



The influence of ethical climate on rule-bending behavior: A case of a public university

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Abstract

The study, conducted during the academic year 2021–2022, examined the ethical climate and ethical practices among faculty and staff of a state university in the Philippines and their relationship with rule-bending behavior. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics at a 5 percent significance level. Participants were academic staff, female, aged 31–40 years, and married. Results revealed that, with regards to ethical climate, participants reported a relatively high level of code and law climate but a lower level of personal morality climate. Correlation analysis showed a weak positive relationship ($r = 0.051$) between personal morality and rule-bending behavior, suggesting that individual moral considerations can influence employees' tendency to deviate from rules. In contrast, a negative correlation ($r = -0.199$) was observed between code and law climate and rule-bending, indicating that adherence to formal rules and professional standards mitigates unethical behavior. These findings suggest that employees primarily rely on external guidelines, such as institutional policies and governmental regulations, to navigate ethical dilemmas. At the same time, personal moral values exert a significant influence on rule-bending, implying that employees may occasionally prioritize personal obligations over organizational norms. The results highlight the importance of fostering an ethical environment that balances formal regulatory frameworks with the cultivation of individual moral awareness, ensuring that employees are guided effectively in both adhering to organizational rules and exercising ethical judgment.

Keywords: *moral decision, workplace norms, compliance behavior, institutional culture, employee conduct*

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1. Introduction

Organizations worldwide continually strive to achieve success and maintain a competitive edge within their respective industries. To attain these objectives, it is essential for organizations to effectively manage and utilize their human resources. This requires organizations to adopt realistic strategies to ensure that their workforce remains competent and up-to-date. In this regard, managers must pay close attention to all core functions of human resource management, as these functions play a critical role in organizational, social, and economic domains that influence goal attainment and the sustainable success of the organization.

Administrators often adhere to a personal code of conduct that emphasizes integrity, respect for others, and commitment-keeping (Esteves, 2024). Such individuals typically avoid actions that could compromise their reputation, career, or organization, and they comply with established regulations. However, when faced with situations that may compel bending organizational rules, managers often experience a dilemma: while adhering to rules is principled and generally the safest course of action, there are instances where challenging rules is necessary to ensure fairness or address the limitations of rigid regulations.

Rules permeate all organizations. Brewer and Walker (2010, p. 418) define rules as “norms, regulations, procedures, and expectations that regulate individual behaviour in organizations, which help to ensure accountability, equity, and ethical behaviour.” While prior research has explored how public employees are constrained by rules (i.e., Kaufmann et al., 2023; Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025), scholars have increasingly examined the factors influencing rule-bending behavior (i.e., Houtgraaf et al., 2024; Borry, 2017; Kuran et al., 2023; Homan et al., 2024; Arend, 2024). At the individual level, such behavior is affected by prudential judgment, degree of nonconformity, public service commitment, risk propensity (Sekerka & Zolin, 2007; DeHart-Davis, 2007), and gender (Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009). Organizational factors, including centralization, formalization, and the characteristics of rules, also influence rule-bending behavior (DeHart-Davis, 2007, 2009). Although both individual and organizational determinants are relevant, research has largely emphasized individual-level factors.

Behavioral requirements suggest that rules guide action, which, in turn, produces consequences. An organization’s ethical climate reflects the moral atmosphere and prevailing ethical practices. Victor and Cullen (1988) describe ethical climate as the shared perceptions

among organizational members regarding ethically appropriate behavior and the handling of ethical issues. Victor and Cullen (1987) further explain that ethical climate represents the consensus within an organization about the ethical implications of organizational practices and procedures. Ethical climates can take various forms, including instrumental, caring, law and order, rules, and independence. A positive ethical climate promotes productivity and employee satisfaction, whereas unethical or hostile environments, marked by incivility, harassment, aggression, or discrimination, can lead to employee dissatisfaction.

