1987 and 1988). They conceive of ethical climate as the "shared perceptions of what is ethically correct behavior and how ethical issues should be handled . . ." (Victor and Cullen 1987, 52).

Ethical work climate is an extension of two related concepts—work climates and organizational culture. Organizational culture can be thought of as shared beliefs, values, customs, and traditions of an organization. Linking ethical climate to organizational culture, Victor and Cullen (1988, 103) conceive of ethical climate as "the ethical dimensions of organizational culture." Victor and Cullen follow the work of Schneider (1975 and 1983) by conceiving of work climates as aggregate perceptions of the practices and procedures of organizations. So, ethical climate is the shared perceptions of the ethical aspects of an organization's culture.

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Ethical work climates reflect organizational culture but focus more specifically on the moral atmosphere of the organization. For example, is there an atmosphere or climate to protect the organization at all costs? Does the climate encourage individuals to look out for their own interests above all else? Does the climate promote professional norms or support autonomous personal norms and beliefs?

Previous research has shown that work climates are related to various outcomes and behaviors in organizations, for example, job performance and satisfaction (Pritchard and Karasick 1973) or research and development innovation (Abbey and Dickson 1983). On the other hand, various factors also can influence ethical work climates themselves. Utilizing Robert Merton's theory of social structure and anomie, Cohen (1993) considered the factors that produce an anomic organizational culture and hence a climate unsupportive of ethical conduct. According to Cohen, these factors include leadership, structure, institutional policies, incentive systems, socialization, decision-making processes, and informal organizational systems.

Measuring Ethical Climates

Victor and Cullen (1987) developed an ethical climate typology in terms of the level of analysis (individual, local, and cosmopolitan) and in terms of the type of criteria used to guide ethical decisions (egoistic, utilitarian, and principled). This yielded a matrix of nine elements of ethical climate. Their conception is a melding of Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development and types of normative decision-making frameworks. For example, when the level of analysis is local (work organization) and the criteria is egoistic, the ethical climate dimension can be characterized as *company interest*. When the level of analysis is cosmopolitan (universal) and the criteria is principled, the dimension can be characterized as *law or professional code*.

Victor and Cullen (1987) subjected their theoretical typology to empirical testing in order to identify the dimensions of ethical climate. This study produced six ethical dimensions: professionalism, caring, rules, instrumentalism, efficiency, and independence. A later study (Victor and Cullen 1988) reduced the dimensions to five: caring, law and code, rules, instrumental, and independence. In this revision, efficiency was folded into the instrumental dimension and professionalism was included in law and code. Victor and Cullen found empirical support that organizations do have distinct profiles in terms of these ethical climate dimensions. Moreover, their findings show that there is variance

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by kind of firm as well as differences within organizations by position, tenure, and workgroup. One of the unexplored variables that may be related to work climate is sector, the object of this study.

Public-Private Differences and Ethical Work Climates

A growing body of research has examined the similarities and differences between public and private organizations. In a summary of this literature, Perry and Rainey (1988, 198) concluded that "the public-private distinction is a significant area of organizational research that needs further analysis."

Differences have been studied at both the individual and organizational level. Empirical studies have found differences in employee attitudes and values (e.g., Buchanan 1974 and 1975; Rainey 1983; Solomon 1986; Wittmer 1991). Differences have also been explored in terms of decision-making processes (Coursey and Bozeman 1990), task and work context (Lau, Pavett, and Newman 1980), management information systems (Bretschneider 1990), diffusion of technology (Bretschneider and Wittmer 1993), and organizational structure and bureaucracy (e.g., Hood and Dunshire 1981; Meyer 1979).

Bowman (1976) conducted one of the few comparative studies by sector in managerial and organizational ethics. He found that private and public managers were similar in terms of perceived pressure to compromise personal standards, but they were different in terms of what constitutes ethical issues (e.g., illegal business campaign contributions, racial discrimination, and the production of military weapons). The research reported here is another piece in this public-private puzzle, a piece that has not been studied previously.

