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# Ethical Climates Across National Contexts: A Meta-Analytical Investigation

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## Abstract

Ethical climates remain one of the most popular ways to assess the ethical orientations of companies. There has been a plethora of studies examining the relationship between ethical climates and critical outcomes, which was triggered by Victor and Cullen's seminal work published 35 years ago. After such a long period of strong research activity in this topic area, it is time to take stock of the accumulated empirical evidence. This meta-analytic review incorporates the considerations of alternative conceptualizations of ethical climates and integrates an international comparative perspective on the consequences of ethical climates. Given the state of the field, it is imperative to assess the tenability of the various relationships of ethical climate types across national contexts. As such, we first provide an update on how ethical climates are related to key organizational outcomes and assess how country-level factors affect the consequences of ethical climates. We present our findings along theoretical, empirical, and methodological issues, discuss the implications of our findings for extant research and provide suggestions for future research for each of the three avenues.

**Keywords** Ethical climate · Institutional anomie theory · Meta-analysis · Cross-cultural analysis

## Introduction

As more scrutiny is paid to organizations and their executives' behaviors, understanding an organization's ethics remains critical (Friend et al., 2020; Kuenzi et al., 2020). This relevance of business ethics is underscored by plentiful examples of ethical misbehavior in organizations worldwide (e.g., Brannan, 2017; Senthilingam, 2017). For the past 35 years, one of the most popular ways to examine

ethics at an organizational level has been through ethical climates (David et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2017; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). The concept was theoretically conceptualized and empirically tested by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988). According to this perspective, ethical climates "represent a subset of the array of work climates and refer to the institutionalized organizational practices and procedures that define what is considered right or wrong within the organization" (Parboteeah & Kapp, 2008, p. 517). Ethical climates are lenses through which issues with ethical implications can be examined (Newman et al., 2017), thus providing employees with bases for ethical decision-making.

An important aspect of ethical climate research has been to examine the impact of these climates on many outcomes, such as work attitudes and ethical and unethical outcomes, which have been examined in over 400 studies and reviewed in several others (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Mayer, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012). Furthermore, Friend et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis to understand the impact of ethical climates on important outcomes for frontline service employees. However, despite the significant research attention, we note several gaps that hinder further progress in theory development on ethical climates in organizations. This is especially critical given that the

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ethical climate concept was proposed 35 years ago (Victor & Cullen, 1987) and the most recent work suggests a rehauling of the concept (Weber & Opoku-Dakwa, 2022).

First, our analysis of previous reviews suggests that prior research has been mostly interested in understanding the antecedents or consequences of ethical climates (Friend et al., 2020; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Mayer, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012). What is more, these studies focused on individual-level or organization-level moderators such as climate strength (Shin, 2012), leaving potential moderators on the country level, in particular regarding cultural aspects, virtually unexplored. While Martin and Cullen (2006) found that positive ethical climates, such as benevolent and principled, have beneficial effects on positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and ethical outcomes, a more recent research review reveals inconsistent findings (Newman et al., 2017). Consider, for instance, that while VanSandt et al. (2006) found benevolent and principled climates were positively related to moral awareness and egoistic ethical climates were negatively related to moral awareness in a U.S. sample, Lau and Wong (2009) found beneficial effects of an egoistic climate with regards to a preference for procedural justice in a sample of Hong Kong companies. Similarly, examining an Indonesian sample, Putranta and Kingshott (2011) found that the egoist ethical climate did not negatively relate to all forms of organizational commitment, despite the expectation of a negative relationship as found by Martin and Cullen's (2006) meta-analysis. These divergent international research results suggest that there are moderating factors at work across national contexts that might change the role and consequences of ethical climates with increasing cultural distance (Shenkar, 2012). Given the need for organizations to be ethical globally, it is critical for researchers to understand global ethical climates, with important implications for managing ethical climates across national contexts.

Second, in addition to the traditional measures of ethical climates based on Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) work, other conceptualizations of the ethical climate concept have been developed (e.g., Arnaud & Schminke, 2012; Schminke et al., 2005; Schwepker et al., 1997; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). These are distinct from Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) conceptualization. Rather than considering the bases of ethical decision making in organizations, these ethical climate concepts, and the factors they consist of, focus on their effects on ethical issues in organizations, assessing "individuals' perceptions of those practices, procedures, norms, and values that govern ethical decisions in their organizations" (Schwepker et al., 1997, p.101). These factors are assumed to contribute to a more positive ethical climate. Previous reviews have either ignored such alternative conceptualizations (Martin & Cullen, 2006) or solely focused on them (Friend et al., 2020) without considering Victor and

Cullen's (1987, 1988) one. We, therefore, also consider other accepted perspectives of ethical climates and compare them to Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) conceptualization, thus addressing an important gap in current literature on ethical climates.

Finally, except for Martin and Cullen's (2006) meta-analysis based on 42 studies, we note that there has been no significant and comprehensive recent quantitative examination of the many hypothesized relationships with the ethical climate concept. The more recent comprehensive review by Newman et al. (2017) provides a narrative discussion of the results of around 95 studies. While providing conceptual integration, their review was not intended to address the empirical aspects in detail. However, our careful evaluation of articles suggests that there are more studies that have investigated ethical climates empirically. As such, it is important for us to take stock of the field's current state to move forward. We aim to confirm or update previous relationships while also testing new hypotheses that we believe make significant contributions to the literature. Additionally, we also examine many outcomes such as performance and stress in addition to the previous meta-analysis that considered only aspects such as organization commitment, job satisfaction, and dysfunctional behaviors (Martin & Cullen, 2006).

Given the above gaps, we conduct an important meta-analysis to update the literature on the various types of ethical climates, incorporating some more recent conceptualizations of ethical climates. We consider the five most widely used ethical climate types within Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) framework (Martin & Cullen, 2006) and their relationships with outcomes such as organizational commitment (Bulutlar & Öz, 2009), satisfaction (Fu & Deshpande, 2012), (un)ethical behavior (Kaptein, 2011), performance (Chun et al., 2013), and well-being (DeConinck, 2010). Through this approach, we provide a much-needed update on the understanding of ethical climates. Additionally, we also make a critical contribution to our cross-national understanding of ethical climates by examining how national culture affects the primary relationships between ethical climate types and outcomes. Given the difficulties of a large cross-national study examining ethical climates, we integrate cross-national studies that have been conducted in single nations within clusters based on the GLOBE framework (House et al., 2004). Furthermore, the meta-analysis procedure "involves the combining of sample sizes by averaging effects of different samples to produce a statistical estimate of effect/association that carries the implications of the combined sample size" (Allen, 2020, p. 77). We conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis comprising research based on 293 independent samples from studies conducted in a total of 46 different countries and advance the incorporation of the numerous country studies into a single study to generate

a more robust theoretical cross-national understanding of ethical climate. In sum, this meta-analytical investigation will offer a state-of-the-art understanding of ethical climates in the global arena and strive to enable researchers worldwide to better position their theorizing on ethical climates within their respective geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

## Ethical Climates and their Outcomes

The ethical climate theory was derived from the general organizational climate literature based on the view that climates are "the shared perceptions of procedures, policies, and practices, both formal and informal, of the organization" (Simha & Cullen, 2012, p. 21). Past studies have identified many forms of climate, including safety climates (Parboteeah & Kapp, 2008), innovation climates (Anderson & West, 1998), and diversity climates (McKay et al., 2009). The overwhelming finding of these other forms of climate is that they affect organizational members through their impact on attitudes and behaviors of these individuals. As such, when applied to the context of ethical decision-making, the ethical climate concept has been shown to impact many aspects of organizational life (Newman et al., 2017).

