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Article

How Benevolent Ethical Climates Mitigate Burnout: Job Autonomy as a Psychological Buffer

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Abstract

Objective: There is growing interest in analyzing whether ethical climates influence the emotional states of organizational members. For this reason, the main objective of this study is to evaluate the relationship between a benevolent ethical climate, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization, taking into account the mediating effect of job autonomy. **Methodology:** To evaluate the research hypotheses, data were collected from 448 people belonging to six organizations in the Colombian electricity sector. Statistical analysis was performed using two structural equation models (SEM). **Results:** The results show that a benevolent climate and its three dimensions (friendship, group interest, and corporate social responsibility) mitigate the negative effect of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. A work environment focused on people and society triggers positive moods that prevent the loss of valuable psychological resources. On the other hand, job autonomy is a mechanism that has a direct impact on the emotional well-being of employees. Therefore, being able to intentionally direct one's own sources of energy and motivation prevents an imbalance between resources and demands that blocks the potential effect of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. **Practical implications:** This study has important practical implications. First, an ethical climate that seeks to build a caring environment needs to strengthen emotional communication among employees through a high perception of support. Second, organizations need to grow and achieve strategic objectives from a perspective of solidarity. Third, a benevolent ethical climate needs to be nurtured by professionals with a clear vocation for service and a preference for interacting with people. Finally, job autonomy must be accompanied by the necessary time management skills. **Social implications:** This study highlights the importance to society of an ethical climate based on friendship, group interest, and corporate social responsibility. In a society with a marked tendency to disengage from collective problems, it is essential to make decisions that take into account the well-being of others. **Originality/value:** This research responds to recent calls for more studies to identify organizational contexts capable of mitigating the negative effects of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Keywords: ethical climate; benevolent ethical climate; emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; burnout; job autonomy

1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly recognizing that sustainability is closely linked to the improvement of employee behavioral models. Unethical conduct directly affects institutional assets and undermines trust-based relationships with stakeholders. Moreover, workplace environments detached from ethical principles negatively impact professional satisfaction and significantly increase chronic workplace stress (Khan et al., 2021). As a result, there is growing interest in understanding which organizational systems can guide and regulate employee attitudes through specific ethical climates (Ayub et al., 2022). In this regard, Victor and Cullen (1988) proposed a conceptual framework grounded in three independent ethical criteria: benevolence, principle, and egoism. Their primary

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aim was to expand upon the notion of a moral atmosphere previously advanced by Levine et al. (1985). This study focuses on a specific ethical climate—benevolence—given its central objective of enhancing individual well-being alongside the social responsibility organizations have toward their stakeholders (Blome & Paulraj, 2013). A benevolent ethical climate is comprised of three core dimensions: friendship, group interest, and corporate social responsibility (Cullen et al., 1993).

Cullen et al. (2003) define benevolence as a genuine concern for human beings and their needs. Decision-making is oriented toward enhancing collective well-being, even if it means curtailing certain individual needs. A fair and impartial work environment enables employees to shift part of their self-interest toward the benefit of the group. This tolerant and understanding framework is associated with perceptions of responsibility, emotional closeness, and trust, which may impede the development of burnout (Elçi et al., 2015). Burnout is characterized as a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that leads to diminished concern for work-related tasks and for the needs of others. Burnout typically manifests in negative and cynical behaviors, lack of empathy, and a tendency toward self-deprecating evaluations (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

In this context, a work culture that decisively embraces a benevolent climate demonstrates a sincere concern for society and prioritizes the practical consequences of organizational behavior over abstract theoretical intentions (Santiago-Torner, 2023a). This realistic and functional approach helps mitigate role ambiguity and conflict, as work expectations are shared, reducing job uncertainty and stress levels. The orientation of a benevolent climate weakens workplace tension by establishing clear boundaries for employee engagement within organizational processes (Ayub et al., 2022). In fact, burnout often stems from extra-role behaviors or ill-defined personal contributions. When this role expansion becomes habitual, it overwhelms emotional limits, leading to exhaustion. Therefore, an organizational context that decisively regulates codes of conduct is more likely to prevent exaggerated emotional responses or impersonal reactions toward others (Elçi et al., 2015).

