Enhancing Service Adaptive Behavior in the Public Service Context: When Ethical Self-Interest Climate as an Obstacle

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Abstract

        The research aims to explore the relationship between public sector employees' prosocial motivation and service adaptive behavior. By examining this relationship, the intervening role of a self-interest climate was explored as a mediator. The research was built upon social cognitive theory to understand how prosocially motivated public servants could exhibit adaptive behavior directly, as well as indirectly, by mitigating an adverse working climate. Data was collected from the perspectives of both managerial and non-managerial employees and analyzed using the PLS-SEM method. A positive linkage between prosocial motivation and service adaptive behavior was established. Furthermore, prosocial motivation was found to help public employees overcome an egoistic climate and exhibit adaptability in serving citizens. Several theoretical contributions and practical implications for public managers were presented.

Keywords: Public Sector, Social Cognitive Theory, Behavior Change, Ethics

Introduction

Changes in stakeholders' demands have prompted public organizations to become more market-oriented, as they now compete with both public and private organizations through enhancing public service quality and customer services (De Araújo, 2001; Geri 2001; Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020). Furthermore, being in the process of public management reform also requires alterations in the characteristics of public employees (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020), such as a focus on customer orientation, as similar as demanded by the private sector. Accordingly, scholars and practitioners in the public sector swift their attention to various desirable behavioral outcomes of public sector employees such as innovative work behavior (e.g., Vuong, 2023), change-oriented extra-role behavior (e.g., Li and Xie, 2022), knowledge sharing behavior (Kaffasha et al., 2020).

However, even though public management reforms stress the use of private management styles for improving service quality and building relationships with citizens (see De Araújo, 2001), there has been a lack of research from scholars to unfold the service-oriented behavior of public servants (see Van de Walle, 2016). Thus, the research focuses on the situation in which public sector employees would go beyond their administrative roles and perform prosocial behaviors such as active listening to the problems of citizens in order to better deliver public services, using appropriate body language (e.g., eye contact or smiling, with citizens,) and so on. In other words, drawing from the best practices of private organizations, these aforementioned behaviors, which are defined as "service adaptive behaviors," could leverage the guanxi between employees and customers, as well as enhance service performance (Locander et al., 2020; Majeed et al., 2023). Thus, this study extends the scope of research regarding service adaptive behavior to public service.

Drawing from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), the research integrates both personal influence and environmental factors to provide better insights into public service adaptive behavior. Specifically, ethical climate was found as a vital factor to promote positive outcomes (e.g.,Halbusi et al., 2021). However, there are several types of organizational climate that could concurrently exist and interact with individuals to shape the behavior. That is, the research delves into the less attentive side of the ethical climate namely ethical self-interest climate (Victor and Cullen, 1988) which describes a situation in which individuals tend to care more about their benefit than the well-being of others. As such, we propose that an ethical self-interest climate could play the role of an obstacle that public organizations need to overcome to encourage expected behaviors among public servants.

To mitigate the effect of an adverse environment (ethical self-interest climate) for promoting public service quality, prosocial motivation among public servants would be a potential solution. On one hand, prosocially motivated individuals have a tendency to remain with public organizations to fulfill personal values (Banuri and Keefer, 2016). On the other hand, prosocial motivation, which is characterized by caring for others (Grant and Berg, 2011), can facilitate a learning process to other individuals absorb this type of motivation and translate it into prosocial thoughts and actions.

In summary, the research relies on social cognitive theory to explore a comprehensive framework that aims to provide an explanation of how public organizations could foster public sector employees to produce public service adaptive behavior and to reduce the shared thoughts of self-interest among individuals, thereby cultivating desirable outcomes. Hence, a triadic interactions framework involving personal determinant (prosocial motivation), environmental influence (ethical self-interest climate), and behavioral outcome (service adaptive behavior) is proposed. There are research questions in this research:

- RQ1: Does prosocial motivation among public sector employees promote public service-adaptive behavior?
- RQ2: Does prosocial motivation among public sector employees mitigate the ethical self-interest climate?
- RQ3: Does ethical self-interest climate reduce the public service adaptive behavior
- RQ4: Does prosocial motivation enhance public service adaptive behavior via lowering ethical self-interest climate?