Originally based on Kohlberg's (1984) work on moral development, 35 years ago Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) suggested that organizations similarly go through stages of moral development and the dominant work climate in any organization can be characterized along the criteria that are used to make decisions that have ethical implications. Three forms of ethical climate were proposed, namely an egoist, a benevolent, and a principled climate (Victor & Cullen, 1987, 1988), with each climate type underscoring specific criteria for ethical decision-making. The egoist climate characterizes organizational climates that favor maximizing self-interests and joint benefits. In contrast, in benevolent climates, adherents prefer caring for each other and maximizing the good for the greatest number of people. The principled ethical climate emphasizes the following of rules and regulations when decisions with ethical implications are made. In addition to the ethical climate types, Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) also proposed three levels or loci: the individual, local, and cosmopolitan loci. These refer to the referent sources on which the decision-maker bases the application of the ethical criteria. Combining the three ethical climate types in this model and their three potential loci yields nine possible theoretical ethical climate types, as discussed extensively in Simha and Cullen (2012).

Despite the nine possible theoretical ethical climate types, empirical research has found consistent support for only five ethical climate types, namely an instrumental (combination of egoism-individual and egoism-local), caring (combination

of benevolent-individual and benevolent-local) and all three principled climate combinations (Martin & Cullen, 2006). The arguments for the caring climate center around the preference for the well-being of the collective. In such climates, individuals are more likely to engage in behavior and attitudes that contribute more strongly to desirable outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, etc. In the principled climates, the focus on rules, regulations, and principles suggests that in such climates, individuals rely on such rules and regulations, thereby relating to more desirable outcomes such as more ethical behaviors. In contrast, previous empirical research based on the egoism dimension (the instrumental ethical climate type) found that it is negatively related to desirable outcomes (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012). The focus on self-interested behaviors creates conditions whereby negative behaviors such as unethical behaviors are encouraged, and aspects related to well-being are negatively affected.

Consistent with previous reviews of ethical climate research (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012), we base our theorizing on these five ethical climate types. Our decision to focus only on the five ethical climate types was based on the need to gather enough studies to accurately compute associations between ethical climates and the outcomes we consider. Newman's et al. (2017, p. 477), examination of ethical climate research suggests that "the overwhelming majority use the subset of commonly observed ethical climates." Consideration of the other ethical climate types is difficult as the limited number of studies do not yield enough statistical power to detect relationships.

In addition to considering the five most found ethical climate types, we also consider an alternative conceptualization of the ethical climate concept (e.g., Arnaud, 2010; Babin et al., 2000; Kaptein, 2008; Schminke et al., 2005; Schwepker et al., 1997; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). In these cases, researchers have used the term ethical climate to refer to environments characterized by stronger ethics (Friend et al., 2020). These approaches have developed independent of the Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) conceptualization and assess "individuals' perceptions of those practices, procedures, norms, and values that govern ethical decisions in their organizations" (Schwepker et al., 1997, p. 101). For instance, Schwepker et al. (1997) used a seven-item measure to assess issues such as the presence and enforcement of codes of ethics and corporate policies on ethics. These aspects are thus assumed to contribute to a more positive ethical climate. This alternative, more general, perspective on ethical climates also came along with aligning ethical climates more closely with peculiarities of certain industries and professions (Brinkmann, 2002; Brinkmann & Henriksen, 2008), like healthcare, services, and accounting (e.g., Friend et al., 2020; Latimer et al., 2023), or like nurses, real estate agents, and sales agents (e.g., Brinkmann, 2009;

Kadic-Magljalic et al., 2019). In some of these focus areas, this has even led to adapting the measurement instruments to the specific contexts as in healthcare, where a widely used assessment tool is the Hospital Ethical Climate Scale (Olson, 1998). Given that most previous reviews have ignored this alternative more general conceptualization, or solely focused on it (Friend et al., 2020), we integrate the findings based on this accepted perspective of ethical climates with the Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) conceptualization, thus addressing another important gap in the current literature on ethical climates.

Figure 1 shows the framework examined in our meta-analytic approach. The paper proceeds as follows: We first present our methodological approach with a focus on the study identification and decision rules for inclusion in this study. We then document our analysis examining the bivariate correlations between the five types of ethical climates discussed earlier with the positive and negative outcomes we consider. For the cross-national moderator analysis, we consider GLOBE's clusters and examine differences between these clusters among the relationships between ethical climates and outcomes. Finally, we discuss the implications for theory and future research.

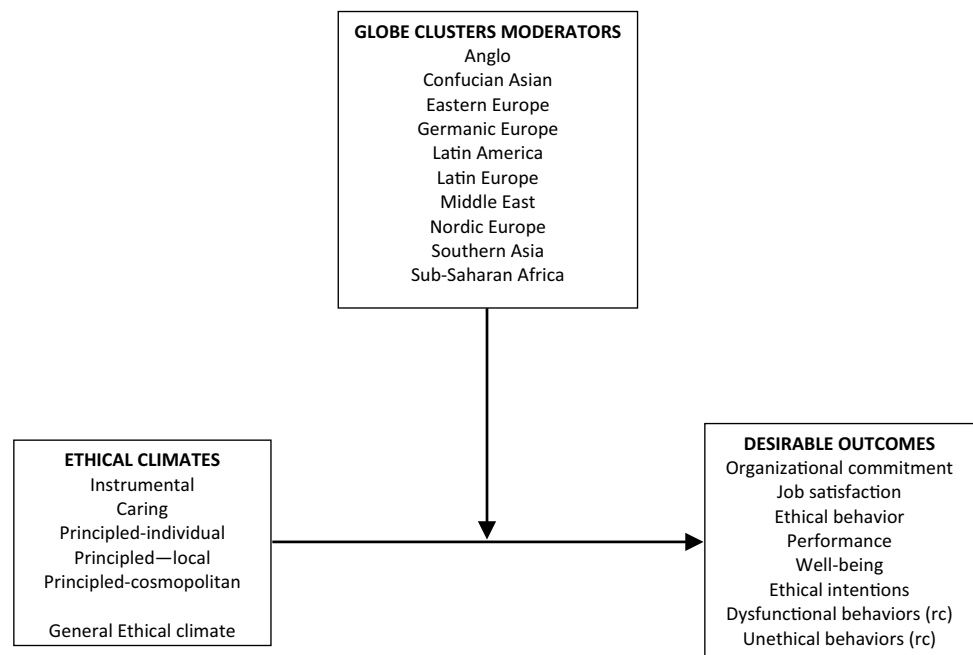
## Methods

### Sampling

*Study identification.* To look for the studies relevant to our meta-analysis, we followed recommendations by Hiebl

(2021). We first conducted a keyword search in scholarly databases to identify studies dealing with ethical climates. As some terms are used interchangeably with ethical climate in the literature, we added some search terms beyond ethical climate. We, therefore, looked for combinations of words pointing to ethical aspects and aspects of climate, including synonymously used terms in the literature. These synonyms included the term moral as another way to express ethical considerations (Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2015; Vidaver-Cohen, 1998), and which is therefore sometimes used synonymously to the term ethical. Moreover, regarding alternative verbalization of what the climate aspect conveys, we added the terms culture and orientation to our search terms. Specifically, we therefore used the search string (*ethic\* OR moral\*) AND (climate\* OR culture\* OR orientation\*)* in titles, keywords, or abstracts of publications. For this, we perused three databases of scholarly research: *ISI Web of Science*, *ProQuest Dissertations*, and *Scopus*. We focused on these broad and generic scholarly databases in order to ensure inclusion of relevant studies that might have been published in other disciplines outside the core domain of our research question, i.e., management in general, and business ethics in particular (Hiebl, 2021). We completed these search queries in November 2022 and all articles published until this time were subject to our search efforts (including online publication). The utility of doing so became quite clear in our literature search, as we were able to identify studies from literatures aside from management and business ethics (e.g., accounting, nursing). The natural starting date for the searches was 1987, when the seminal article on ethical climates was published by Victor and Cullen (1987)

**Fig. 1** Relationships examined in meta-analysis





that introduced the concept of ethical climates in the organizational literature. It is important to note that we took further steps in our literature search in order to ensure that we did not miss any relevant studies due to a differing use of key terms (Hiebl, 2021).

