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Ethical climate and pro-social rule breaking in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Pro-social rule breaking (PSRB), rule-breaking to promote the interests of the organization, is a burgeoning topic on the scholarly landscape, but drivers of this behavior remain largely unexplained. This paper seeks to extend theory on PSRB by conceptualizing this behavior as an ethical decision requiring tradeoffs and ethical assessments. Specifically, we offer a model of PSRB that contextualizes the behavior within Victor and Cullen's (1988) five-dimensional typology of organizational ethical climate. We offer a set of propositions that provides theory on the role of each climate type on PSRB, as well as additional theorizing about salient individual attributes that impact PSRB. In addition to clarifying PSRB as an ethical decision, this paper offers theory at multiple levels of analysis on what drives PSRB. Specifically core self-evaluations are proposed as antecedents to PSRB. This theorizing is also integrated into literature on HR policy and HR decision-making implications of the model for HR practitioners are discussed, and a set of future research directions are offered.

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1. Introduction

The violation of formal organizational rules is generally considered to be self-interested, deviant, or unethical workplace behavior (e.g. Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Renn, Allen, Fedor, & Davis, 2005; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). As a consequence, literature on rule breaking has been characterized by descriptions of angry, dissatisfied employees violating organizational rules in protest of perceived injustices or due to an incongruence of values or identity between the employee and the organization. This prevalent view has been the subject of extensive empirical investigation, with elements such as hostility (Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006), employee dissimilarity (Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004), social exclusion (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002), personality (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004; Renn et al., 2005), and job dissatisfaction (Dalal, 2005) linked to breaking formal organizational rules.

Despite the dominant viewpoint of rule breaking as deviance, a more nuanced perspective has emerged. Morrison (2006) introduced the pro-social rule breaking (PSRB) construct in order to explain rule breaking that is motivated not by deviant intentions, but instead by a desire to assist the organization in meeting its objectives. Pro-social rule breaking is thus defined as "any instance where an employee intentionally violates a formal organizational policy, regulation, or prohibition with the primary intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders" (Morrison, 2006, p. 6). Pro-social rule breaking is important because while organizational rules are generally thought to be congruent with the organization's goals, employees often find themselves in situations where violating rules may actually advance the interests of the organization. For example, envision a restaurant manager who has received a complaint about poor service from a well-connected, influential member of the community. While organizational policy states that the manager should offer a free dessert to a patron dissatisfied with his or her dining experience, the manager might feel that breaking that rule by offering the entire meal for free is necessary to satisfy the customer and prevent them from spreading negative comments about the restaurant in the local community. This scenario is instructive because it highlights that the decision to break formal rules is more complex than previously thought.

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Despite recent interest in PSRB, research on its antecedents has been fairly limited. Morrison (2006) reported that risk propensity, co-worker behavior, and job autonomy were significant predictors of well-intended rule breaking, while Dahling, Chau, Mayer, and Gregory (2010) validated the PSRB construct and linked conscientiousness to PSRB. Adding to the complexity of PSRB is the fact that the behavior also seems rife with ethical concerns, such as whether breaking a formal rule to help the organization is worth the risk to one’s personal interests, or whether the decision to break a rule to maximize performance is warranted at the expense of violating social or organizational obligations. Given this, the decision to break a formal rule, even with good intentions, appears often to be a decision not always between right or wrong alternatives, nor between good and bad choices. Instead PSRB decisions are often between right and right, or between one bad choice and another. Thus, PSRB is a process in which the decision-maker is forced to make significant tradeoffs and cope with ethical dilemmas, such as whether to violate organizational policy and offer a free meal to a disgruntled customer who could damage the restaurant’s reputation and standing in the community. Despite findings that suggest the prevailing ethical climate in an organization often has an impact on how employees make ethical decisions, (Bulutlar & Oz, 2009; Neubaum, Mitchell, & Schminke, 2004; Sonenshein, 2007), PSRB has not been conceptualized as an ethical decision, and nothing is known about the ways in which organizational factors such as ethical climate systematically shape PSRB. This lacuna in our understanding of PSRB suggests theorizing on these issues (and others) is much-needed.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide a more-comprehensive model of PSRB that synthesizes established research with theorizing on the impact of ethical climate on PSRB. In so doing, we aim to explicate the role of ethical climate in fostering PSRB behavior and provide insight into how this behavior maybe engendered or mitigated. The model is guided by attention to ethical climate theory as well as extant empirical work on the antecedents of PSRB, specifically core self-evaluations (CSE). The paper is driven by a primary question: how does ethical climate influence an individual’s decision to engage in pro-social rule breaking? We argue that the ethical climate types proposed by Victor and Cullen (1988) impact PSRB both directly and by moderating relationships between individual attributes and PSRB. Our theoretical model is presented in Fig. 1.