Literature review and hypothesis development

Prosocial motivation and service adaptive behavior

Characterized by a tendency to help others and to make social contributions, prosocial motivation is recognized as an important attribute that triggers individuals to choose professions that respond to the call of public service ideals (Banuri and Keefer, 2016). Grant and Berg (2011, p.3) proposed a general definition of prosocial motivation as "a desire to benefit people or group". Accordingly, prosocially motivated individuals could function at three levels (Grant and Berg, 2011) including global prosocial motivation, contextual motivation, and situational motivation. The first dimension of prosocial motivation (the global) refers to the general care that individuals exhibit to

maintain the well-being of all people around them. The contextual dimension of prosocial motivation describes an individual's desire to pay attention to others when they are in charge of a specific role, job, etc. (Grant and Berg, 2011). For example, public sector employees with prosocial motivation may adhere to their value of contributing to the well-being of others or caring for the convenience of citizens during interactions. The last dimension of prosocial motivation mentions the specific situations in which individuals may demonstrate their desire to help others. For instance, while delivering public services to citizens, there is a chance that the service might not meet expectations and cause annoyance among citizens. A certain degree of prosocial motivation among public sector employees could maintain the orientation to help citizens resolve problems and preserve the image of the public service. As such, prosocial motivation was found to link with various desirable behavioral outcomes such as proactivity (Lebel and Patil, 2018), helping behavior (Choi and Moon, 2016), and community citizenship behaviors (Eva et al., 2020). Since public organizations have missions to create public values that promote better welfare for the community, prosocially motivated public sector employees are particularly needed due to value congruence that aims to effect change in people's lives (Banuri and Keefer, 2016).

The public sector, which holds a prominent role in promoting positive changes in society, has been reforming from a traditional model that tends to stress on hierarchy, to become more flexible and effective. That is, the New Public Management - NPM movement across world governments has changed the ways that the system functions (see Lane, 2002 for the NPM). Specifically, NPM focuses on activities through which the government could improve effectiveness and efficiency such as adopting best management practices (Lane, 2022), implementing technology (Margetts, 2008), encouraging innovation (Melo, 2022), etc. Accordingly, the shift has caused many public organizations to become more oriented toward marketization and privatization (Coffie and Hinson, 2022). As a result, public servants are also required to become more flexible, treating citizens with the same spirit of customer service as the private sector (e.g., David et al., 2024; Franken et al., 2022; Ramdhan et al., 2022). Since NPM delving into adopting private management practices, there were several behavioral outcomes of public sector employees have caught attention from scholars such as organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., De Geus et al., 2020; Ingrams, 2020), innovative behavior (Almazrouei et al., 2022; Cho and Song, 2021), employee voice (Alang et al., 2022; Williams and Yecalo-Tecle, 2020), etc. In addition to desirable behaviors at the workplace in general, scholars have shifted their attention to more specific-oriented behavior, such as that toward public service. For instance, several scholars

propose further exploration into when and how the public sector could extend their efforts to help citizens when failures occur in public service (Döring, 2022; Van de Walle, 2016). Thus, in contributing to the stream of research on the behavior of employees to enhance public service quality, which has been called for research to provide better insights and still has a shortage of empirical studies. To be specific, we investigate service adaptive behavior among public sector employees, which is defined as "the deliberate modification of the service offering and/or the employee's interpersonal behavior in a situationally appropriate manner in response to meeting perceived consumer needs" (Gwinner et al., 2005, p.135).