Beyond this keyword-based database search, we therefore manually looked through the titles and abstracts of articles in the main outlets focusing on business ethics research, i.e., the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business Ethics Quarterly*, and in top-tier general management journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Organization Science*, *Strategic Management Journal*), which allowed us to spot further relevant studies that used a different terminology. Moreover, we manually looked through previous meta-analyses and reviews on ethical climates (Friend et al., 2020; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012) and performed forward and backward citation search of the identified studies. Finally, to seek unpublished work, we looked through programs of academic conferences and posted requests for unpublished papers and studies that dealt with ethical climates on listservs of academic associations, such as the organizational behavior division of the Academy of Management.

In total, this exercise resulted in 916 publications that examined ethical climates (the keyword search also yielded hundreds of further publications that complied with the used key terms but dealt with other topics like ethical considerations of climate change; we manually checked and discarded these false positives of our search efforts). To ensure that we did not miss any relevant studies in the keyword search, we ran a backward and forward citation search of the identified articles, which did not yield further candidate studies.

**Screening.** Of all candidate publications, we performed a manual content analysis based on several screening criteria to exclude all publications that were not suitable for our meta-analysis (Hiebl, 2021). First, since meta-analysis requires statistical information about relationship between the focal variables (in our case ethical climates and outcome variables), we excluded all studies that did not report the results of quantitative empirical analyses (e.g., theoretical articles or qualitative research). Second, we excluded all those quantitative studies that did not measure ethical climate or related climates. Similarly, we had to exclude quantitative studies that measured ethical climates but did not examine their relationships to outcome variables. For example, some of the identified publications focused on antecedents of ethical climates (e.g., Wu & Tsai, 2012) or on specifying the factor structure of ethical climate instruments (e.g., Agarwal & Malloy, 1999). Third, we excluded studies that did not report the correlations between variables or other statistics that could be converted into correlations (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001), and whose authors did not answer

or refused our requests for providing us with the correlations. If more than one study examined an identical dataset, we included only one of the reported correlations. Two or more different samples from the same study were treated as independent samples if there was no overlap between them. Finally, our meta-analytic sample included 293 independent samples from 46 countries. A complete overview of all studies included in the sample, see Table SOM-1 in the supplemental online materials. For an overview of the study search and selection process, please see the flowchart based on Kepes et al. (2013) in Figure SOM-1.

## Meta-Analytic Procedures

**Coding.** We took several measures to ensure the integrity of the data entered into the meta-analytic database based on established recommendations in the literature (Aytug et al., 2012; Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). First, trained research assistants entered each study into the database. Each of these studies was then checked and verified by the second author. For coding the variables, the second author instructed another research assistant, who was blind to the purpose of the study, about the coding procedures. To ensure that these coding procedures were fully understood, the trained research assistant and the second author both coded 10 percent of the identified studies and discussed any disagreements in coding to reach a consensus and to clarify potential misunderstandings of the coding protocol. After that, the research assistant completed the coding of the remaining studies. The second author then checked the final coding results. This coding procedure is in line with the approach of many previous meta-analyses (e.g., Leslie et al., 2014; Peng & Kim, 2020; Simons et al., 2015).

**Updating and extending** Martin and Cullen (2006). For our comprehensive overview of outcomes of ethical climates, we conducted bivariate analyses to provide a detailed overview of the various ethical climates and constructed a meta-analytic correlation matrix. Similar to Martin and Cullen (2006), we examined the five ethical climates based on Victor and Cullen (instrumental, caring, independence, law and code, and rules) together with the outcome categories (commitment, satisfaction, well-being, and dysfunctional behavior). Extending the approach by Martin and Cullen (2006), we added another conceptualization of ethical climates (i.e., general ethical climates), and we added the outcome category of performance, which was not included in Martin and Cullen (2006). This also includes negative outcomes (e.g., stress, dysfunctional behavior, turnover intention) that have been examined in the identified studies that represent the opposite of the respective outcome category. In these cases, we reverted the sign of the correlation to match the direction of the positively oriented outcome categories.

We conducted this analysis based on a random-effects model, taking into account the variations in population parameters across studies (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). We computed a sample-size-weighted mean correlation for the measures of the ethical climates with each of the outcome dimensions. To account for the nested nature of our meta-analytic data, where correlations are nested within studies, we used a multi-level approach in running the analyses. We did so because if multiple effect sizes from the same sample are used to calculate mean correlations (e.g., when multiple outcome variables from the same category are included in a study), ignoring these dependencies may compromise statistical inferences and inflate the Type I error rate (Van den Noortgate et al., 2014), while averaging would mean a loss of valuable information.

For the meta-analytic regression analysis, we used the restricted maximum likelihood estimator, given that this estimator has been shown to be approximately unbiased and efficient in meta-analysis (Viechtbauer, 2005). The correlations were corrected for measurement error indicated by reliability estimates (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). If no such reliability estimate was reported, we calculated and used the average reliability estimate for a variable. Moreover, we calculated the standard deviations of the mean corrected correlations and the 95% confidence intervals around them. We reported the results we obtained from these calculations applying the metafor package in R (Viechtbauer, 2010).

*International moderation analysis.* In our international moderator analysis of the effects of ethical climates, we report the relationship between the different ethical climates and their outcomes separately for geographical clusters. These clusters are based on the ones identified in project GLOBE (Gupta et al., 2002). The 293 independent studies in our meta-analytical sample allowed us to cover the following clusters for this analysis: Anglo, Confucian Asia, Eastern Europe, Germanic Europe, Latin America, Latin Europe, Middle East, Nordic Europe, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. An overview of all the 46 countries in our meta-analytic sample and the clusters they represent can be found in Table 1.