Furthermore, a benevolent climate enhances professionals' sense of responsibility regarding role-related demands. In this respect, a workplace that fosters emotional security enables employees to perform their tasks autonomously (Santiago-Torner, 2023b). Job autonomy functions as a critical resource at work and is defined as the employee's capacity to manage work-related aspects, act independently, make decisions, and adapt schedules within organizational boundaries (Sia & Appu, 2015). From this perspective, the ability to redistribute effort voluntarily fosters a sense of harmony that obstructs emotional depletion (Fernet et al., 2014).

This research aims to contribute to the existing literature in several ways, thereby addressing a significant knowledge gap. First, the buffering effect of certain ethical climates on burnout remains inconclusive. There is limited empirical evidence demonstrating how ethical climates influence employee attitudes. For instance, Ayub et al. (2022) found a positive association between unethical practices and the burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Elçi et al. (2015) proposed a partial mediating role of ethical climate in the relationship between organizational justice and burnout. Similarly, authors such as Faelens et al. (2013) and Ozdoba et al. (2022) identified a clear affinity between ethical climate and job satisfaction. Tehranineshat et al. (2020) found a positive association between professional values, ethical climate, and quality of life. Other studies (Li & Peng, 2022; Rivaz et al., 2020; Sahi et al., 2022; Saleh et al., 2022) indicate that ethical climate mitigates employee burnout. Meanwhile, Mulki et al. (2008) concluded that ethical climate reduces role stress, interpersonal conflict, and psychological burnout by fostering trust in supervisors.

Second, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization have garnered substantial attention from both scholars and practitioners in the post-COVID-19 era (Sunjaya et al., 2021; Tian & Sun, 2024). However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have specifically examined the role of a benevolent ethical climate in influencing the depletion or enhancement of emotional resources. A workplace environment that prioritizes well-being may function as a resource that promotes professional engagement. In doing so, employees are better able to absorb increased workloads while maintaining emotional resilience (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017). Friendship and collective interest serve as

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psychosocial supports and may act as beneficial strategies for managing emotional conflicts that lead to exhaustion and depersonalization (Doolittle, 2021). Additionally, internal and external corporate social responsibility enhances subjective well-being and professional resilience, significantly reducing the risk of emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2023).

Third, this study provides additional theoretical support regarding the relationship between ethical climate and burnout by introducing job autonomy as a mediating mechanism. Job autonomy is a resource that grants professionals a degree of control over their tasks. According to the updated self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2020), job autonomy involves the ability to manage motivational and energy-related resources, thus serving as a psychological mechanism that may counteract emotional overload (Fernet et al., 2013). Recent studies (e.g., Guo et al., 2023; Zhang & He, 2022) have confirmed the buffering role of job autonomy on burnout. However, this is the first study to introduce job autonomy as a mechanism that explains how and why a benevolent ethical climate is associated with burnout.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to assess the relationship between a benevolent ethical climate and the two core dimensions of burnout—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—while accounting for the mediating effect of job autonomy. This study deliberately omits the analysis of reduced personal accomplishment, as several studies suggest it is an inseparable consequence of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Elçi et al., 2015).

Study Context

Colombia represents a paradigmatic case for examining the interaction between organizational structures, ethical factors, and emotional well-being at work. For decades, the country has endured structural challenges associated with armed conflict, institutional corruption, and pronounced social inequality. These conditions have had widespread effects on strategic sectors, including the electric industry, which has been compelled to transform in response to the demands of a sustainability-oriented energy transition marked by decentralization and digital innovation.

In this context of continuous change, the psychological well-being of workers has become an emerging concern. Constant adaptation requirements, combined with pressure to meet new technical and social standards, can trigger emotional fatigue and affective disconnection—especially in environments where organizational support systems are weak or nonexistent (Bellou & Chatzinikou, 2015). Despite its strategic relevance, the Colombian electric sector lacks empirical studies analyzing how ethical configurations in the work environment may act as protective factors against burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This study makes a substantive empirical contribution by addressing this gap. It introduces the concept of a benevolent ethical climate as a central explanatory variable—a form of organizational climate grounded in mutual care, colleague solidarity, and social responsibility as normative pillars. This approach is especially relevant in a context like Colombia's, where organizations face constant tension between operational efficiency and the need to rebuild institutional trust based on robust ethical principles.