Prior studies in other service settings have found that an employee's service adaptive performance can serve as a source to enhance the experience and bring greater satisfaction to customers (see Wilder et al., 2014). Despite adaptative capacity among service employees has been widely evaluated in specific industries such as hospitality (e.g., Anning-Dorson and Nyamekye, 2020; Elshaer and Saad, 2022; Kaltiainen and Hakanen, 2022), banking (e.g., Hamzah et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2021), and healthcare organizations (Karanika-Murray and Biron, 2020; Krijgsheld et al., 2022), public service has still received scant attention from scholars. Drawing from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which posits a triadic interaction among external environment, personal influence, and behavioral consequences, we propose that prosocially motivated public sector employees can transfer value to consistent behavior in their daily work (see Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2020), thereby expressing service adaptive behavior such as showing empathy, active listening to the citizens' problems. Empirical studies also found the effect of prosocial motivation on behaviors toward benefits of customers (Cai et al., 2022; Kang et al., 2020; Shin and Hur, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis was formed:

H1: Prosocial motivation is positively related to service adaptive behavior

Ethical self-interest climate as a mediator

The ethical climate can be described as the result of organizational policies, practices, or leadership that focus on moral values and are shared among members, thereby defining their thoughts and actions (Newman et al., 2017). Thus, various studies have found that an ethical climate has a positive effect on daily practices, such as reducing undesirable behaviors (e.g., Appelbaum et al., 2005) and promoting welcome behaviors (e.g., Halbusi et al., 2021). However, as suggested by Victor and Cullen (1988) in the ethical climate framework, there are a total of nine types of ethical climates, which vary from less desired to more desired in organizations. Particularly, although scholars often focus on the

positive aspects of ethical climate, a dimension known as egoism, which prioritizes the benefit of oneself (individual or organization) over others, has received less attention (Victor and Cullen, 1988). For instance, a few studies concerning the egoism type of ethical climate, such as Chen et al. (2024), have found a negative effect of an egoistic ethical climate on safety compliance and safety participation among employees, since they hold the value of prioritizing their benefits. In this research, we delved into more specific categories of the egoism dimension of ethical climate to provide deeper insights into the ethical self-interest climate. This is defined as an egoistic ethical climate at the individual level, where employees care more about personal interest (e.g., to protect themselves) before making any decisions (Victor and Cullen, 1988).

An ethical self-interest climate may reduce organizational effectiveness and harm the missions of public organizations, as it possesses values that contradict the public service ideal of dedication to the community. Therefore, this research aims to develop a comprehensive framework for better understanding and mitigating self-interest climate. Through the lens of social cognitive theory, individuals would make a social comparison between themselves and others (Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2020). Subsequently, through the modeling process (observing the role model), individuals can enhance their self-efficacy to emulate learned values (see Deng, 1982; Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2020). That is, prosocially motivated public sector employees are suggested to be initial role models who could disseminate prosocial values to their colleagues, thereby promoting a spirit of public motivation rather than self-interest. We proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Prosocial motivation is negatively related to ethical self-interest climate

In order to clarify the negative effects of an ethical self-interest climate, which has been rarely studied, we provide an explanation of its influence on public service adaptive behavior. Prior studies found the positive linkage between self-interest climate on unethical outcomes such as unethical pro-organizational behavior (Sheedy et al., 2021), unethical accounting behavior (Deng et al., 2023). We propose that an ethical self-interest climate could result in less empathy when delivering public services to citizens. As such, public sector employees within an ethical self-interest climate may translate public service as a rigid system, characterized by unchanging procedures and a lack of active listening to any form of exception. Therefore, we have formulated a hypothesis regarding the negative association between an ethical self-interest climate and public service adaptive behavior.

H3: Ethical self-interest climate is negatively related to service adaptive behavior

Forming by social cognitive theory and drawing from the above discussions, we propose a triadic interaction that begins with the prosocial motivation of public sector employees. Specifically, prosocial motivation could be a key factor in encouraging public sector employees to behave prosocially (see Choi and Moon, 2016) and exhibit service adaptive behavior. Furthermore, there is a mechanism in which prosocial motivation could activate social comparison and role modeling for others to learn (see Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2020). Then, in turn, we expect the prosocially motivated public sector employees would less thinking about their benefit (reducing ethical self-interest climate) and promote service adaptive behavior. Consequently, the indirect effect of prosocial motivation on public sector employees' service adaptive behavior was hypothesized:

H4: Ethical self-interest climate mediates the relationship between prosocial motivation and service adaptive behavior. That is, prosocial motivation could lessen ethical self-interest climate and then enhance service adaptive behavior