For this moderator analysis, we focus on a more inclusive perspective on outcomes of ethical climates, which we unite under the umbrella of *desirable outcomes*. This incorporates the many desirable outcomes available in our sample's studies, some of which go beyond the outcomes reported in our meta-analytical correlation matrix (i.e., ethical and unethical intentions). We decided to combine the outcome variables for their inherent conceptual proximity to enable our regional comparison without creating overwhelming complexity (i.e., 10 country clusters and 6 ethical climates already result in voluminous results tables), while on a methodological level

**Table 1** Countries and clusters represented in the meta-analytic sample

Cluster	Countries	# Samples
Anglo	Australia	5
	Canada	2
	New Zealand	1
	UK	4
	US	108
	<i>Total</i>	<i>120</i>
Confucian Asia	China	29
	Hong Kong	1
	Japan	1
	South Korea	15
	Singapore	2
	Taiwan	12
	<i>Total</i>	<i>60</i>
Eastern Europe	Bosnia	3
	Greece	2
	Montenegro	1
	North-Macedonia	1
	Poland	1
	Russia	1
	Serbia	1
	Slovenia	1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>
Germanic Europe	Belgium	2
	Germany	3
	Netherlands	8
	Switzerland	1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>14</i>
Latin America	Brazil	1
	Colombia	1
	Mexico	1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>3</i>
Latin Europe	France	3
	Israel	12
	Italy	5
	Portugal	3
	Spain	7
	<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>
Middle East	Turkey	13
Nordic Europe	Finland	3
	Norway	1
	Sweden	2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>6</i>

**Table 1** (continued)

Cluster	Countries	# Samples
Southern Asia	Bangladesh	2
	India	10
	Indonesia	2
	Iran	4
	Malaysia	3
	Pakistan	8
	Thailand	4
	<i>Total</i>	<i>33</i>
Sub-Saharan Africa	DR Congo	2
	Ethiopia	1
	Nigeria	7
	Uganda	1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>

the combined sample sizes provide us with more power for our meta-analytic examinations. In the moderator analysis, we thus consider how the geographic location of the studies either strengthened or weakened the relationships between the ethical climate types and desirable outcomes.

**Publication bias.** In many cases, meta-analyses suffer from the "file-drawer" problem, which is a tendency not to publish insignificant results (Kepes et al., 2012). To probe for the likelihood of any publication bias, we examined the distribution of effect sizes for all outcome dimensions to test for potential biases in publication or in our retrieval of studies (Rothstein et al., 2005). To do so, we applied the trim-and-fill technique, which is based on funnel plot symmetry and calculates the number of studies to be imputed in order to create a more symmetric funnel plot (Duval & Tweedie, 2000). These imputations can then be used to adjust for the influence that the potentially missing studies might have had on the estimates in order to obtain more conservative population estimates. In the case of our study, while the tests of the funnel plots signaled some asymmetry, running the trim-and-fill analyses altered neither the level of significance nor the direction of any hypothesized relationship. In contrast, the results tended to strengthen the patterns found in the bivariate analyses.

## Results

### Update of Martin and Cullen (2006)

Consistent with Fig. 1, we first wanted to update the Martin and Cullen (2006) meta-analysis. The results of the bivariate analyses are shown in Table 2. In this table, we summarize all findings that have been published in the

literature on ethical climates since its inception 35 years ago. In line with the results by Martin and Cullen (2006), we see that the relationships between egoist ethical climates and most desirable outcomes are significantly negative (and significantly positive for dysfunctional behavior as an outcome) for those relationships that are analyzed based on more than three studies. The only exception is the outcome dimension performance; here, there is no significant relationship with instrumental climates.

As expected, and in contrast, the benevolent ethical climate shows significant positive effects on all desirable outcome dimensions (and a significant negative one for dysfunctional behavior). Similar results apply for the principled ethical climates independence, rules, and law and code in those instances where the analysis based on more than two independent samples. However, the outcome dimension performance is an exception here as well in that we did not find significant relationships with all three principled ethical climates. This is noteworthy, even though there is a positive tendency, as for all these principled ethical climates we had at least seven independent samples (7 for independence, 9 for law and code, 11 for rules), and thus, the results clearly show that the positive relationship between principled ethical climates and performance is weaker than for caring climates.

Beyond the update of the findings by Martin and Cullen (2006) is our examination on the effects of general ethical climate, as Martin and Cullen (2006) focused only on studies within the theoretical framework by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988). We also display the summarized effects for this general approach to conceptualize ethical climates in Table 2, along with the overall effects for the other five ethical climates. The results show that such general ethical climates mostly resemble the relationships of the benevolent ethical climate in Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) framework and are significantly positively related to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, well-being, and performance and are negatively related to dysfunctional behavior.

### International Comparison Based on GLOBE Clusters

In Table 3, we present our international moderator analysis findings of the effects of ethical climates for different geographical clusters. Here, we report how the geographic location of the studies resulted in different relationships between the six studied ethical climate types and desirable outcomes. Generally, the sometimes-broad confidence intervals point to still further relevant moderators within the respective clusters, which are beyond the scope of this study.

Regarding instrumental ethical climates, we can see marked differences across the geographical clusters.



**Table 2** Meta-analytic correlation matrix for main climate types and outcomes

Variable	Commitment	Satisfaction	Well-Being	Dysfunctional Behavior	Performance
1. Instrumental	– 0.30 (– 0.41, – 0.19) (35, 10,298, 0.31)	– 0.20 (– 0.30, – 0.09) (29, 9970, 0.27)	– 0.11 (– 0.36, 0.14) (2, 305, 0.16)	0.25 (0.15, 0.35) (33, 5056, 0.28)	0.04 (– 0.12, 0.20) (14, 4679, 0.26)
2. Caring	0.53 (0.47, 0.60) (40, 16,149, 0.19)	0.47 (0.39, 0.56) (32, 11,373, 0.23)	0.43 (0.20, 0.67) (4, 1070, 0.11)	– 0.28 (– 0.36, – 0.20) (26, 6945, 0.18)	0.21 (0.08, 0.34) (16, 5526, 0.23)
3. Independence	0.24 (0.12, 0.35) (21, 9828, 0.25)	0.28 (0.17, 0.39) (23, 8280, 0.26)	–	– 0.20 (– 0.30, – 0.10) (19, 9499, 0.19)	0.17 (– 0.02, 0.37) (7, 2414, 0.25)
4. Law & Code	0.39 (0.32, 0.47) (28, 12,985, 0.18)	0.35 (0.23, 0.47) (25, 9699, 0.29)	–	– 0.27 (– 0.41, – 0.13) (14, 3830, 0.17)	0.16 (– 0.00, 0.32) (9, 2439, 0.24)
5. Rules	0.34 (0.28, 0.41) (25, 7664, 0.15)	0.38 (0.28, 0.48) (23, 8319, 0.23)	0.08 (– 0.09, 0.28) (2, 437, 0.12)	– 0.27 (– 0.34, – 0.20) (30, 12,328, 0.17)	0.13 (– 0.01, 0.28) (11, 3692, 0.24)
6. General	0.45 (0.40, 0.49) (68, 25,964, 0.18)	0.44 (0.38, 0.50) (49, 17,670, 0.20)	0.24 (0.14, 0.35) (30, 12,583, 0.25)	– 0.25 (– 0.31, – 0.19) (55, 17,385, 0.22)	0.34 (0.27, 0.40) (66, 18,824, 0.26)

<sup>a</sup>Mean correlations corrected for measurement error are presented. Values in parentheses below correlations indicate the lower and upper bound of the 95% confidence interval. Values in parentheses below confidence intervals indicate k (number of studies), N(total sample size), and SDR (standard deviation of observed correlations)

While, on average, this climate shows a significantly negative relationship with desirable outcomes, we do not see such a significant negative effect for the Sub-Saharan, Latin Europe, and Southern Asia clusters. Here, the confidence intervals include zero, and thus, no significant relationship between instrumental ethical climate and desirable outcomes was detected. In contrast, the negative relationship between instrumental ethical climate and a desirable outcome was stronger for Confucian Asia and Germanic Europe.

