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Whistleblower Protection and Ethical Climate in Public Sector Organizations

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Abstract

Whistleblowing is one of the ways that can promote transparency, accountability, and ethics within public sector organizations. Staff may become aware of corrupt practices, fraudulent activities, unethical behaviors, misuse of resources, violation of policies, among other wrongdoings and choose to act against such wrongdoings through whistleblowing. However, staff members may not have the desire to whistleblow about any wrongdoing because of various reasons, including fear of any repercussions, lack of confidentiality, lack of protection, lack of knowledge, and fear of the impact on career development. Hence, having an effective whistleblower protection process becomes important for providing a safe environment for whistleblowers. This study will focus on whistleblower protection and ethical climate. The study will focus on staff knowledge and perception of the whistleblower protection process, the ethical climate of the organization, the reporting process, organizational trust, psychological safety, and fear of retaliation. The methodology used in the research consists of the following elements: the use of a quantitative research design and the use of a structured questionnaire as the technique of data collection from public sector organization employees. Data collected will be processed using the methods of descriptive statistics and relationship analysis. Issues of confidentiality, anti-retaliation, reporting procedure, ethical leadership, and management support need to be considered if it is desired to make employees report unethical behavior. Ethical climate can help employees build trust in the reporting system and act responsibly. Recommendations on how to improve whistleblowing policy, raise employees' awareness, improve confidential reporting channels, investigation procedures, and ethical leadership are given in the research.

Keywords: Whistleblowing, Whistleblower Protection, Ethical Climate, Public Sector Organizations, Organizational Ethics, Employee Reporting, Organizational Trust, Psychological Safety, Ethical Leadership, Retaliation.

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Introduction

Whistleblowing is an organizational behavior that entails the disclosure of malpractice. This process affords employees a tool to expose unethical, unlawful, fraudulent, or any form of malpractice within an organization. Studies have looked into whistleblowing behavior with regard to ethical climate and organizational settings, emphasizing the need for environmental factors in the reporting process by employees (Ahmad et al., 2014). However, whistleblowing is especially pertinent in public sector organizations, where employees are likely to experience misconduct that might impact organizational accountability and integrity. Ethical climate within the public sector has been studied in terms of employees' perception of the ethical climate within their organizations and how this affects their ethical conduct and organizational effectiveness (Raile, 2013).

The concept of trust is equally essential for employee decision-making on how to report any misconduct in their respective organizations. The employee is likely to make use of the internal reporting channel whenever he believes that there is an appropriate response to his actions and protection from the negative consequences. This connection has been explored in the case of healthcare workers (Aydan & Kaya, 2018).

Another point is that whistleblowing internally is highly correlated with the amount of trust that workers have in public service organizations. If the workers have certainty in the reporting procedures of their organization and in its reactions towards the problems, then employees will be likely to engage in reporting any sort of misconduct through proper channels (Taylor, 2018).

In addition to organizational factors, another factor that might influence the decision of workers to engage in whistleblowing is the severity of misconduct and the benefit the workers get from such an act. There have been some studies carried out in order to find out how the monetary gain and the severity of misconduct affect the behavior of workers (Andon et al., 2018). Recently another research on the intentions of employees of local government organizations to blow whistle considering the ethical climate and psychological safety has been carried out (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021).

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To evaluate the significance of whistleblower protection in public sector organizations.
2. To evaluate the ethical climate in public sector organizations.
3. To evaluate the awareness of employees regarding the mechanisms of whistleblower protection.
4. To evaluate the association between whistleblower protection and ethical climate.
5. To find out the major barriers that prevent employees from reporting any wrongdoings.
6. To give recommendations for improving the situation in terms of whistleblower protection and ethics.
7. Scope of the Study

This research centers around the employees of public sector organizations. This paper discusses whistleblower protection, ethical climate, reporting intention, organizational trust, and perception of retaliation risk.

Literature Review

Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is a significant phenomenon in organizational behavior where individuals reveal any misconduct in organizations. There has been some research on the effects of values and personality traits on individuals' attitudes towards reporting organizational misconduct. These are relevant because they help understand why employees have different levels of willingness to report misconduct and view whistleblowing as an ethical obligation (Park et al., 2014).