While there is no well-accepted theory to ground sector differences, there has been an abiding belief, at least since Paul Appleby, that public officials and public organizations are different by virtue of "a special degree of public responsibility" and in terms of "promoting and protecting the public interest" (Shafritz and Hyde 1987, 161-62). If this belief is true, one might expect a more favorable ethical climate among public organizations. Because of such moral commitment to the public, one might expect a more caring professional climate, emphasizing integrity and public service, than one would see in private sector counterparts. On the other hand, if government organizations are more rigid and bureaucratic, and if employees and managers have no special commitment to the public, one might expect less favorable ethical climates. Accordingly, one might expect public

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organizations to be less caring, more protective of personal interest, and less professional. We shall explore which of these profiles is most descriptive by examining top-level managers in business and government organizations.

METHOD

Data Collection

Data for this study are derived from the National Administrative Studies Project (NASP), a research consortium including participants at Syracuse University, Ohio State, University of Georgia, University of Denver, and Florida State. The purpose of NASP is to generate data for empirical studies on bureaucratization, formalization, red tape, and personnel systems in public and private organizations.

The most recent NASP project collected mail survey responses from top and middle managers who work in and around Syracuse, New York; Tallahassee, Florida; and Denver, Colorado. A top manager was defined as the chief executive of an agency, in the case of public managers. In the private and nonprofit samples, the local head of the company was considered to be the senior manager. If the organization was very large (more than five hundred employees), the immediate subordinates also were considered top managers. This was the first dataset concerning public and private differences that focused on broad managerial domains and used a sample frame beyond local organizations. Previous studies at the national level centered on particular organizational technologies such as MIS (e.g., Bretschneider 1990) or research management (e.g., Bozeman 1987). Studies across organizational tasks characteristically used local samples (e.g., Coursey and Bozeman 1990).

For this analysis, we examined the mail survey results from 432 top managers in and around Syracuse and Albany, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Tallahassee, Florida. Sample frames were obtained from various sources across the sites, but generally these sources consisted of state and local agency personnel directories and business license and chamber of commerce listings. The Tallahassee and Denver samples included nonprofit managers located through charitable agency listings from the United Way or state and local government social service contract awards. Organizations with less than ten full-time employees were dropped from the sample frame (confirmed by phone).

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The three sites were intentionally chosen for their geographic and business diversity. For example, Syracuse businesses are more likely to be in light manufacturing and declining industries. Tallahassee firms are more likely to be in the service industry with government clients. Denver, as a major metropolitan center, has a healthy mix of industrial types. Survey administration differed slightly across the sites. Tallahassee and Denver implementations used alert letters and sent second copies of the twelve-page survey to nonrespondents after four to six weeks. In Syracuse, alert letters were not used and second survey mailings were supplemented by phone call reminders. Exhibit 1 reports the sample size and return rates.

Measures

Survey items measuring ethical work climate were drawn from Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Questionnaire (1987 and 1988) and from Menzel (1991). Since the measures for ethical climate were a portion of a larger study on bureaucracy and administrative systems, only a limited number of survey questions could be used.

Following Victor and Cullen's scheme, at least one item was selected for each ethical dimension: caring, law and code, rules, instrumental, and independence. Multiple items for some dimensions were used to capture potential differences within dimensions. For example, for the instrumental dimension three items were used, since they focused separately on personal interest, organizational interest, and organizational costs. Three other items were used from a study of public sector managers (Menzel 1991). These items focused on the integrity of peers, the ethical example of supervisors, and the existence of serious ethical problems. The items, variable names, source, and related dimension are found in exhibit 2.