A more uniform picture emerges for the caring ethical climate. This ethical climate type represents one of only two that consistently show significant and positive relationships with desirable outcomes for all clusters. Moreover, this ethical climate also shows the strongest positive effect sizes on average. Still, there is also some variation in the strength of these positive effects across cultural clusters. Studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa show stronger relationships and studies in Eastern Europe tend to report weaker positive relationships.

Looking at the three principled ethical climates, i.e., independence, rules, and law and code, we see similar patterns and mainly positive relationships with desirable outcomes. The rules ethical climate is the only among the three in which consistently significantly positive relationships were detected. There are weaker positive relationships for the Germanic Europe cluster for both the independence and

rules ethical climates, while the Sub-Saharan Africa cluster reported stronger positive effects here. This is different for the law and code ethical climate, for which we find stronger positive effects in the Middle East cluster and weaker positive effects in the Nordic and Eastern Europe clusters.

Finally, as for the bivariate analysis reported above to replicate Martin and Cullen (2006), we can also see here that the overall results of the general ethical climate concepts show high levels of similarity with the caring ethical climate. Like for the caring ethical climates, these general ethical climates show mostly strong positive relationships with desirable outcomes, even though there is no significant relationship with desirable outcomes for the Latin America clusters, which shows a larger spread of effect sizes than the other clusters. Moreover, there is also similarity between the caring and general ethical climate when considering the more detailed results for each cultural cluster. For the general ethical climates, the positive relationship is above average for the Middle East, Southern Asia, and Germanic Europe clusters, which was also the case for caring ethical climates (albeit not for the Middle East, as we did not have enough studies including caring climates for this cluster). The same applies to the lower end of effect size strength, in general, as well as for caring ethical climates, in which Eastern Europe showed the weakest positive relationship. The only notable exception to this similar trend for general and caring ethical climates is the Sub-Saharan Africa cluster,

**Table 3** Results of subgroup analysis

Ethical climate/cluster	rho	k	N	95% CI
<i>Instrumental</i>	− 0.18	94	31,835	− 0.24, − 0.12
Anglo	− 0.20	41	15,025	− 0.30, − 0.10
Confucian Asia	− 0.27	19	5403	− 0.39, − 0.15
Germanic Europe	− 0.30	6	1479	− 0.48, − 0.12
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.04	5	1674	− 0.57, 0.64
Latin Europe	− 0.02	10	3147	− 0.24, 0.18
Southern Asia	− 0.08	8	3485	− 0.28, 0.12
<i>Caring</i>	0.38	94	30,187	0.34, 0.43
Anglo	0.36	37	9944	0.29, 0.43
Confucian Asia	0.35	20	8226	0.25, 0.45
Germanic Europe	0.44	6	1429	0.26, 0.62
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.78	4	1333	0.48, 0.99
Eastern Europe	0.27	5	942	0.10, 0.44
Latin Europe	0.34	13	4521	0.25, 0.44
Southern Asia	0.48	6	2135	0.28, 0.67
<i>Independence</i>	0.23	57	23,831	0.16, 0.29
Anglo	0.18	24	11,298	0.09, 0.26
Confucian Asia	0.20	14	5889	0.04, 0.35
Germanic Europe	0.13	4	1229	0.01, 0.26
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.69	4	1333	0.57, 0.80
Eastern Europe	0.12	4	427	− 0.21, 0.44
Southern Asia	0.42	4	2193	0.04, 0.81
<i>Rules</i>	0.29	78	26,290	0.25, 0.34
Anglo	0.27	35	13,089	0.22, 0.33
Confucian Asia	0.29	14	3981	0.16, 0.42
Germanic Europe	0.17	7	1698	0.03, 0.31
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.50	6	1741	0.15, 0.85
Eastern Europe	0.38	4	427	0.13, 0.62
Latin Europe	0.23	6	1471	0.10, 0.36
Southern Asia	0.33	4	2351	0.10, 0.57
<i>Law &amp; Code</i>	0.29	71	23,461	0.23, 0.34
Anglo	0.25	27	6749	0.17, 0.32
Confucian Asia	0.25	21	7618	0.14, 0.37
Germanic Europe	0.27	4	1229	0.05, 0.50
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.69	5	2172	0.43, 0.95
Latin Europe	0.32	5	2127	0.08, 0.56
Southern Asia	0.24	4	1341	0.00, 0.48
<i>General</i>	0.35	195	65,695	0.32, 0.39
Anglo	0.34	79	25,599	0.28, 0.39
Confucian Asia	0.31	30	10,164	0.23, 0.39
Germanic Europe	0.37	8	2850	0.15, 0.61
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.32	5	1490	0.15, 0.49
Nordic Europe	0.22	5	4865	0.02, 0.43
Latin America	0.43	4	536	− 0.04, 0.89
Middle East	0.56	11	3191	0.45, 0.67
Eastern Europe	0.27	6	1526	0.07, 0.48
Latin Europe	0.33	19	4957	0.21, 0.45
Southern Asia	0.43	28	9231	0.34, 0.52

which showed the strongest positive relationship with desirable outcomes for the caring ethical climate but was only slightly below average for the general ethical climates.

## Discussion

Taking advantage of the large number of studies conducted in different countries, our meta-analysis provides support for the positive impact of the benevolent and principled climates while confirming the negative effects of the egoist climates. Additionally, our examination of these relationships across clusters as informed by the GLOBE scheme (Gupta et al., 2002) provides fascinating insights. Furthermore, our consideration of a general ethical climate also adds to the literature by integrating another way researchers have examined ethical climates (Newman et al., 2007). While most research has tended to emphasize the ethical climate types based on Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) work, the other more general ethical climate types we consider here, such as the ones based on Arnaud (2010), Kaptein (2008), and Schwepker (2013), add to a more comprehensive perspective on ethical climates.

In the following, we first provide a more detailed discussion of our findings with regards to both outcomes of ethical climate types as well as the moderating effects of geographical context, i.e., the two areas in which this meta-analysis contributes above and beyond prior meta-analytic and narrative reviews. This is followed by a critical discussion of broader implications along theoretical, empirical, and methodological avenues, along with suggestions for relevant future research.

## Discussion of Findings: Ethical Climate Types and Outcomes

Our meta-analysis incorporating the large number of studies that have been conducted since Martin and Cullen's (2006) article confirms many of the previously found relationships. As expected, the instrumental climate typified by a concern for the self negatively correlates with desirable outcomes and positively with dysfunctional behaviors. However, we were surprised to find no relationship between the egoist climate and performance. In this regard, it is very likely that other moderating factors explain the (missing) link between the egoist ethical climates and outcomes. We hope our findings will spur future examination of such moderating factors, especially for the performance outcome.

Our examination of the caring climate is also noteworthy. Our findings confirm the generally positive effects of benevolence, reflected by positive relationships with positive outcomes such as commitment, well-being, and satisfaction. Additionally, our consideration of dysfunctional behaviors

such as unethical behaviors makes an important contribution as we show that caring negatively relates to these behaviors. These findings provide support for the view that caring climates are generally beneficial (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Simha & Cullen, 2012) as such climates not only encourage positive outcomes, but also discourage negative behaviors. Additionally, for the caring climate, we found a strong and positive relationship with performance, indicating that caring can also lead to stronger organizations. Such findings contribute to an enhanced understanding of the benevolent climate.