The inclusion of a benevolent ethical climate as an explanatory variable in the analysis of burnout responds to recent scholarly calls to examine the contextual factors that promote emotionally sustainable workplaces with greater precision (Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). The analysis focuses not on a general notion of ethical climate but on a specific configuration—benevolence—distinguished by its capacity to foster emotional bonds, group cohesion, and moral engagement with the environment. This focus enables the identification of specific mechanisms through which organizations can protect employees' emotional capital, rather than depleting their psychological resources in response to mounting external demands. Moreover, the study positions job autonomy as a mediating variable that links the subjective experience of ethical climate to the emotional outcomes perceived by workers. This approach is especially valuable in sectors such as energy, where change management is often accompanied by rigid hierarchical models that inhibit self-direction and individual initiative. In this sense, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethical

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redesign of workplace environments can activate individual psychosocial resources—such as autonomy—to buffer the adverse effects of chronic stress.

In sum, this research stands out for three key contributions: (1) it analyzes a specific type of ethical climate (benevolent) within a socially and economically impactful industrial sector; (2) it incorporates a mediating mechanism (job autonomy) that elucidates how organizational values translate into emotional well-being; and (3) it does so in a nationally underexplored context, offering original empirical evidence from Latin America in a field predominantly shaped by studies from Anglo-Saxon and European contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Benevolent Ethical Climate, Emotional Exhaustion, and Depersonalization

Burnout is a complex phenomenon that manifests itself when the emotional and psychological demands of the work environment consistently exceed the individual's available resources. The two most critical dimensions of this condition—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—are highly sensitive indicators of the deterioration of emotional bonds at work and the loss of subjective meaning in the task (Maslach, 2001; Maslach et al., 2003). While emotional exhaustion is expressed as a persistent feeling of internal fatigue and loss of motivational energy, depersonalization involves a progressive disconnection from others and one's own professional role.

From this perspective, the organizational climate plays a fundamental role in modulating the psychosocial processes underlying burnout. In particular, a benevolent ethical climate—understood as an environment where values such as mutual aid, interpersonal care, and concern for collective well-being prevail—can act as a preventive barrier against emotional deterioration (Cullen et al., 1993; Blome & Paulraj, 2013; Santiago-Torner et al., 2025). Unlike ethical climates based on regulatory compliance or individual interest, the benevolent climate emphasizes human relationships, intragroup solidarity, and responsibility to the social environment (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

Numerous studies have suggested that organizations that promote interpersonal relationships based on empathy and respect significantly reduce levels of work stress and promote emotional commitment (McClelland et al., 2018; Rathert et al., 2022). In such contexts, work ceases to be an exclusive source of pressure and becomes a space where professionals perceive emotional recognition and moral validation. This reduces the likelihood of employees resorting to defensive mechanisms, such as emotional distancing or emotional cynicism, which are characteristic of depersonalization (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Resource conservation theory (RCT) (Hobfoll et al., 2018) offers a solid explanatory framework for understanding this process. According to this theory, people seek to conserve, accumulate, and protect their personal and social resources. When these are perceived as insufficient in the face of environmental demands, stress emerges. In this sense, a benevolent ethical climate can be interpreted as a contextual resource that provides emotional support, strengthens social bonds, and improves the individual's ability to cope with adverse situations without experiencing a drastic loss of psychological resources.

Empirical evidence supports this approach. For example, Elçi et al. (2015) found that ethical climates oriented toward prosocial values moderate the relationship between perceived organizational justice and burnout. Similarly, recent studies identify a sense of community, group cohesion, and support among colleagues as protective factors that reduce the likelihood of emotional exhaustion (Rathert et al., 2022; Doolittle, 2021). Friendship in the workplace, as a component of a benevolent climate, functions not only as a support network but also as an active strategy for coping with emotional pressure (McClelland & Vogus, 2021).

Furthermore, when organizations integrate corporate social responsibility into their internal culture—that is, not just as an external projection—employees tend to develop a greater sense of purpose, which reinforces their intrinsic motivation and emotional resilience (Chen & Liu, 2023; Liu

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et al., 2023). In this context, depersonalization is minimized, as employees feel part of a mission with ethical meaning, rather than performing fragmented tasks unrelated to their values.