Whistleblowing in the public sector is significant due to the potential for corruption in government institutions. A review of the literature on whistleblowing in the public sector sheds light on the organizational and individual aspects that influence the reporting behavior of employees (Kang, 2023).

Whistleblower Protection

Protection of whistleblowers aims at reducing the personal and occupational risk that an individual may be exposed to while blowing the whistle on organizational wrongdoing. Protection measures could range from confidentiality, reporting anonymously, antiretaliation policies, and adequate investigations. The motives for whistleblowing may depend on whether the employees believe the organizational climate is supportive and psychologically safe.

Psychological safety and public service motivation have been studied among local government workers in relation to ethical climate and whistleblowing intentions (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021).

Ethical Climate

An ethical climate is a set of perceptions regarding ethics and behaviors of the employees within an organization. The environment of an organization with its communicated ethical principles may affect employee readiness to reveal any kind of wrongdoing. There have been studies exploring the connection between the ethical climate of an organization and whistleblowing behavior in terms of person-organization value congruence and ethical leader behavior (Cai et al., 2024).

The link between ethical climate and whistleblowing intentions has been researched, with ethics training being used as the moderator variable. This approach underscores the significance of looking at both the development of the employees and the ethical environment of the organization in investigating reporting intentions (Antoh, 2025).

Ethical Climate and Whistleblowing Intention

Ethical climate could affect employees' perceptions of organizational misconduct and their intentions to report misconduct. Psychological safety and public service motivation are pertinent issues in examining the connection between ethical climate and whistleblower intentions among local government workers (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021).

Organizational ethical climate has similarly been explored in the context of whistleblowing behavior due to the effect of organizational values and ethical leadership. The research that considers the role of person-organization value congruence and ethical leadership behavior offers yet another point of view regarding the link between organizational ethical environment and whistleblowers (Cai et al., 2024).

Organizational Justice and Other Influencing Factors

Organizational justice can be considered one of the key issues in terms of how employees perceive the reporting procedure and organizations' reactions to misconduct. Fairness, organizational support, and consequences can be considered the main issues that employees take into account when they want to report misconduct.

The influence of organizational justice on whistleblowing intention among public employees has been studied with the application of the adapted Theory of Planned Behavior. It allows considering this issue from the theoretical perspective (Zhang et al., 2025).

The role of ethical environment, moral intensity, and professional commitment in terms of whistleblowing intention has also been studied. They also allow considering other issues related to this topic and provide additional perspectives (Zhang et al., 2025).

Individual values and personal characteristics of people have also been analyzed in the context of whistleblowing attitudes (Park et al., 2014).

Research Gap

Some researchers have investigated whistleblowing, ethical climate, organizational justice, psychological safety, and protection as individual and combined variables. The systematic review by Kang on the whistleblowing literature of the public sector examined 71 articles and dissertations, and highlighted the diversity of both theoretical and empirical research related to public sector whistleblowing.

But at the same time, there is great importance in examining the variables of protection and ethical climate together, and particularly from the perspective of the employees of public sector organizations. In this paper, the impact of protection and ethical climate in organizations on whistleblowing behavior will be examined.