Our findings for the principled climate types were also consistent with previous scholarship, showing a positive relationship with desirable outcomes. However, we were unable to test the relationship with well-being. Additionally, we also found that all three types had the expected negative relationship with dysfunctional behaviors. Furthermore, all three principled ethical climate types had a positive relationship with performance across the studies. We, therefore, add to the insights about the generally positive effects of principled climates.

Another contribution of our meta-analysis is the consideration of a general ethical climate, whereby a stronger such climate indicates stronger ethics. As expected, we found that this climate is also positively related to desirable outcomes while having a negative relationship with dysfunctional behaviors. Our research thus contributes to an enhanced understanding of the impact of a general ethical climate type, given that most prior ethical climate research focused on the Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) conceptualization. It is theoretically feasible to argue that ethical climates can be more general, similar to a diversity climate, and our findings across studies provide evidence of the utility of this concept.

## Discussion of Findings: Moderating Effects of the Geographical Context

Another primary objective of this meta-analysis was to address the dearth of studies examining the moderating effects of the national culture. Our findings show differences in relationships across country clusters, thereby supporting our argument for moderation.

*Instrumental climates.* Regarding the instrumental climate, we found a consistent and expected negative relationship with desirable outcomes within the Anglo, Confucian Asia, and Germanic Europe clusters. However, surprisingly, we found non-significant relationships in the Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin Europe, and Southern Asia clusters. We can only speculate on the reasons for this non-significance. One explanatory approach to this finding is based on the cultural values prevalent in these three clusters, with one possible reason being the high level of humane orientation values in these three clusters (House et al., 2004). A high level of

humane orientation indicates that societal members value and expect friendly and caring interactions and that they are also expected to socially support each other. It is, therefore, possible that the societal norms and expectations of caring and social support may counteract the negative effects the instrumental climate would otherwise have. Another related cultural value dimension that these three clusters all score highly on is in-group collectivism (House et al., 2004). In-group collectivism implies organizational situations where societal members operate interdependently. As such, the high level of concern within organizations in such societies may protect their members from the detrimental effects of an instrumental climate, which might be more pronounced in more individualistic cultures. These national contexts therefore seem to mitigate negative effects of the instrumental climate.

In contrast to the high levels of collectivism and humane orientation, the clusters that enhance the expected negative moderating effects all have cultural contexts that enhance egoism. Consider that the Anglo cluster is "characterized by an individualistic performance orientation" and "tend to be male-dominated in practice" (Ashkanasy et al., 2002, p. 28). Similarly, although the Germanic Europe cluster has organizational contexts in which employees have a voice, such cultures are seen as having relatively high-performance orientation and assertiveness. Such contexts imply an environment where employees tend to be more aggressive in their activities as they strive to achieve. It is not too surprising that such a context enhances the impact of the instrumental climate. Furthermore, such contexts also imply high masculinity, and since masculinity emphasizes achievement and competition at the expense of cooperation, such emphasis is likely related to an environment where individuals deviate from acceptable norms to achieve such materialistic goals. Our findings are therefore not surprising for these clusters.

*Caring climates.* Regarding the caring climates, we found a positive overall effect among all clusters. However, the strongest positive relationship was detected in the Sub-Saharan and Southern Asian clusters. Although a relatively high level of group collectivism and humane orientation characterizes these clusters and should therefore create a context embracing concern for others, thereby further strengthening the positive consequences of caring organizational climates, an examination of other institutional aspects of these societies is also insightful. Consider that the Sub-Saharan culture is reflected in the philosophical concept of *ubuntu* (Wanasika et al., 2011). *Ubuntu* is reflected in a concern for others, leading Gupta and Hanges (2004, p. 187) to conclude that the cluster is "characterized by the norms of reciprocity, suppression of self-interest, the virtue of symbiosis and human interdependence." As such, we believe that such an environment of caring for each other will likely reinforce the effects of the caring climate even more than in other

clusters. Similarly, despite religious diversity, the South Asian cluster has shown that people with diverse religious beliefs can coexist peacefully and even thrive. Given the potential of religious differences to create conflicts, this co-existence also likely creates a contextual environment whereby members of societies naturally assist each other. Such an environment is also likely to magnify the effects of the caring climate.

*Principled climates.* Our findings for all principled climates across all clusters were also reflected in a generally positive relationship between the three ethical climate types and desirable outcomes. Again, the Sub-Saharan cluster had the highest relationship of all clusters for this group of ethical climates. To explain this, we expect the mentioned cultural values and attributes of this environment to be likely to strengthen the generally positive effects of the principled climates on desirable outcomes in organizations within the Sub-Saharan cluster. In addition, however, for these principled climates, another relevant aspect might come into play. One pronounced characteristic of the Sub-Saharan context that has been frequently pointed to in research on international management and business is the relatively weak presence of societal and legal institutions, commonly described as institutional voids (Luiz & Stewart, 2014; Peprah et al., 2022). Such institutional voids may materialize through insufficient regulatory systems and property rights, consolidating or dysfunctional political systems, or flawed judiciary systems, and poor contract enforcement (Mair et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2022). Hence, contexts characterized by such institutional voids can be described as contexts "where the rules of the game are still fluid" (Luiz & Stewart, 2014, p. 383).

Such environmental context gives reason to assume that in the presence of such weak formal institutions and unclear rules, expectations concerning ethical considerations of one's behavior are also fluid and thus imply a less pronounced baseline ethical guidance within organizations (irrespective of the direction of this guidance). This lack of baseline ethical guidance in organizations would be compensated for to some extent by stronger ethical climates within them. Especially strong principled ethical climates are likely to achieve this and would be connected to desirable outcomes, through providing and reinforcing professional rules and codes to guide organizational members in ethical aspects that might otherwise not be clearly established. After all, these climates instill norms and perceived obligations that in other contexts would (also) emerge through stronger societal and legal institutions. Because of that, we expect enhanced importance of the principled climates in contexts with weak formal institutions like Sub-Saharan Africa. This explanation also holds when looking at those clusters with the lowest relationships between principled climates and desirable outcomes, which are, despite some variation between the

specific principled climates, primarily the Germanic cluster, the Anglo cluster, and the Confucian Asia cluster (House et al., 2004; Zattoni et al., 2017). All these clusters have in common more strongly pronounced formal institutions. In such contexts, the additional value of principled climates to provide more general ethical guidance in formal terms appears not to be as strong, given the likely presence of this guidance resulting from the pressure to behave ethically imposed by strong formal institutions.

*General ethical climates.* The moderation results for the general ethical climates across the geographic clusters show less pronounced differences. This is likely rooted in the very generic nature of these climates that might blur the more nuanced differences between ethical climate types we could observe in the specific five ethical climate types based on the Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) conceptualization. However, the large number of studies based on this more general conceptualization and operationalization of ethical climate, which also represents a larger number of countries, allows us to consider differences between further geographic clusters, for which we did not find a sufficient number of studies for the other ethical climate types. Most importantly, this includes the Middle East, Latin America, and Nordic Europe clusters. While this observation clearly points to the need to conduct more empirical research on specific ethical climates in these clusters, we can also see some commonalities between these and the other clusters. With regard to the Nordic Europe cluster, the relatively weaker positive relationship between general ethical climates and desirable outcomes for this cluster (Samara, 2021) might reflect the strong formal institutions in this cluster, which might reduce the incremental value of ethical climates for desirable outcomes in organizations.