Consequently, it can be argued that organizational environments that promote a culture of care, mutual support, and community engagement not only facilitate subjective well-being but also create an affective environment that prevents the progression of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). A benevolent ethical climate is negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

2.2. The Mediating Effect of Job Autonomy

Autonomy at work has become established as a key construct in the analysis of factors that affect employee psychological well-being. In general terms, it refers to the individual's ability to organize their activities, make decisions about how to perform their tasks, and regulate the use of their time according to the priorities of the role they perform (Spreitzer, 1995; Sia & Appu, 2015). In work contexts marked by uncertainty, autonomy is not only a right but also an instrumental psychological resource that allows individuals to cope with demanding work requirements with a greater sense of control and self-efficacy.

According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), autonomy not only increases intrinsic motivation but also promotes emotional and cognitive self-regulation processes. In particular, when the work environment organizes its relationships around respect, participation, and recognition, professionals tend to experience greater self-direction, which enhances their commitment and reduces their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion. Along these lines, studies such as those by Fernet et al. (2013) and Guo et al. (2023) have shown that the degree of perceived autonomy acts as a buffer between stress and manifestations of burnout.

This work argues that autonomy not only acts as an independent variable but also constitutes an essential mediating mechanism in the relationship between a benevolent ethical environment and levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This mediation is theoretically sound for two reasons. First, an ethical climate focused on collective well-being tends to build horizontal working relationships characterized by trust, reciprocity, and participation in decision-making (Fein et al., 2013). These conditions, in turn, create the psychosocial foundations necessary for autonomy to flourish as an everyday work experience.

Second, from the perspective of resource conservation theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), autonomy is a highly adaptive resource that allows individuals to better manage their energy, identify priorities, and set limits in the face of disproportionate demands. By allowing for a strategic redistribution of effort, autonomy prevents professionals from being exposed to prolonged overload situations, thus reducing the risk of emotional fatigue and the need to adopt defensive attitudes such as depersonalization (Zhang & He, 2022; Matthews et al., 2018).

Empirically, recent research has confirmed that employees with greater job autonomy have a greater ability to regulate their emotions, establish positive coping strategies, and maintain a sense of purpose in the face of adverse working conditions (Kim et al., 2019; De Clercq & Brieger, 2022). This finding is especially relevant in environments such as the Colombian electricity sector, where the pressure to achieve energy transformation goals can generate additional tensions if there are not adequate margins for self-direction.

Thus, it is argued that a benevolent ethical climate creates the necessary conditions for job autonomy to emerge as an available resource, which in turn facilitates the balance between demands and capabilities, reducing the likelihood of experiencing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This mediation not only adds an explanatory nuance to the theoretical model, but also allows for the identification of a specific organizational mechanism that is susceptible to intervention and improvement.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Job autonomy mediates the negative relationship between the benevolent ethical climate and the two dimensions of burnout. Specifically, the benevolent ethical climate is

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positively associated with autonomy, which in turn is negatively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

2.3. Research Model

Based on the theoretical framework developed above, we propose an explanatory model that analyzes the direct effect of a benevolent ethical climate on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, considering the mediating role of job autonomy. This model is based on a dual conceptual framework: on the one hand, resource conservation theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which posits that individuals tend to protect and mobilize psychological resources in the face of stress; and on the other hand, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which highlights the adaptive value of autonomy in sustaining motivation and well-being in demanding environments.

From this perspective, it is proposed that a benevolent ethical climate constitutes a contextual organizational resource that can activate individual psychological resources, such as job autonomy. The latter, in turn, would allow employees to distribute their emotional energy more efficiently, reducing the negative impact of intense organizational demands. The model not only seeks to confirm direct relationships between variables, but also to explore an explanatory mechanism that adds depth to the understanding of the organizational processes that modulate burnout.

The proposed framework consists of three main paths: (1) a direct negative relationship between benevolent ethical climate and the two central dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization); (2) a positive relationship between benevolent ethical climate and job autonomy; and (3) a negative relationship between autonomy and the dimensions of burnout. The mediation of autonomy allows us to examine whether the protective effect of the benevolent climate operates wholly or partly through the strengthening of perceived self-direction. This model has significant theoretical and practical value, as it allows us to analyze how the ethical principles that shape the work environment can translate, through specific psychosocial mechanisms, into lower levels of emotional exhaustion. Unlike other approaches that focus solely on objective working conditions (such as workload or time pressure), this study incorporates subjective and moral variables, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the factors that explain organizational well-being.