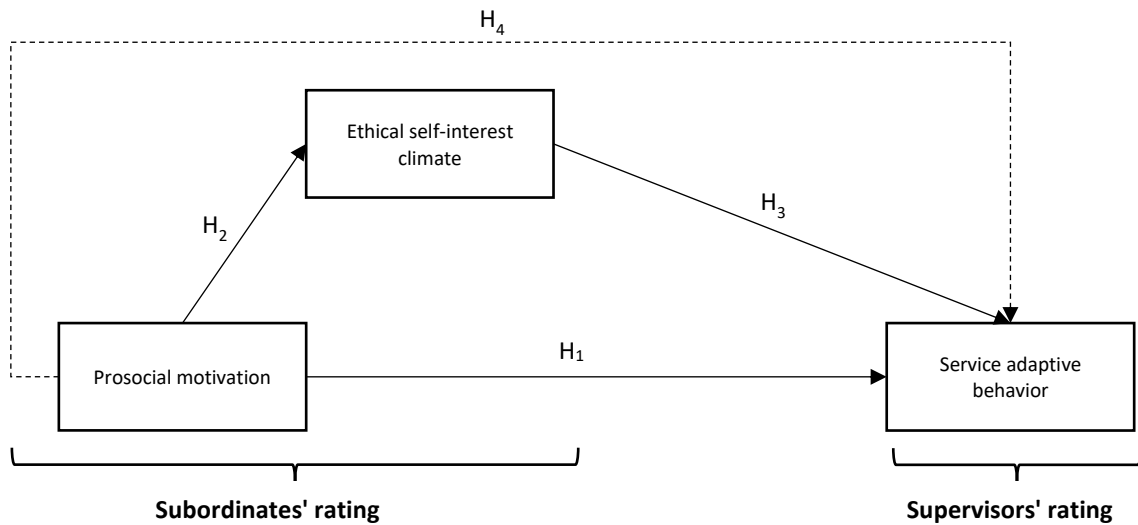Figure 1 depicts all of the relationships among constructs:

Figure 1. Research model

Source: Figure by authors

Methods

Sampling and procedure

The research data was collected using the snowball sampling method, as we lacked a sampling frame and the required participants were challenging to approach personally due to the fact that we did not have prior relationships with local governments. This sampling method is suitable and was widely used in previous behavioral studies in the public sector (e.g., Torabipour et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2021). First, we sought assistance from public leaders working in local governments in Vietnam and asked them to help us distribute questionnaires to their subordinates (non-managerial employees). Second, the public sector employees rated their answers on a digital questionnaire to provide their perceptions of (1) prosocial motivation and (2) ethical self-interest climate. Then, we asked the public supervisors to rate the service adaptive behavior of their employees to whom they had distributed the questionnaires. The answers were sent directly to the authors to ensure confidentiality and to be used solely for research purposes.

We employed the recommendation of Hair et al. (2019) to calculate the minimum sample size using G*power software with a power level of 80%, which returns that the minimum response needs to be at least 68.

Measures

The research adapted prior reliable measures used in previous studies (Table 1). Prosocial motivation was assessed via five items from Grant and Sumanth (2009). We adapted three items from the research of Sheedy et al. (2021) to evaluate the perception of public sector employees on their working aspect self-interest working climate. Finally, six items were gauged from the research of Gwinner et al. (2005) and adapted to the view of public supervisors.

Data analytic

The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM method. We followed Hair et al. (2019) to test the measurement and structural model. The measurement model was evaluated by examining loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE, and HTMT criteria. Then, the structural model was assessed via VIF value, predictive powers (explanatory and out-of-sample predictive power), and the significance of the path coefficients.