Research Methodology

Research Design

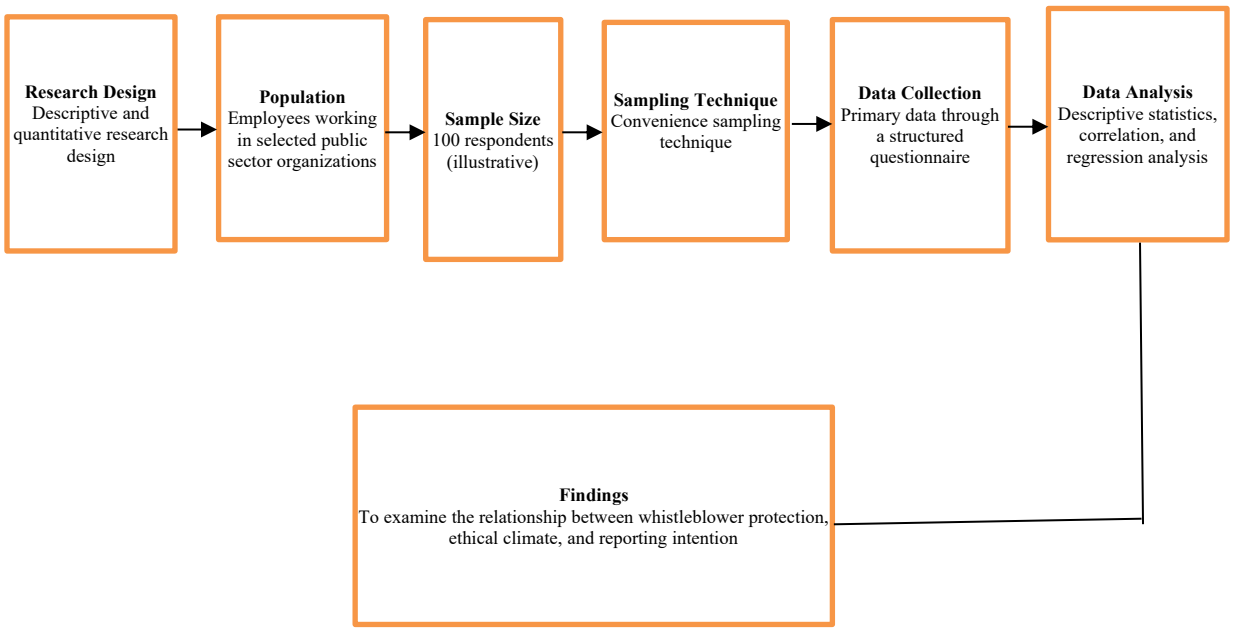


Fig. 1: Research Methodology Framework for the Study on Whistleblower Protection and Ethical Climate

In this study, the descriptive and quantitative research approach will be employed in examining how employees perceive whistleblowing protection and ethical climate in public sector organizations. The study will explore how protection and ethics-related organizational factors affect employees' likelihood to report unethical or improper behaviors in their organization.

Fig 1 above depicts the entire research methodology adopted in the process of conducting the research on the topic of whistleblower protection and ethical climate in public sector organizations. The research will adopt an approach that combines a descriptive and quantitative one, analyzing whistleblowers' views on ethical climate in public sector organizations. This will be done among selected employees in those organizations. The sample size for the research will be 100 respondents through convenience sampling. The data will be collected using questionnaires on issues such as whistleblower protection, ethical climate, whistleblowing processes, and employees' intentions to report.

Population

The target population for the study will be employees in the chosen public sector organizations. Employees from different departments and different levels could be taken into consideration to get diverse views on the issue of whistleblower protection and organizational ethics.

Sample Size

For illustrative purposes, it is recommended that a sample of 100 individuals be considered. This will provide a convenient sample that can serve as an example of how descriptive and statistical analysis can be done. Of course, if real survey data is available, the sample for illustration will have to be adjusted.

Sampling Technique

For this study, the sampling technique that will be employed by the researcher will involve the selection of the subjects for the study based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research process. In this way, the researcher will get responses from employees who are available and willing to give their views.

Data Collection

Primary data shall be gathered through the use of a structured questionnaire which can include questions related to the following themes: confidentiality, reprisal, reporting methods, management's support, ethical leadership, organizational trust, and employees' readiness to report unethical conduct. A Likert scale can be employed to measure the responses.

Results And Analysis

Findings of the study are presented to examine the awareness of employees in relation to whistleblower protection and perceptions in relation to the ethical climate of public sector organizations. Some of the aspects that should be considered in the analysis include awareness of the reporting procedure, managers' attitude towards ethical behavior of employees, safety of whistleblowers, clarity of organizational policies, seriousness in the handling of complaints, and protection against retaliation. The analysis is performed on the basis of frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. From the analysis, one will get an idea about the awareness of employees about the mechanisms of whistleblower protection and perception of the environment in the organization as being conducive to the reporting of misconduct. Through the analysis, it is possible to identify areas where the organizations should improve in terms of information, reporting, safety, attitude of managers, and protection against retaliation.