Figure 1 graphically summarizes the research model and the direction of the hypotheses proposed.

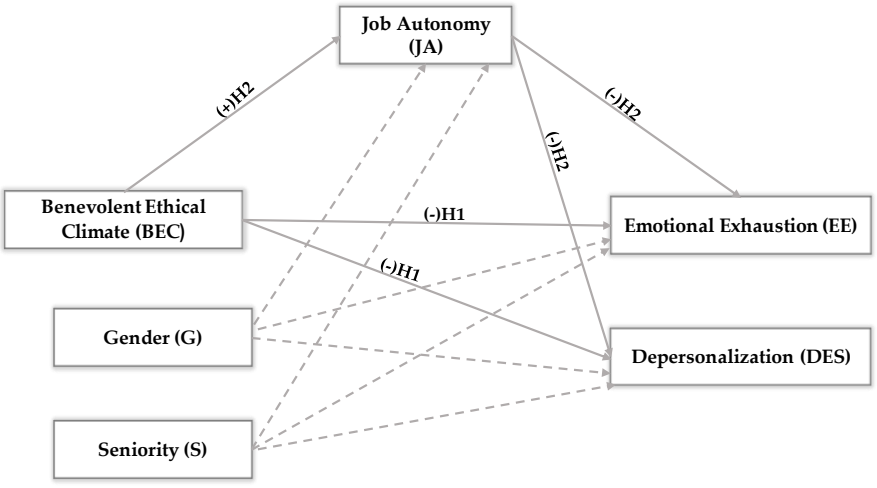

Figure 1. Research model.

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3. Method

3.1. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a quantitative empirical strategy, aimed at analyzing causal relationships through a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. The research is framed within an explanatory model, supported by mediation analysis using structural equations with bootstrapping estimates. This procedure allowed us to test a theoretical model that posits a negative association between a benevolent ethical climate and two key indicators of burnout syndrome—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—considering job autonomy as an intervening mechanism.

3.2. Sample and Context

The target population consisted of professionals linked to the electricity sector in Colombia, in the particular context of teleworking. A stratified cluster probability sample was selected, consisting of 448 participants (61.4% men and 38.6% women), whose average age was 37 years (range between 20 and 69 years). Thirteen-point four percent of respondents performed direct supervisory functions. The sample included different hierarchical levels: senior management (4.5%), middle management (8.9%), analysts (68.8%), and support staff (17.8%). The average length of service in the organization was 10 years. All subjects had a university education, and 60% had postgraduate studies, which reinforces the validity of the analysis as these are highly qualified profiles.

3.3. Procedure

The information was collected between January and March 2022, with the endorsement of an independent ethics committee, approved in June 2021. Access to the organizations was managed through institutional presentations made to the sector's community action committees, where the objectives, scope, and guarantees of the study were presented. Voluntary and anonymous participation was guaranteed, in accordance with current regulations on confidentiality and personal data protection. Each organization received informed consent documents, voluntary withdrawal protocols, and agreements on the responsible use of information. The questionnaire was administered through the Microsoft Forms platform. Participants responded synchronously in sessions differentiated by functional unit, lasting approximately 35 minutes. Prior to completing the instrument, the principal investigator gave a brief introduction (5 minutes) highlighting the overall objective of the research, as well as the importance of reflecting carefully before giving each answer.

3.4. Measurement of Variables

Sociodemographic control variables. In order to control for the variance explained by individual factors, gender (0 = male; 1 = female) and length of service in the organization, measured in years, were included as exogenous control variables. The scales used in the study employed a six-point Likert format, with anchors ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Benevolent ethical climate. This variable was assessed using a subscale adapted from the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (Victor & Cullen, 1988), which considers three structural components: friendship (3 items), group orientation (4 items), and corporate social responsibility (4 items), for a total of 11 items. A representative example of the items is: “In this company, our main concern is always what is best for others.” The original instrument reports an $\alpha = 0.85$, and in this research, the reliability index reached $\alpha = 0.88$.

Job autonomy. For this variable, the unidimensional scale proposed by Spreitzer (1995) was used, consisting of three items, such as: “I can decide for myself how to do my job.” The scale assesses the perception of control and self-direction in the execution of tasks within organizational limits. The Cronbach's alpha obtained was 0.87, higher than that originally reported ($\alpha = 0.72$).