Results

Measurement model

A total of 331 valid responses were gauged in separate waves. 47.5% of participants were female, 52.5% were male and other genders. 12.7% of participants were below 25 years old and 6.3% were above 55 years old, a majority of participants were from 25 to below 55 years old (81%)

Table 1 shows that the outer loadings of all indicators were above the threshold of 0.708, representing the indicators' reliability. Next, we evaluated the internal consistency reliability, which was also confirmed by assessing Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The reliability values of latent constructs ranged between the suitable threshold of 0.7 and 0.9 (Hair et al., 2019) (prosocial motivation: α = 0.852, CR=0.894; ethical self-interest climate: α = 0.813, CR=0.889; service adaptive behavior: α = 0.829, CR=0.875). Finally, the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model were evaluated. The AVE values of all constructs were above 0.5 (see Table 1) which confirmed the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 1. Outer loadings, α, CR, AVE values

Items and loadings	α	CR	AVE
Prosocial motivation (Grant and Sumanth, 2009)			
PM1: I get energized by working on tasks that have the potential to benefit others *(0.760)*	0.852	0.894	0.628
PM2: It is important to me to have the opportunity to use my abilities to benefit others *(0.809)*			
PM3: I prefer to work on tasks that allow me to have a positive impact on others *(0.825)*			
PM4: I do my best when I'm working on a task that contributes to the well-being of others *(0.772)*			
PM5: I like to work on tasks that have the potential to benefit others *(0.795)*			
Ethical self-interest climate (Sheedy et al., 2021)			
ESC1: People around here are mostly out for themselves *(0.849)*	0.813	0.889	0.728
ESC2: People in my work unit think of their own welfare first when faced with a difficult decision *(0.850)*			
ESC3: In my work unit, people's primary concern is their own personal benefit *(0.860)*			
Service adaptive behavior (Gwinner et al.2005)			
SAB1: This employee usually adapts the type of service to meet the unique needs of each citizen *(0.721)*	0.829	0.875	0.538
SAB2: This employee uses a wide variety of strategies in attempting to satisfy the citizen *(0.739)*			
SAB3: This employee can easily suggest a wide variety of services to meet each citizen's needs *(0.725)*			
SAB4: This employee prides himself/ herself in customizing the service for the citizen *(0.731)*			
SAB5: This employee varies the actual service offering on a number of dimensions depending on the needs of the citizen *(0.709)*			
SAB6: This employee has a believe that each citizen requires a unique approach *(0.773)*			

Note: α: Cronbach's Alpha; CR: Composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted

The HTMT criteria were employed to assess the discriminant validity (Henseler, 2015). We adopted a stricter threshold value below 0.85 to confirm discriminant validity, as our latent variables were different in terms of conceptual (Henseler, 2015). Table 2 suggests the discriminant validity between latent constructs. Thus, the measurement model met the requirement for testing the structural model.

Table 2. HTMT values

	Ethical self-interest climate	Prosocial motivation	Service adaptive behavior
Ethical self-interest climate			
Prosocial motivation	0.205		
Service adaptive behavior	0.248	0.617	

Structural model

To avoid the collinearity issue, the VIF values were examined and all of the coefficients were below 3 to ensure for running further steps in structural model analysis. Next, the in-sample predictive power was assessed via R2, with the value for the target construct (service adaptive behavior - 0.292) being satisfactory (see Hair et al., 2019). The out-of-sample predictive power was also examined by performing blindfolding process, Q2 values (see Table 3) above the threshold of zero value to confirm the predictive power. The 5,000 subsamples bootstrapping process was conducted to test hypotheses. Prosocial motivation was found to significantly affect service adaptive behavior (β= 0.508***) and ethical self-interest climate (β= -0.173**), hypotheses H1 and H2 were supported. Likewise, we found support for hypothesis H3, ethical self-interest climate is negatively related to service adaptive behavior (β= -0.118*). Finally, the ethical self-interest climate was found to slightly bridge the gap between prosocial motivation and service adaptive behavior, hypothesis H4 was marginally supported. The final estimation for the structural model is presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Table 3. Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Path description	β	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	LL/UL	Conclusion
H_1	Prosocial motivation -> Service adaptive behavior	0.508***	0.049	0.400/ 0.595	Supported
H_2	Prosocial motivation -> Ethical self-interest climate	-0.173**	0.059	-0.280/ -0.051	Supported
H_3	Ethical self-interest climate -> Service adaptive behavior	-0.118*	0.046	-0.204/ -0.023	Supported
H_4	Prosocial motivation -> Ethical self-interest climate -> Service adaptive behavior	0.020 †	0.011	0.004/ 0.046	Marginally supported