2. Theory development

2.1. Pro-social rule breaking

Because the pro-social rule breaking construct is burgeoning on the scholarly landscape, it is imperative that we define the concept as it is used here. A vital component of the PSRB construct is the definition of “pro-social.” The concept of pro-social behavior originates in the behavioral sciences literature, and was first applied to an organizational context by Brief and Motowidlo (1986), who proposed that individuals often go above and beyond the specific responsibilities that are assigned to them in an effort to aid others.

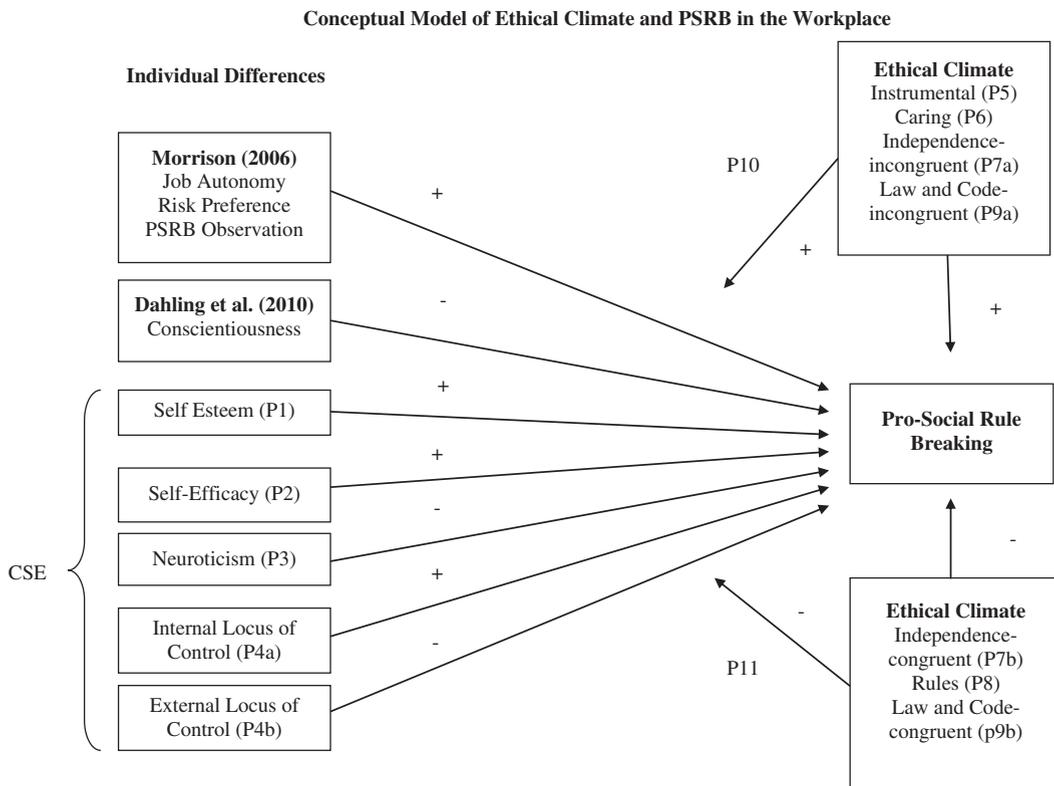


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of ethical climate and PSRB in the workplace.

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