Awareness of Whistleblower Protection

Table 1: Respondents' Awareness of Whistleblower Protection

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	25	25%
Agree	35	35%
Neutral	18	18%
Disagree	14	14%
Strongly Disagree	8	8%
Total	**100**	**100%**

The results indicated in table 1 are the awareness level of the employees concerning the whistleblowing protection scheme in their firm. In the group of 100 fictitious respondents in this study, there were 25 respondents (25%) who strongly agreed, and 35 respondents (35%) agreed that they were aware of the whistleblowing protection scheme in their organization. Therefore, the proportion of respondents who were positively aware was 60%. On the other hand, 18 respondents (18%) were neutral, indicating that they had very little information regarding the whistleblowing protection scheme. There were also 14 respondents (14%) who disagreed and 8 respondents (8%) who strongly disagreed.

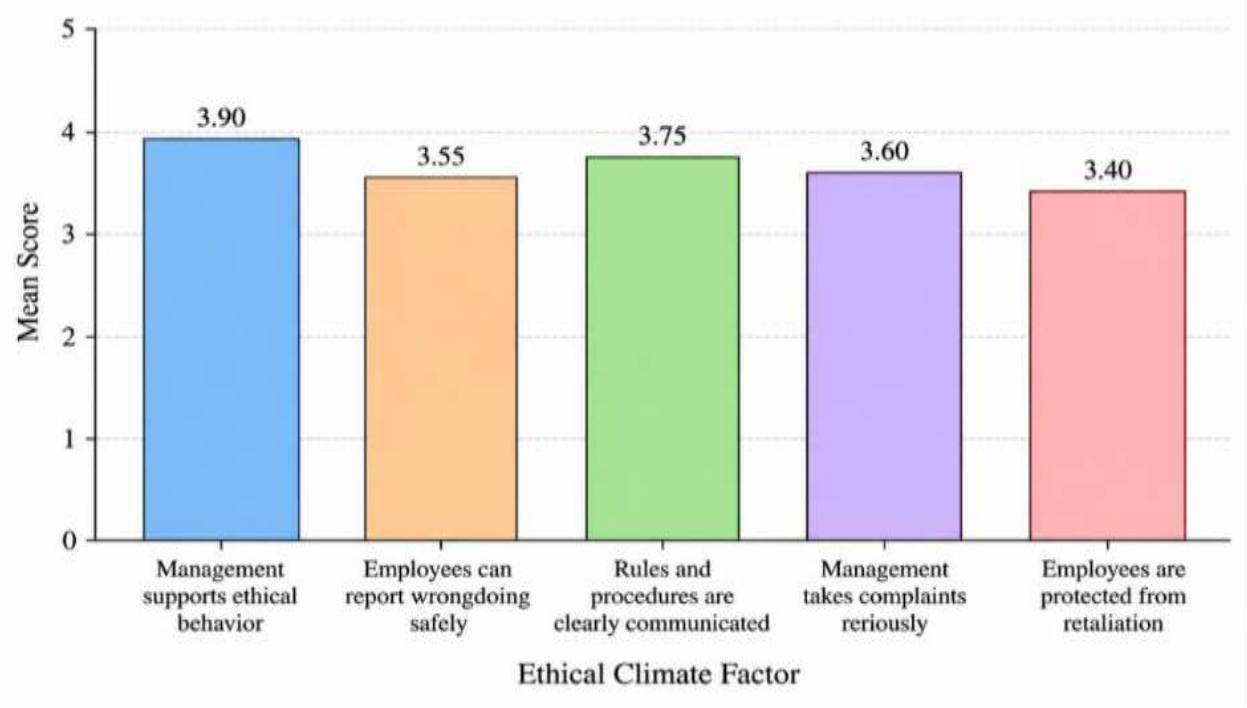


Fig. 2: Perceived Ethical Climate Factors

Fig 2 is a diagram depicting the perceptions of various ethical climate dimensions by the employees according to mean scores on a five-point scale. From the chart above, it can be noted that the mean score of management support for

ethical behavior is 3.90, indicating that perceptions of management are relatively positive when it comes to their support of ethical behavior. The mean score of clear rules and procedures is 3.75, while the seriousness of complaints management made is 3.60. The mean score of perception of reporting unethical behavior by the employees is 3.55, while the mean score of protection from retaliation is 3.40.