R^2ethical self-interest climate=0.030; R^2service adaptive behavior=0.292; Q^2ethical self-interest climate=0.019; Q^2service adaptive behavior=0.150

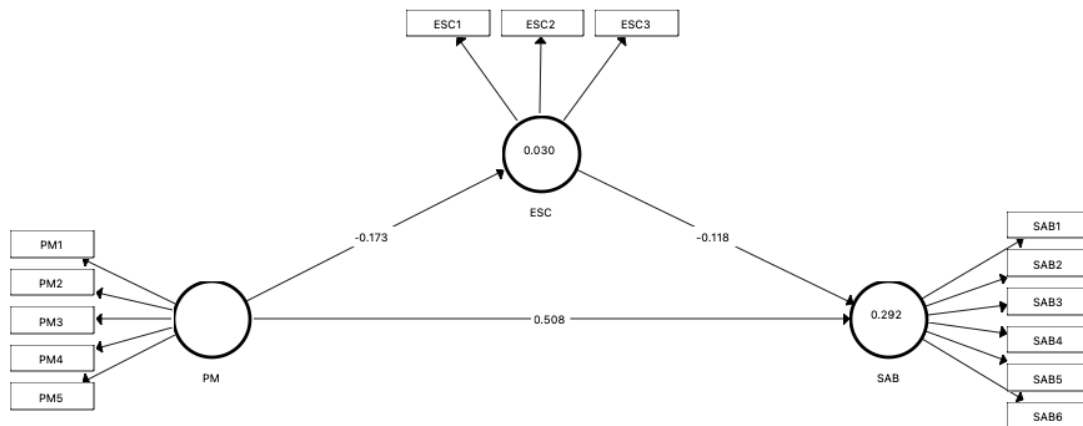*$***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ^\dagger p < 0.1$*
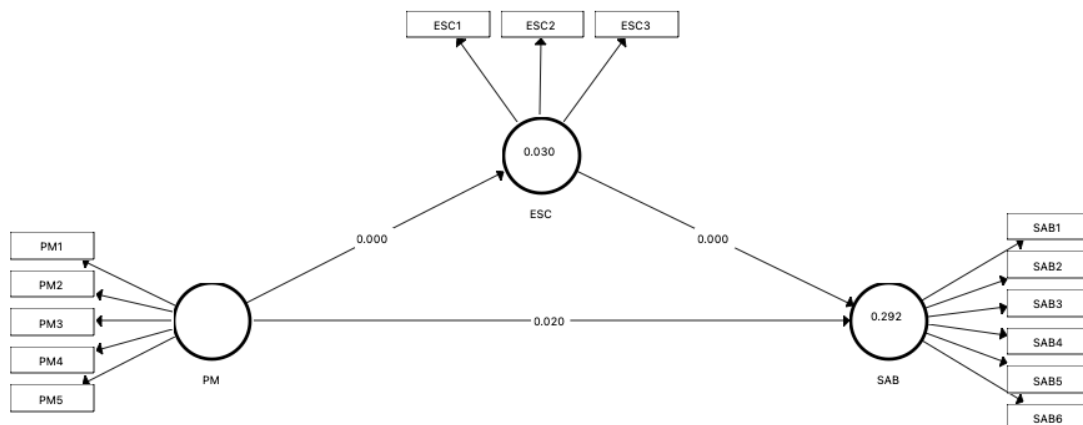

Figure 2. Direct effects

Figure 3. Indirect effect

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

The research result found a direct effect of prosocial motivation on public service adaptive behavior. This finding was consistent with prior research that a higher degree of prosocial motivation could leverage the tendency of individuals to go beyond their own benefit and concern for the well-being of others (e.g., Choi and Moon, 2016). However, unlike prior scholars focused attention on the general activities of prosocially motivated individuals towards others, this research sheds light on the behavior of public sector employees in benefiting customers and public service concurrently. Through the lens of social cognitive theory, public servants with a higher degree of prosocial motivation are likely to translate their values into behaviors, exhibiting greater flexibility and tailoring public services to demonstrate empathy and patience when listening to citizens' problems, among other things.