In contrast, the relatively strong positive relationships between general ethical climates and desirable outcomes in the Middle East and Latin America clusters might reflect what we already discussed above for the Sub-Saharan cluster in terms of why a generally benevolent ethical climate that also provides guidance in terms of rules and codes strengthens its positive effects on desirable outcomes. The Middle East and Latin America clusters are also contexts where formal institutions are comparably weak in many countries (Jaén et al., 2021). Moreover, in these two clusters in-group collectivism is highly valued (House et al., 2004).

## Practical Implications

With regard to implications for organizational practices, our results point to the clear finding that organizations need to encourage benevolent and principled climates. This finding is very robust and applies across different types of outcomes (all except performance which does not show any relationship with instrumental climates) and across most cultural

clusters. While this might not be surprising, our dataset shows that egoistic climates are still widely spread across organizations and the level of benevolent and principled climates leaves still much room for improvement, even though the ethical climate in organizations is at least to some extent controllable by management (Shafer, 2015). Managers in organizations with underdeveloped benevolent and principled climates either are not aware of the existence and of the consequences of different ethical climates, respectively, or they were not successful in strengthening benevolent and principled climates. Recommendations for the latter case range from actively opposing the emergence of other (i.e., egoistic) climates in organizations (Parboteeah & Kapp, 2008), over professional socialization in organizations (e.g., in training activities) to promote and stimulate the desired benevolent and principled climates (Cullen et al., 2003), to the establishment of organizational structures to establish an environment, in which members of the organization are oriented towards each other's good (Parboteeah & Kapp, 2008).

Based on our results, managers need also to be aware of the different relationships some ethical climates with desirable outcomes in different cultural clusters. This becomes particularly clear for instrumental climates, which not only differ in the magnitude of their relationship with desirable outcomes but also in the direction of this relationship. Only half of the clusters show a significantly negative effect of these instrumental ethical climates on desirable outcomes. This consideration is particularly important for companies active across different countries and cultural clusters. While some organizational ethical climates might be more strongly positively connected to desirable outcomes in one location, this not necessarily needs to be the case in other subsidiaries. A poor match of prevalent ethical climates in certain locations might not only impair the studied desirable outcomes, it might also imply higher costs in terms of acquiring skilled employees, while a good match can provide organizations with competitive advantage for attracting local talents (Ermasova, 2021). Our findings can thus help better prepare managers for their companies' business environment in different cultural clusters.

## Theoretical Implications and Future Research

In the context of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ethical climate concept, our findings confirm some of the previously found relationships, such as the generally positive effects of the caring and principled climates and the negative effects of the instrumental climates. Moreover, our consideration of the general ethical climate type and performance as additional outcome in our meta-analysis also makes important contributions. In addition to updating and extending the relationships between ethical climates and outcomes, another objective of the study was to mimic a large-scale cross-national

test across many countries, and our results should be viewed in such a light. Our study also improves on the only qualitative review of 14 cross-cultural studies published earlier, when a meta-analysis would have been difficult (Parboteeah et al., 2011). The present study incorporates 292 independent samples across 46 countries. Furthermore, the list of countries is varied, representing all continents, including countries such as Bangladesh, Colombia, Pakistan, Poland, and Uganda, among many others. Taken together, such findings are significant and make several important contributions to our understanding of ethical climates in general and in the global arena.

In particular, by considering the moderating relationships of country factors ignored by previous literature (Parboteeah et al., 2011), we contribute to our theoretical understanding by examining the many factors that affect the ethical climate and desirable outcome relationships. Furthermore, the consideration of such moderating effects through the lens of culture, as evidenced by the GLOBE clusters, also provides an additional perspective on the explanations of the moderating mechanisms. As such, this meta-analysis provides much needed conceptual and empirical impetus beyond the primary studies it is based on, which have individually been unable to investigate the likely contextual influences from the various national environments. Given our findings, this paper provides several directions for future research to advance our knowledge about ethical climates and their differential effects along theoretical, empirical, and methodological avenues.

*Theoretical avenues.* One of the theoretical challenges of cross-national research is the selection of national culture and its dimensions. As researchers attempt to conduct studies related to understanding the impact of cross-national moderators, they can rely on Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT). IAT is a critical theoretical approach that has been shown to provide guidance on the context related to ethics (IAT; Cullen et al., 2004; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1997). The original thesis of the theory is that a contradiction between the social structure of society and the goals that the society values will result in anomie, or a sense of disconnect with social norms. Because of such anomie, societal members resort to illegitimate means to achieve their goals (Merton, 1938). However, Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) built on Merton's conceptualization of anomie to argue that such a contradiction is not always necessary for societal members to engage in deviance. They suggest that an emphasis on economic outcomes can also result in deviance. As such, it is possible for researchers on ethical climate to rely on IAT generally and particularly to select those national culture variables that may enhance anomie, and potentially strengthen the effects of egoism and weaken the effects of other, more positively valenced, ethical climates.



One theoretical approach that uses the tenets of institutional theory, namely the country institutional profile (CIP) (Kostova, 1997; Kostova et al., 2020) proposes that a comprehensive understanding of factors affecting cross-national arena can be derived based on cognitive, normative, and regulative components. The normative aspect, referring to the systems of beliefs and assumptions, is often equated with national culture (Busenitz et al., 2000), and both GLOBE and Hofstede national culture schemes would be useful in this regard. The cognitive aspect refers to the taken-for-granted aspects, and studies examining such issues have looked at education and religion (Parboteeah et al., 2008). Other cognitive aspects represented by critical social institutions (e.g., level of social inequality, the polity) that can have an impact on ethical climates could be considered here. The regulative aspects refer to laws and other regulations that are in place to encourage or discourage specific behaviors (Kostova, 1997). For instance, the example of corruption we considered earlier would represent the regulative aspect. Researchers can consider other laws such as the OECD anti-bribery laws and others to see how these impact ethical climates.

We also note that most research on ethical climate has focused on the individual and organizational level, with much of this work done at single levels of analysis. With this meta-analysis, we added the country and cultural clusters as level of analysis to the study of ethical climates. However, beyond this research on outcomes of ethical climates and moderators thereof on country, organizational, and individual levels, there is also an important level that has not been subject to focused (cross-level) study of consequences of different ethical climates: the vocational level that refers to specific industries and professions (Brinkmann, 2002; Brinkmann & Henriksen, 2008). This level builds on the idea of specific professional ethics and transcends country and organizational levels (Brinkmann, 2002). The explanatory potential this vocational level holds for the study on ethical climates has been recognized only to a small extent yet and has predominantly materialized in conceptual developments aiming to explain the nature and outcomes of ethical climates in a specific profession like marketing, healthcare, and financial industries (Brinkmann, 2002, 2009) or a specific profession like sales agents or nurses (Bush et al., 2017; Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019; Latimer et al., 2023; Olson, 1998). Still, this perspective has drawn predominantly on peculiarities of one specific focal industry or profession and relationships of ethical climates to outcomes in such a more focused context. So far, research still has largely ignored the explanatory potential of this level in the role of a moderator of the relationship between ethical climates and outcomes. To put it in other words, there is neither a comprehensive conceptual model nor systematic analysis yet regarding which elements on the vocational level might affect the

consequences of ethical climates and thus whether the same ethical climates might show different outcomes in different industries or professions. To test conceptual developments in this direction, the meta-analytic approach offers a good opportunity to study how variance on this vocational level can influence outcomes of ethical climates on other levels, perhaps also in an exploratory way to contribute to theory development.