Perception of Ethical Climate

Moreover, the study assesses the perception of the ethical climate within the organization in terms of the level of management support, safety of reporting, communication of rules, complaints management, and protection from retaliation. From Table 2, it is evident that the illustrative mean for the management support of ethical behavior is 3.90, indicating that there is a relatively high perception of management support towards ethical behavior. The illustrative mean score for communication of organizational rules and procedures is 3.75. The mean score for serious complaint taking by the management is 3.60. The mean score for the perception of employees that they can report wrongdoings safely is 3.55. The lowest illustrative mean score is 3.40 for protection from retaliation. It can be seen from the results that while employees have a relatively high perception of management support for ethical behavior, their perception of protection is comparatively lower.

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Ethical Climate Factors

Ethical Climate Factor	Mean Score
Management supports ethical behaviour	3.90
Employees can report wrongdoing safely	3.55
Rules and procedures are clearly communicated	3.75
Management takes complaints seriously	3.60
Employees are protected from retaliation	3.40

Table 2 demonstrates the attitudes held by the respondents about the different variables that influence the ethical climate of the organization. Based on the results obtained, management's support for ethics earned the highest mean value of 3.90. This indicates that management is perceived to be supportive of ethics in the organization. Communication of rules and procedures to the workers got a mean value of 3.75, which indicates that the policies of the organization are considered clear. Management's seriousness in handling complaints had a mean value of 3.60, while safe mechanisms for reporting unethical behavior got a mean value of 3.55. The lowest mean value of 3.40 was obtained for employee protection from retaliation after reporting, indicating low levels of protection from such retaliation. In summary, there is an adequate ethical climate in the organization, but improvements are still needed in terms of reporting protection.

Interpretation of Results

In general, it can be said that the ethical behavior of employees is positively perceived, however, it appears that a lot needs to be done regarding whistleblowing protection and retaliation. According to employee perceptions, 60% of employees feel that they are protected, and 22% are not sure if they are protected or not, which is indicative of inconsistencies in the communication of this information within the organization. Regarding ethical climate variables, management support on ethical issues was the highest-rated one, while safety from retaliation was rated the lowest one. It shows that employees feel supported in terms of ethical issues; however, they are afraid of any repercussions after making their report.

Discussion

From the above research, it can be clearly seen that whistleblower protection and ethical climate are organizational concepts related to each other. If employees feel that there is confidentiality in the organization, fair investigation procedure, and protection from retaliation, they would feel protected in disclosing misconducts. Literature has shown that ethical climate influences whistleblowing intention decision making of the employee. According to Ahmad et al. (2014), principle-based ethical climate could influence the whistleblowing intention of the employee. Moreover, Potipiroon and Wongpreedee (2021) talked about psychological safety as one of the mediating variables that influences ethical climate and whistleblowing intention among local government employees. Interpretation of the results of the study should be made with care as whistleblowing intention does not imply whistleblowing behavior. There are differences between whistleblowing intention and whistleblowing behavior among employees. Public organizations should develop whistleblowing policies along with the organizational environment where the policies are applied.

Recommendations

Strengthen Confidential Reporting

There should be measures that allow for confidentiality, easy access, and security to ensure that there is no danger involved when an employee makes a complaint about any form of malpractice within the organization. The processes of identifying how the complaint will be made, who will be responsible for receiving and reviewing the report, as well as ensuring that there will be complete confidentiality in the process, should be established. There could be various methods of reporting that could help ease the process for the employee.

Introduce Strong Anti-Retaliation Measures

It is necessary for organizations to have in place effective anti-retaliation strategies that will protect employees from harm when reporting the cases. The employee should not face discrimination, termination, harassment, demotion, intimidation, or any other form of penalty for reporting. The organization should ensure that employees are well informed about anti-retaliation procedures either through the issuance of policies or through training of employees on how to report retaliation cases. In this way, the organization will create a conducive environment for employees to report unethical behavior.

Conclusion

This becomes clear when the importance of transparency and accountability in public sector organizations is considered. However, the presence of a whistleblower protection policy does not mean much if the employees do not feel protected from retaliation and if the organization will undertake an objective investigation of their concerns. The ethical climate is another important factor as it helps define how employees view ethical problems in their organization. Previous research shows that there are certain links between ethical climate, psychological safety, organizational trust, justice, and whistleblowing intentions. In this regard, public sector organizations can increase ethical behavior by combining whistleblower protection with ethical leadership, awareness and justice.

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