These measures of ethical climate were constructed to capture characteristics of the organization. The measures, then,

Exhibit 1 Response Rate by Site

	Denver	Syracuse	Tallahassee
Public	76 (30.2%)	109 (40.5%)	85 (63%)
Private	29 (20.6%)	83 (27.9%)	50 (35%)
Nonprofit	65 (44.8%)	—	36 (58%)

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Exhibit 2 Ethical Climate Items

Item	Variable	Source	Dimension
1 In this organization, each person is expected to follow their own personal and moral beliefs.	Personal	V and C	Independence
2 My supervisors set a good example of ethical behavior.	Supervisor	Menzel	
3 The people in my department demonstrate high standards of personal integrity.	Colleagues	Menzel	
4 People in this organization are expected to comply with the law and professional standards.	Law	V and C	Law and code
5 In this organization, people protect their own interests above all else.	Self	V and C	Instrumental (self)
6 There are serious ethical problems in my department.	Department	Menzel	
7 People are expected to do anything to further the organization's interests.	Org	V and C	Instrumental (org)
8 It is expected that you will always do what is right for the public you serve.	PubServ	V and C	Caring
9 A major consideration is what is best for everyone in the organization.	Communal	V and C	Caring
10 It is very important to follow the organization's rules and procedures here.	Rules	V and C	Rules
11 The major responsibility of people in this organization is to control costs.	Cost	V and C	Instrumental (efficiency)

are aggregated perceptions of the organization. Individuals were not asked to make ethical judgments, but rather to be observers of the organization and report their observations and experiences. Instructions in the survey read:

Recently, the topic of ethics in the workplace has been much in the news. The items below attempt to determine the general ethical climate in organizations, without respect to any particular person or situation. Please indicate

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the extent to which you agree with the following issues pertaining to ethical behaviors of employees in your organization.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale, from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

The measurement of ethical climate is perceptual, although individuals were asked to identify features of the organization's climate or atmosphere, not their personal or subjective attitudes. Nevertheless, this measurement strategy ran the risk of capturing more individual attitudes than objective features of the organization. For example, subjects may have responded to a lack of personal control, frustration with elected officials, or constraint by bureaucratic rules and procedures. However, by aggregating perceptions it was hoped that a more general and objective characterization of the organization would result.

Analysis

The primary research question involves two variables, ethical climate and publicness. For this analysis, publicness was measured by legal ownership, a traditional approach. Ethical climate was measured by using eleven Likert items derived from previous instruments, as discussed above.

Mann-Whitney U tests, a nonparametric statistic similar to a t-test, was used to evaluate differences between the public and private top managers (exhibit 3). Eight of the eleven tests produced statistically significant differences ($p < .05$). Perhaps surprisingly, in every case but the *cost* variable, private managers perceived the ethical climate more favorably.

One plausible alternative explanation for this result is the type of organizations surveyed. We might expect from the literature, for example, that service firms would have better ethical climates. One reason for sampling over the three geographical areas was to include a wide mix of organizational functions, particularly among businesses. For example, Florida State's business sample was much more service oriented and included firms with greater government interaction (common for state capitals) than did the sample from Syracuse, where manufacturing is more prevalent.

A simple test for whether the result may be an artifact of the types of businesses compared to public operations can be made by examining whether these results appear stable across the three sites. Exhibit 4 displays means for each sector by site. In the

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**Exhibit 3
Sector Differences on Ethical Climate Items
Mann-Whitney U Tests^a**

Variable	Public ^b	Private	P-Value
Personal	3.02	2.56	.0020
Supervisor	1.98	1.76	.0060
Colleagues	1.84	1.54	.0001
Law	1.33	1.18	.0029
Self ^c	3.39	3.76	.0002
Department ^c	4.32	4.68	.0001
Org ^c	4.20	4.18	.3588
PubServ	1.76	1.80	.8500
Communal	2.61	2.00	.0001
Rules	2.20	2.17	.6145
Cost	3.41	3.06	.0328

^aSample size 260-266 for public and 159-160 for private, except last four items, which were not collected at Syracuse. Sample sizes for these items 155-166 public and 77 private.

^bMeans presented to explicate results, although they are not used in Mann-Whitney calculations.

^cReverse scaled items, i.e., higher values indicate more favorable ethical climate.

