



Climate congruence: How espoused psychosocial safety climate and enacted managerial support affect emotional exhaustion and work engagement



Yulita ^{a,b,*}, Maureen F. Dollard ^b, Mohd Awang Idris ^{a,c}

^a Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

^b Work & Stress Research Group, Asia Pacific Centre for Work Health and Safety, School of Psychology, Social Work & Social Policy, University of South Australia, CA1-05, Magill Campus, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

^c School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The alignment between espoused (saying) and enacted (doing) psychosocial safety climate (PSC; a climate for worker psychological health) is important to consider in relation to health and work outcomes. This diary study explored the interplay (moderation and mediation processes) between espoused PSC (organizational level PSC) and daily enacted PSC (operationalized in the specific domain of managerial support) and their relationships to worker psychological health (i.e., daily emotional exhaustion) and motivation (i.e., daily work engagement). In all, 545 diary data points were collected within five consecutive days from 109 secondary school teachers across 23 schools in Selangor, Malaysia. Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) in a three-level model, we found espoused PSC was positively related to daily enacted managerial support. For work engagement, espoused PSC was related to work engagement through enacted managerial support. For emotional exhaustion, enacted managerial support moderated the negative relationship between espoused PSC and daily emotional exhaustion. The expected (beneficial) effects of espoused PSC were evident when high levels aligned with high levels of enacted managerial support within schools. In this case, PSC acts as a safety signal – when high espoused PSC is coupled with repeated, unequivocal and stable support (enacted managerial support), employees may feel safe to take action in their environment to protect themselves from emotional exhaustion. These findings offer new insights regarding how managers can build PSC, by valuing employee psychological health, and translating PSC into action (integrity in saying and doing), to increase psychological health and work engagement.

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1. Introduction

Globally, work stress is a major challenge for both workers and organizations due to worker psychological and physical ill-health and financial losses associated with reduced work engagement, sickness absence, and workers compensation (Bailey et al., 2015; EU-OSHA, 2009; McTernan et al., 2013). The European Union for Occupational Safety and Health statistics showed that nearly one-third of European workers experienced work-related stress with an estimated cost of EUR 20 billion annually (EU-OSHA, 2007). Similarly, the 2015 Gallup US daily survey reported that

68% of US workers and 87% of worldwide workers were disengaged with their work (Adkins, 2016; Mann and Harter, 2016), and approximately 18% of disengaged US workers suffered from psychological (depression and stress) and physical (hypertension, cholesterol, and obesity) problems (Harter and Adkins, 2015). In the same year, the Staples Advantage Workplace Index (2015) showed the majority (86%) of US and Canada workers were happy and motivated at work, yet surprisingly 53% were also burned out at the same time. Elsewhere, in Australia, only 50% of workers considered that their workplaces were mentally healthy (Beyondblue, 2014). Clearly increased attention needs to be given to the organizational climate that could protect and promote worker psychological health and work engagement.

Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) is a specific facet of organizational climate for worker psychological health and well-being; it concerns management commitment, management priority,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

E-mail addresses: yu_2202@siswa.um.edu.my (Yulita), Maureen.Dollard@unisa.edu.au (M.F. Dollard), idrma@um.edu.my (M.A. Idris).

communication systems, and participation and involvement of all stakeholders within organizations, in relation to worker psychological health and well-being (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). Senior management values and philosophy about employees' psychological health and welfare drive the manifestation of PSC, in the face of competing interests such as productivity imperatives. As a climate concept, PSC is assessed by the shared perceptions of employees about organizational policies, practices, and procedures for employee psychological health and safety (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). The main objective of our study was to examine the mechanism via which organizational psychosocial safety climate (PSC) affects worker psychological health and motivation by using a climate congruence and proximity approach.

In this study, we were concerned with how PSC related to psychological health (operationalized as emotional exhaustion) and work motivation (operationalized as work engagement). Emotional exhaustion is the central manifestation of burnout and occurs when individuals experience taxing demands that sap energy reserves leading to feelings of being burned out (Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Maslach et al., 2001). In contrast, work engagement is a positive cognitive-affective condition categorized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002). An engaged worker displays energetic behavior and a high level of devotion towards their work (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2006). Employees who are psychologically healthy, with high work engagement, yield benefits for the employee and organization alike.