Finally, another important implication for future research emerges from Weber and Opoku-Dakwa's (2022) suggestions for reformulating the ethical climate concept as such. They argue that the true meaning of the principled-cosmopolitan climate may not be captured by the current conceptualization as Kohlberg's original formulation of the post-conventional level of moral development implied "adherence to ethical principles, which allows for autonomous thinking" rather than "adherence to rules, laws, and codes" (Weber & Opoku-Dakwa, 2022: 631). Given that our results show that the principled climate types are all positively related to positive outcomes across all cultural contexts that allowed an analysis, it seems very likely that the laws and codes found in our studies all relate to universal ethical norms. However, future research would benefit from better understanding the content of principled ethical codes, to see if they truly reflect adherence to universal ethical principles. From a theoretical standpoint, the ethical climate concept was heavily based on Kohlberg's cognitive moral development framework. However, to-date, no studies have examined whether companies can similarly progress along stages of moral development. Future qualitative approaches would benefit from studying the impact of interventions to see if companies can move to higher levels of moral development. Additionally, the theory assumes that higher levels of moral development tend to be a superior level of moral development. However, our findings provide evidence of stronger results with the caring climates. It will be interesting to determine whether superiority of some ethical climate types does exist, given that the overwhelming majority of studies tend to provide support for a benevolent/caring climate.

*Empirical avenues.* First, given that our study emphasized the global aspect of ethical climates, we hope that more studies will examine the moderating effects of national culture in this respect in wider samples. In fact, our findings are mainly based on results from single-country studies. Despite the difficulty of data collection, a cross-national effort to collect data from a larger number of countries in a single study will hopefully provide a more robust yet nuanced understanding of such contextual influences (Jackson, 2001). Our review reveals just a small number of studies examining cross-national determinants of ethical climates (e.g., Kuntz et al., 2013; Laratta, 2011; Lin & Ho, 2009; Parboteeah et al., 2005). For instance, Kuntz et al. (2013) examined how the social culture in Russia and New Zealand, together

with ethical leadership, and ethical climate, influences the way individuals analyze and interpret organizational decision making. Such insights are only possible if more than one national context is included in primary studies.

This also points to the need of future research in countries that have not yet been considered for the study of ethical climates and their consequences. A review of the number of different countries in our study suggests that ethical climates have been empirically considered in only 46 countries (see Table 1). This is a clear step forward compared to the only 14 studies qualitatively reviewed in the only known review of international ethical climates (Parboteeah et al., 2011). Still, there are more than 100 countries that have not been covered by empirical ethical climate research at all and our meta-analysis suggests that ethics researchers have largely ignored the African and Latin American continents. In addition to this, there is a striking disparity regarding the volume of research done on ethical climates in different countries. On the one hand, this shows larger numbers of studies than expected for some countries (e.g., Turkey, Pakistan, or Nigeria), while, on the other hand, surprisingly low numbers for countries that normally show more empirical activity in organizational research. Concerning the latter, large countries with an active research community like Germany, France, Japan, or Northern European countries contributed less than a handful studies to this meta-analysis. This observation could be an indication that the necessity and relevance of studying ethical climates might be underestimated in countries with strong institutions. Given that business ethics is relevant to all cultural clusters and countries, however, future studies in these absent or underrepresented regions and countries would add significant insights in terms of our understanding of ethical climates in a cross-cultural context.

Finally, our study is the first meta-analysis that incorporates ethical climates as proposed by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) as well as the alternative conceptualization of a more general ethical climate type or ethical culture (e.g., Kaptein, 2008; Schminke et al., 2005; Schwepker et al., 1997; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). However, given the absence of a sufficient number of primary studies that incorporated these different approaches to ethical climates, we could not explicitly explore the relationships between the ethical climate types as proposed by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) and this more general type. Therefore, future scholarship on ethical climates would benefit from such explorations. For instance, future studies could examine whether this more general ethical climate type is more like the benevolent or the principled ethical climate types and whether such a similarity varies across regional or professional contexts.

*Methodological avenues.* An issue that accompanies all internationally comparative research efforts based on cultural clusters is that the underlying clustering can never fit all

countries to the same extent. In the international moderation analysis we presented in this study, we based our clustering on the cultural clusters identified in the GLOBE study (Gupta et al., 2002). However, there are also alternative cultural frameworks, like the one by Ronen and Shenkar (2013), that could be used as a foundation for clustering countries. What is more, arguments have been made by some cross-cultural researchers that clustering based on countries is lacking accuracy and that certain countries like Brazil, India, or Israel generally are difficult to assign to larger cultural clusters and might rather represent singletons that should not be incorporated in broader clusters (Ronen & Shenkar, 2013). To address this limitation, also of our study, alternative cultural frameworks could be used to group countries in internationally comparative studies of ethical climates to demonstrate convergence or divergence with our findings. For this purpose, also measures or indicators of cultural distance, which are based on cultural values (Shin et al., 2017), could be directly used to categorize and study countries as has been done in other topic areas of business ethics research (e.g., Sampath & Rahman, 2019). Ultimately, such problems in assigning countries to clusters might be overcome in the future once more empirical studies on ethical climates have accumulated for a meaningful number of countries, thereby enabling a more fine-grained comparative analysis of individual countries.

Moreover, although the field has now seen many international studies, we note that few assess inter-cultural construct validity beyond back translation and measurement equivalence. However, as some authors have argued, mere translation, no matter how sophisticated the process, may not be the best method to ensure that the ethical climate construct is valid across cultures (e.g., Chidlow et al., 2014). Therefore, we recommend that future researchers take more careful steps to ensure that their measures are cross-culturally equivalent (Hult et al., 2008). Consider, for example, Parboteeah et al. (2005), who assessed ethical climates differently for their U.S. and Japanese samples. Different cultures may have different meanings associated with different items, and such issues have to be recognized.

Beyond that, we also echo the recommendations by Tsui et al. (2007) for organizational behavior researchers to "go native". In other words, rather than starting with the U.S. derived ethical climate measures, it is recommended to collaborate with local researchers who may be in a better position to contextualize the research. For instance, consider whether a benevolent climate is necessarily the same for a collectivist society, where caring and well-being is expected, relative to an individualist society. While some cross-cultural research has pointed to the applicability of concepts and measurement instruments in different cultural contexts (e.g., Smith et al., 2014; Weiss et al., 2018), this cannot be taken for granted and there are many examples telling

us otherwise (Hult et al., 2008; McDonald, 2000; Resick et al., 2011). We, therefore, join the call for more attention to indigenous concepts in management research (e.g., Barkema et al., 2015; Holtbrügge, 2013; Leung, 2012), also regarding ethical climates and hope that future researchers will go beyond this US-centric theory. Doing so would enable to unearth potentially alternative operationalizations of the ethical climates or even completely new types of ethical climates that are endemic to some cultural contexts.

In conclusion, we are confident that this study provides a much-needed update on many aspects of ethical climates and how they relate to critical outcomes in organizations. Our consideration of cross-country moderation also provides for critical insights to understand cross-national differences between ethical climates and their outcomes across cultural clusters. We are confident that this international update will also benefit the relevant fields and provide a foundation and a stimulus to further advance our knowledge on ethical climates in the next 35 years.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose. This research did not involve human participants or animals.

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