Second, ethical self-interest climate is a less desirable factor in any organization. Since much of the previous research has delved into the types of ethical climate (e.g., Halbusi, 2021; Chen, 2024) that could contribute to the effectiveness of organizations, this research provided a significant understanding of the negative aspects of ethical climate, wherein individuals prioritize their benefit before favoring others. We found that self-interest among employees could sustain their intention to go forward and expand their roles in improving public service. That is, the findings provided empirical evidence for further research related to obstacles that impair the effectiveness of public organizations.

Third, in providing insights into the stream of research on how to eliminate negative factors in organizations (e.g., ethical self-interest climate), the research identified an important role for prosocial motivation. Initially, prosocial motivation was found to affect organizational climate by defining caring values and triggering learning processes among public employees that shape their shared thoughts and reduce self-interest motives. Subsequently, prosocial motivation also influences the behavioral outcome by constructing and mitigating a negative organizational climate. Accordingly, prosocial motivation performs a spreading function, reducing the shared thoughts of self-interest that lead employees to go beyond their prescribed roles and extend their efforts to fulfill the needs of citizens.

Practical contributions

The research results provided empirical evidence for public practitioners. First, prosocial motivation among public servants was proved to be a vital criterion when selecting, training, and implementing management practices. Specifically, prosocial motivation has been found to possess both static and dynamic characteristics (Van der Voet and Steijn, 2021). For the former aspect, individuals with a higher level of prosocial motivation tend to choose and fit well with public service roles (Banuri and Keefer, 2016). Thus, the selection process could include tests that directly examine the motivation, such as writing tests, case studies in public service, and situational questions. The latter characteristics of prosocial motivation imply that it can be nurtured by stimulus. Therefore, there are several ways that public organizations could do such as devising prosocial motivation programs (e.g., Berry et al., 2020). Moreover, public managers could use previous studies results to enhance prosocial motivation such as socially responsible human resource management practices (e.g., Wang et al., 2023), leadership (e.g., Xu et al., 2022).

Second, prosocial motivation could reduce ethical self-interest climate and inspire public employees to put their efforts into serving citizens. Therefore, it is suggested that public managers may include ethical content in prosocial-oriented programs to direct desirable behaviors (see Berry et al., 2020 for types of prosocial outcomes). Furthermore, mindfulness training could be considered, as it would foster passion among individuals to overcome bias and prejudice, and encourage a desire to help others (Berry et al., 2020), potentially reducing the self-interested climate and leading to customer-oriented public sector employees.

Finally, there are implications for the public practitioners could think beyond the prosocial motivation to reduce ethical self-interest climate. Since the indirect effect of prosocial motivation on service adaptive behavior was marginally supported, there are also other stronger change factors that could diminish the self-interest climate among employees. For example, there are several organization climates that could exist alongside and mitigate the effect of self-interest climate (see Liu and DeFrank, 2013). That is, organizations could try to implement positive working climate through HR practices or enhance the leadership capacity which was proven to shape the organizational climate (e.g., Kim and Park, 2020; Maamari and Majdalani, 2017).

Limitations and further research directions

There are several limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. First, the research contains a limitation on research design. Although we attempted to limit the shortcomings by gauging responses from multiple sources (both employees and supervisors), the data may not be free of overestimation or underestimation of the true phenomenon due to participants' bias. For instance, the supervisor may underestimate the adaptive capacity of their employees due to a lack of observation. Second, there is a limitation regarding measures that mainly relied on the self-ratings of respondents and will need to be re-examined in future studies. That is, ethical issues need to be understood within a framework related to national culture, and a standardized moral framework must be devised to define the conditions of self-interest or an other-focused climate. Finally, a single study cannot encompass all variables and relationships to fully capture the effects of prosocial motivation (or how to promote prosocially motivated employees). Hence, future research needs to be conducted that includes other mediating or moderating mechanisms, as well as considers alternative research frameworks, to better understand the phenomenon.

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