The level of PSC in workplaces has important implications for worker psychological health and productivity-related outcomes. Evidence confirms that workers in high PSC contexts have higher levels of psychological health, such as reduced emotional exhaustion (Idris et al., 2014), and positive worker motivational states, such as work engagement (Idris et al., 2015) compared to low PSC workplaces. While there are several potential mechanisms linking organizational PSC to psychological health and work engagement such as job quality (i.e., higher resources vs. less job demands, see Idris et al., 2015, 2014), an open question relates to the dynamic unfolding of PSC over time. To date, there is no theory that disentangles espoused PSC (what organizations say they do via formal policies and procedures) and enacted PSC (what managers actually do). In this paper, we address this gap and advance PSC theory by considering the kinds of manifestations that characterize espoused PSC (a snapshot of organizational PSC) vs. enacted PSC (operationalized as daily individual perceptions of managerial social support), and whether the effect of espoused PSC on daily perceptions of emotional exhaustion and work engagement is moderated or mediated by enacted PSC (specifically managerial support).

To explain the moderation process, we draw on “theories of action” (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996), to highlight the importance of congruence between espoused and enacted managerial support and implications for employee psychological health and work engagement. The practical significance of this “climate congruence” approach already discussed in the safety climate literature (Zohar, 2003), is that it will throw light on the importance of integrity in PSC – enacting what one is espousing, saying and doing the same thing – and the consequent ramifications for employee behavior. We use safety signal theory (Lohr et al., 2007), to explain why enacted managerial support acts as a safety signal, and interacts with espoused PSC in relation to emotional exhaustion and work engagement.

To explain the mediation process, we refer to the PSC extended framework of job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Drawing on Dollard and Bakker (2010), we conceived that espoused PSC is a property of the organization that may stimulate the enactment of PSC (a

resource, managerial support), and in turn influence emotional exhaustion and work engagement. Since enacted managerial support is evident on a daily basis, its effect is more proximal and immediate. We tested these mechanisms using a diary study across five consecutive days from 109 secondary school teachers across 23 schools in Selangor, Malaysia, an emerging developing country in South East Asia.

1.1. Climate congruence: espoused vs. enacted policies

The theoretical underpinning of “theories of action” particularly highlights the alignment between words and actions, by using the concepts of espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996). Theories of action are key to understanding human behavior. These theories are governed by a set of values that provide the framework for action strategies chosen, where human actors are conceived as designing beings, that create, store and retrieve designs to guide future action for goal attainment (Argyris, 1995, p. 20). By definition, espoused theory refers to values and beliefs that are used to guide behaviors, whereas theory-in-use (enacted theory) is defined as the actions taken that are based on these values and beliefs (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The core premise of this theory is the necessity to align both espoused and theory-in-use in order to achieve the most effective action and intended outcomes.

Scholars have argued for a distinction between espoused and enacted climate in organizational climate theory (Simons, 2002; Zohar, 2000). Espoused climate represents perceptions of policies (i.e., strategic goals and means for their attainment), practices (i.e., guidelines for action related to goals and means) and procedures (i.e., implementation of policies and procedures) that are shared among members (Zohar and Luria, 2005). Enacted climate represents enacted policies, practices, and procedures that are utilized practically in the organization. Applied to safety climate, congruence between espoused and enacted climate is crucial in order to achieve safety goals, particularly in high risk industries, to prevent accidents and injuries (Zohar, 2003). However, in any organization there are competing imperatives; for example, even though management may value worker health and safety, their productivity and profit imperatives may drive them to behave contrarily to espoused values and to cut corners in relation to health and safety policy implementation. Similarly, PSC is related to safety climate but is focally concerned with worker psychological health rather than worker physical health, injuries, and accidents (Idris et al., 2012). Nevertheless, both PSC and safety climate investigate the role of management and the work environment as determinants of worker health and safety (Dollard and Bakker, 2010; Neal and Griffin, 2006). In the present study, we used organizational level PSC to represent espoused theory and perceived daily managerial social support to represent enacted PSC in the specific domain of management support. Workplaces with high PSC (espoused climate) should provide good supervisory support for their employees (an exemplar of enacted managerial support).

Senior managers set down policies and procedures to achieve organizational goals and the means to achieve them, such as in a climate for service and a climate for safety (Zohar, 2008). Likewise, in establishing a climate for psychological health, managers set down relevant policies, practices, and procedures that specifically relate to employee psychological health (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). To guide their behaviors, employees must make sense of complex and complicated organizational contexts, and sometimes contradictory information and actions (Weick, 1995). According to Zohar (2008), for employees, assessing policies, practices, and procedures is difficult, and requires distinguishing formal policy and procedures (overt statements, policies, and procedures) from enacted practices that are tacit and derived through observation.

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