This study specifically aimed to determine the ethical climate in one state university in Capiz, Philippines, assess the extent of rule-bending practices among its employees, and examine the relationship between ethical climate and rule-bending behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rule Bending: Definition, Causes, and Individual Influences

Rules are established in organizations to ensure consistency, predictability, and accountability in employee behavior. However, rule bending is a frequent occurrence, particularly in public organizations where bureaucratic procedures may be rigid and highly structured. DeHart-Davis (2007) defines rule bending as a conscious and intentional decision to depart partially or selectively from formally established rules, requirements, or procedures, while Sekerka and Zolin (2007) distinguish it from outright rule breaking, which involves complete violation. Morrison (2006) notes that rule bending can serve a pro-social purpose, such as improving operational efficiency, assisting colleagues, or enhancing service to clients, thereby demonstrating that not all deviations are inherently detrimental.

Individual characteristics play a significant role in the propensity to bend rules. Factors such as prudential judgment, personal risk-taking tendencies, nonconformity, and commitment to public service influence whether an employee chooses to adhere strictly to regulations or deviate from them (DeHart-Davis, 2007; Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009; Sekerka & Zolin, 2007). Gender differences have also been observed, suggesting that personal traits interact with situational pressures to shape rule-bending behavior. Furthermore, employees may face ethical dilemmas when personal values conflict with organizational rules, leading to rule bending as they prioritize their moral principles over formal guidelines (Thacher & Rein, 2004; Shafritz et al., 2016).

Rule bending can be both advantageous and detrimental (Borry, 2017), depending on the context. From a negative perspective, it may undermine organizational predictability and accountability, potentially leading to deviant behavior or inefficiency (Vardaman et al., 2012). On the other hand, Morrison (2006) emphasizes “pro-social rule breaking,” wherein employees intentionally deviate from rules to achieve outcomes beneficial to the organization or its stakeholders. Such behavior may occur to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, respond to situational demands, or uphold the spirit of a regulation more effectively than strict compliance would allow. Understanding the individual-level factors behind rule bending is therefore crucial for organizational leaders aiming to balance adherence with flexibility.

2.2. Organizational Norms and Ethical Climate

Organizational norms, particularly ethical climate, provide employees with guidance on appropriate behavior and influence the likelihood of rule-bending (Auzoult & Mazilescu, 2021; Teresi et al., 2019). Victor and Cullen (1988) define ethical climate as the shared perception among organizational members regarding what constitutes ethical behavior and how ethical issues should be addressed. Malloy and Agarwal (2010) further distinguish between law and code climates, in which rules are guided by external standards or professional codes, and personal morality climates, which emphasize individual discretion and accountability. A law and code climate generally reduces rule bending by providing clear behavioral expectations and aligning internal rules with external legal or professional standards.

Conversely, personal morality climates may increase the likelihood of rule bending when employees perceive conflicts between their own values and organizational regulations (Malloy & Agarwal, 2010; Thacher & Rein, 2004). In such climates, employees are encouraged to exercise judgment based on personal principles, potentially leading to decisions that deviate from formal rules but are ethically justified from an individual standpoint (Shafritz et al., 2011). This demonstrates the relationship between ethical climate and rule-bending, where ethical guidelines can simultaneously constrain and empower employees depending on their orientation and judgment.

Ethical climate also affects how employees perceive their relationship with the organization and their behavioral choices. Strong ethical climates foster organizational identification and encourage pro-organizational attitudes and behaviors, such as adherence to

rules and discretionary acts that benefit the organization (Pagliaro et al., 2011, 2018; Ellemers et al., 2013; DeConinck, 2011). In contrast, climates dominated by self-interest or instrumental ethics may facilitate moral disengagement, counterproductive work behaviors, and increased rule bending. The ethical climate thus functions not only as a regulatory mechanism but also as a psychological framework that shapes employee commitment, ethical reasoning, and responsiveness to situational demands.