**Exhibit 4
Ethical Climate Items for Public and Private Managers by Site**

Item	Syracuse		Tallahassee		Denver		Overall	
	Pub	Priv	Pub	Priv	Pub	Priv	Pub	Priv
Personal	3.10	2.58	3.06	2.63	2.86	2.39	3.02	2.56
Supervisor	2.03	2.01	2.01	1.43	1.88	1.61	1.98	1.76
Colleagues	1.88	1.72	1.81	1.41	1.83	1.21	1.84	1.54
Law	1.36	1.29	1.33	1.06	1.28	1.04	1.33	1.18
Self	3.36	3.61	3.32	3.89	3.50	3.96	3.39	3.76
Department	4.47	4.63	4.23	4.73	4.21	4.79	4.32	4.68
Org	4.16	4.06	4.18	4.26	4.26	4.39	4.20	4.18
PubServ	—	—	1.80	1.90	1.71	1.64	1.76	1.80
Communal	—	—	2.52	2.00	2.71	2.00	2.61	2.00
Rules	—	—	2.16	2.06	2.24	2.36	2.20	2.17
Cost	—	—	3.64	3.12	3.17	2.96	3.41	3.06

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seven items collected, the differences between private managers and public managers were sustained across each of the sites. This strongly suggests the results are not an artifact of the types of businesses included in the sample and that the basic findings are reproducible across a variety of geographical and cultural areas.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of this data shows that generally public managers perceive the ethical climates of their organizations less favorably than do private sector managers. Public managers perceive less support for independence in following personal moral beliefs, lower expectations to follow professional and legal standards, less emphasis on caring about the welfare of everyone in the organization, and more emphasis on individuals protecting their own interests. Moreover, the analysis shows that public managers are less likely to think that their supervisors set good examples of ethical behavior, less likely to perceive that their colleagues exhibit high standards of integrity, and more likely to believe that their departments have serious ethical problems.

It is perhaps not surprising that private managers perceive the organizational climate as more instrumentally efficient (i.e., promoting responsibility to control organizational costs). There was no significant difference in terms of furthering the organization's interests at all costs, nor was there any difference in expectations of doing what is right for the public, a measure of caring and public service orientation.

While great caution should perhaps be advised in taking these findings too seriously, these results are at least reason for concern, if not consternation, for public sector administrators. How are we to account for these differences? Assuming the findings are valid, what strategies can be employed to improve environments in public organizations?

As we have discussed earlier, one possible explanation for these findings is the type of business sampled or the particular region sampled. However, the consistency across regions and the fact that businesses sampled represent a cross section of services and manufacturing lend support to the stability of the findings. On the other hand, most of the managers sampled were state government officials, and thus the findings may not be generalizable to local or federal managers. Assuming the perceptions do measure climate differences by sector, public organizations are still in need of attention when it comes to ethical dimensions, in spite of the attention given to ethics in recent years.

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Competitive market pressures may be thought to affect negatively the ethical climates of business organizations. In the case of these public organizations, one may wonder whether there is an analogue in the current political environment. Public funding and public budgets have been under attack, perhaps negatively impacting the ethical climates of these organizations. For example, in 1992 Colorado citizens passed Amendment 1, a strong tax limitation measure. Data for this study was collected in Colorado over the year following passage of this amendment. New York State also experienced severe budget strains during this period, which ultimately led to the defeat in 1994 of a strong incumbent governor, Mario Cuomo. Such pressures may influence the perceptions of these public managers. John Rohr relates an example of the Chicago Housing Authority chairman calling for warrantless searches to deal with gang and violence problems. Pressures of various sorts can produce compromises on some of our most fundamental values. Of course, whether such extreme measures would improve or diminish the ethical climate of those organizations is an open question.

Organizational form and structure also may be a factor that affects these findings. Bureaucracy, formalization, and size also may be strong predictor variables that account for these findings.