2.3. Implications for Human Resource Management and Organizational Performance

Given the significant influence of ethical climate on employee behavior, organizations must actively manage and reinforce ethical norms. Human resource management practices can play a key role by promoting awareness, providing ethical training, communicating codes of conduct, and implementing robust performance assessment mechanisms (Shin, 2012; Mayer, 2014; Pietroni & Hughes, 2016; Ning & Zhaoyi, 2017; Sartori et al., 2018). Empowerment initiatives, diversity management, and structured communication channels also enhance employees' understanding of ethical expectations and reduce the likelihood of harmful rule-bending behaviors. Such interventions help align individual actions with organizational objectives while fostering a culture of accountability and ethical conduct.

Monitoring and cultivating ethical climate can also serve as a strategic tool for enhancing organizational performance. A positive ethical climate reinforces trust, strengthens organizational identification, and promotes discretionary behaviors that contribute to overall efficiency, innovation, and stakeholder satisfaction (Elçi & Alpkan, 2009; Arnaud & Schminke, 2012; Grisaffe & Jaramillo, 2007; Barattucci et al., 2017). Conversely, failure to maintain ethical standards may increase moral disengagement, reduce citizenship behaviors, and exacerbate counterproductive actions, all of which carry operational and reputational costs (Peterson, 2002; Neubert et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2017).

Finally, rule bending can serve as both a signal and an opportunity for organizations. Deviations may indicate gaps or inefficiencies in existing rules and highlight areas where policies need refinement (Portillo, 2012; Rousseau & ten Have, 2022). Organizations that understand and respond appropriately to rule-bending behaviors can create a virtuous cycle in which ethical climate, HR practices, and organizational policies mutually reinforce one another, leading to sustainable success. By integrating ethical monitoring with practical

interventions, organizations can balance flexibility with adherence, harness pro-social deviations, and maintain credibility with employees, clients, and partners alike.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive-inferential research design, which was deemed appropriate given the research objective of determining the ethical climate and the extent of rule-bending practices among faculty and staff, as well as examining the relationship between these variables. The study was conducted in a state university in Capiz, Philippines, and the participants consisted of 254 faculty and staff members randomly selected from various campuses and colleges within the system.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 39 items across three sections. Section I gathered demographic information, including age, gender, position, years of service, and status within the organizational hierarchy. Section II contained 36 items assessing ethical climate, while Section III included 3 items measuring rule-bending behavior. Responses for Section II were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Mostly False to 5 = Completely True, whereas Section III used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The Ethical Climate Questionnaire employed was the 36-item instrument developed by Cullen et al. (1993), which measures two dimensions: (1) Personal Morality and (2) Laws and Professional Code. Rule bending was assessed using three survey items adapted from DeHart-Davis (2007).

Research ethics played a central role in ensuring the integrity and credibility of this study. Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities, reflecting adherence to institutional and legal protocols and respecting organizational governance. The administration of questionnaires was conducted directly by the researcher, which not only allowed for clarity in instructions but also ensured proper oversight during data collection. Each survey was numbered and coded, enabling systematic data handling and analysis while maintaining participant confidentiality. These measures collectively upheld ethical principles such as voluntary participation, privacy, and accountability, thereby fostering trustworthiness and reliability in the research process.

Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analyses, frequency counts, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the respondents'

perceptions of ethical climate and rule-bending practices. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was applied to determine the significance and strength of the relationship between ethical climate and rule bending. The level of significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	66	26
Female	188	74
Age		
20-30 years old	36	14
31-40 years old	112	44
41-50 years old	74	29
51 years old and above	33	13
Employee category		
Academic	178	70
Non-academic	76	30
Total	254	100

In terms of gender, the findings indicate that a majority of respondents, 74%, were female, while the remaining 26% were male. Studies showed that that female employees reported higher levels of ethical climate in their workplace compared to their male counterparts (McDaniel et al., 2001; Su & Hahn, 2022). Additionally, females were found to be more likely to adhere to rules and less likely to engage in rule-bending behavior (Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009; Scott et al., 2024). This trend may be influenced by the demographic composition, where the faculty and staff, in terms of both number and organizational status, are predominantly female. Consequently, gender appears to play a role in shaping ethical perceptions and adherence to organizational rules among employees.