Another possible explanation, more encouraging for the public sector, is that public managers simply may be more sensitive and concerned about the ethical dimensions of their organizations. Because these are perceptual measures, it may be that public managers are more negative precisely because they are more sensitive and attuned to the ethical dimensions. The expectations and standards of public managers may be higher, and therefore their perceptions may be lower than those of private sector managers. On the other hand, private sector managers may be more oblivious and less sensitive and have lower standards and expectations about these ethical dimensions. This suggests that a more complete analysis might determine the standards and expectations and then some measure of relative success in achieving these standards.

As Rohr suggests in his keynote address, the expectations of public officials (elected and career civil servants) may be so heightened as to create a climate of negativism in public organizations. A certain public sector self-consciousness may be revealed in the analysis of the data. One might even wonder if public management has been fixated on the issue of ethics in recent years.

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Apart from understanding the multiple factors responsible for these findings, what might be done to improve the ethical climates of public organizations? Ironically, we might look at an example from the private sector for organizational strategies. In 1992, Sears came under attack for complaints about selling unnecessary parts and services. Attorneys general in forty states took action against Sears, and as a result their policies and practices were changed. In July 1992, Ed Brennan, chairman and CEO of Sears, issued an open letter to consumers. He stated that Sears had "inadvertently created an environment in which mistakes have occurred." Supporting the importance of ethical climates, Brennan acknowledged Sears's responsibility for an environment that led to "mistakes."

Brennan described the actions taken to "eliminate this environment": Incentive systems were changed—rewards were changed from commissions on sales to customer satisfaction; quality control was augmented by using "independent organizations" to conduct audits of automotive services to insure compliance with company policies; partnerships were created to improve practices. Sears made a commitment to organize and fund industry-consumer-government groups that would review auto repair practices and recommend uniform industry standards. The publicly stated intent was clearly to take specific actions that would change the ethical climate of the organization.

In like manner public organizations can examine their incentive systems and redefine goal attainment, perhaps to include the linkage of performance and consistency with organizational codes and customer satisfaction. Partnerships can be created that would allow community groups and professionals from other public organizations to define and monitor organizational policies and practices to insure consistency with organizational goals and values.

Other strategies might include improvements in socialization and decision-making processes (Cohen 1993). Orientation and training sessions can be used to clarify the values and ethical expectations of employees. This is perhaps the most commonly expressed strategy, possibly because it is so critical. Such sessions can provide a serious forum for discussion of ethical issues and concerns, besides simply sending a strong signal that ethical dimensions of the organization are important. Decision-making systems also can be constructed so that all employees have opportunities to voice ethical concerns that are important to the organization and the public.

CONCLUSION

This has been an exploratory study of sector differences related to ethical work climates, an emerging research area of organizational ethics. A national sample was conducted of top managers from three regions of the United States, using ethical measures from previous research. Researchers found variance by sector in ethical climates. The analysis indicates that public managers generally perceive the ethical climates of their organizations less favorably than do their private sector counterparts.

Like most exploratory research, this study raises more questions than it answers. There is need for more well-developed theory concerning the determinants of ethical climates and the specific role of sector. Further empirical testing is needed both to develop ethical climate measures and to confirm sector differences. Some organizational strategies to improve ethical climates were discussed briefly. A more comprehensive plan could be developed that would include unique and specific strategies for both public and private organizations.

To some extent we must all endure and accept the climate and weather of the regions we inhabit. Relocation may be necessary if discomfort is too great. While relocation is an option in our organizational lives, we also can strive to improve the climates of organizations. Improvement requires an understanding of the important elements or dimensions of the climate. Management can design strategies that will foster and develop better climates in the workplace.

In this article we have examined how public and business organizations may differ in terms of ethical climates; our goal has been to promote further research and discussion about how such climates can be improved. It is hoped that this will result in discussions and ideas about how administrators can create ethical climates for their organizations. No doubt the changing political environment will make this relevant as well as challenging for those brave enough to be the public administrators of the twenty-first century.

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