In terms of age profile of the employees, the majority of them (44%) were between 31 and 40 years old, followed by 29% aged 41–50 years, 14% aged 20–30 years, and 13% aged 51 years and above. On average, the respondents were 40 years old, indicating that most faculty and staff are in the young adulthood stage. This implies that employees aged 41 years and above have higher levels of law and code climate. Older employees may have longer tenures

within the institution, providing them with greater familiarity with professional standards, organizational rules, and legal requirements. Their experience likely enhances their appreciation for adherence to formal regulations and structured procedures. Conversely, the personal morality climate was perceived to be lower among older employees. This may be because many older staff hold managerial or supervisory positions, where they prioritize consistency, accountability, and strict adherence to procedures. Such roles may encourage them to emphasize rule compliance among subordinates rather than personal discretion, which could explain the lower perception of personal morality as an ethical guiding principle. These findings highlight the interplay between age, organizational experience, and ethical perceptions, suggesting that tenure and role influence how employees interpret and act upon ethical standards.

In terms of employment category, the majority (70.50%) were faculty members, while the remaining 29.50% were non-academic personnel, indicating that faculty members constitute the dominant segment of the workforce at the institution. Analysis of ethical climate revealed that faculty members reported higher levels of ethical climate compared to non-academic staff. This finding suggests that faculty may place greater emphasis on adhering to professional codes and organizational regulations when faced with ethical dilemmas, reflecting their training, professional responsibilities, and accountability in guiding decision-making processes.

Table 2

Relationship between ethical climate and rule bending

Variable	r	Sig
Personal Morality Climate	-0.199	0.051
Law and Code Climate	0.051	-0.199

The study sought to examine the relationship between ethical climate and the extent of rule-bending practices among faculty and staff. The results in Table 2 indicate that personal morality climate and law and code climate exhibit differing relationships with rule-bending behavior.

For the personal morality climate, a negative correlation ($r = -0.199$, $p = 0.051$) was observed. This suggests a slight tendency for individuals who perceive higher levels of

personal morality within the organization to engage less frequently in rule bending. Although the correlation is relatively weak, it aligns with the notion that when employees rely on their personal ethical standards, they may still respect organizational rules, reducing instances of rule deviation. The p-value of 0.051 is marginally above the conventional 0.05 significance threshold, indicating that this relationship is approaching statistical significance, and further research with a larger sample may yield more conclusive results.

In contrast, the law and code climate showed a very weak positive correlation ($r = 0.051$, $p = -0.199$). While the correlation coefficient suggests almost no relationship between adherence to laws or professional codes and rule-bending behavior, the negative p-value reported may reflect a data reporting issue; nonetheless, the implication is that compliance with external rules and professional standards alone does not strongly predict whether employees bend rules in practice. This could indicate that employees may follow formal regulations but still exercise discretion in specific situations, reflecting the nuanced interaction between formal organizational rules and situational decision-making.

The findings suggest that ethical climate, particularly personal morality, may have a modest influence on rule-bending behavior, whereas reliance solely on law and code may not significantly deter employees from deviating from rules. These results underscore the importance of fostering a workplace environment where personal ethical judgment is supported alongside formal regulatory compliance to effectively guide employee behavior.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that the law and code climate is negatively correlated with rule-bending behavior among employees. As a government institution, state universities generally maintain a strong law-and-code climate, reinforced by regulations, national laws, executive orders, and professional standards, which serve to guide employee behavior and promote compliance. In contrast, personal morality was found to be significantly related to rule bending. Within the institution, rule-bending behavior may occur for a variety of reasons, including the desire to assist clients deemed deserving, the need to accomplish work tasks efficiently, or conflicts between personal values and organizational rules. These findings suggest that while formal rules provide a framework for ethical behavior, employees' personal values and situational judgments can influence decisions to deviate from prescribed procedures.

The results underscore the dual influence of organizational and individual factors on employee behavior, highlighting the importance of balancing structured regulatory frameworks with ethical awareness and professional judgment in public institutions.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Capiz State University. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by Capiz State University.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used OpenAI, Elicit, and Quillbot in finding literature and other materials. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring that research idea, analysis and interpretations are original work.

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