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Emotional exhaustion. This was measured with five items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Survey adapted by Schaufeli et al. (1996). An example of an item is: "I am emotionally exhausted at work." Internal consistency reached $\alpha = 0.90$ (original $\alpha = 0.85$).

Depersonalization. The four-item scale developed by Salanova and Schaufeli (2000) was used, including: "I have become more cynical about the usefulness of my work." The internal reliability of this scale was 0.90 in this sample (original $\alpha = 0.78$).

3.5. Data Analysis

Data processing was carried out using SPSS software, using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2018), specifically the simple mediation model 4. A bootstrapping resampling procedure with 10,000 iterations and a 95% confidence interval was applied to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects of the proposed relationships. Before estimating the mediation model, the statistical assumptions associated with multiple regression analysis were verified. The normality and linearity of the distributions were evaluated using the kurtosis and skewness indices. Possible outliers were identified using Mahalanobis distance (Aguinis et al., 2017). The presence of multicollinearity was ruled out by verifying that the VIF index values were less than 10, and the condition index (CI) values did not exceed the critical threshold of 30. This methodological strategy allowed us to rigorously estimate the magnitude of the mediating effects of job autonomy on the relationship between benevolent ethical climate and indicators of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, controlling for the effects of gender and seniority.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

In order to explore the general patterns in the distribution of the data and establish preliminary relationships between the variables in the model, the fundamental descriptive measures were calculated: mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and Pearson correlations between the latent variables and their respective dimensions. Regarding the control variables, the analyses revealed that gender in the organization did not show significant correlations with any of the central variables of the study, while seniority showed a weak but statistically significant relationship only with emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.129$; $p < 0 .001$), suggesting a minimal influence on emotional exhaustion processes.

Regarding the benevolent ethical climate, both the global variable and its three dimensions (friendship, interest in the group, and corporate social responsibility) correlated positively with job autonomy and, simultaneously, showed negative associations with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. These preliminary findings support the theoretical premise that an ethical environment oriented toward care and solidarity promotes the perception of self-direction at work, while mitigating adverse emotional reactions. For its part, job autonomy exhibited a significant inverse correlation with both dimensions of burnout, suggesting its role as a protective factor against emotional deterioration. These correlations also support the validity of the proposed mediation hypothesis, which posits that autonomy acts as an explanatory mechanism between the ethical climate and the professional's affective outcomes.

The discriminant validity of the constructs was also verified through cross-correlation analysis, observing that all variables showed higher correlations with themselves (diagonal-bold) than with any other construct, which meets the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The correlation values are presented in Table 1, along with the descriptive statistics for each scale.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations and discriminant validity between constructs.

Constructos	***N***	***M***	***SD***	**G**	**S**	**BEC**	**F**	**GI**	**CSR**	**JA**	**EE**	**DES**
Gender (G)	1	1.4	0.49	x								
Seniority (S)	1	3.6	1.8	0.04	x							

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Benevolent climate (BEC)	11	55	12.1	0.01	0.06	**0.62**						
D1: Friendship (F)	3	16.8	2.9	0.04	0.01	0.61*	**0.64**					
D2: Group interest (GI)	4	21.2	3.1	0.03	0.10	0.61*	0.56*	**0.61**				
D3: Social responsibility (CSR)	4	20.4	3.5	0.08	0.06	0.61*	0.43*	0.43*	**0.61**			
Job autonomy (JA)	3	14.9	2.5	0.02	0.05	0.32*	0.32*	0.28*	0.12*	**0.89**		
Emotional exhaustion (EE)	5	23.1	5.6	0.03	0.13*	-0.36*	-0.21*	-0.22*	-0.16*	-0.23*	**0.82**	
Depersonalization (DES)	4	23.3	5.1	0.04	0.07	-0.34*	-0.23*	-0.21*	-0.15*	-0.21*	0.65*	**0.81**

Notes: The table shows the calculation of descriptive information and Pearson correlations. Discriminant (diagonal) validity is also included. (N) Number of items. (M) Mean. (SD) Standard deviation. Significant correlations *($p < 0.05$). CI (95%) (n=448). Source: Prepared by the authors.

This initial descriptive approach, together with evidence of significant relationships in the expected theoretical direction, provides a solid basis for proceeding with the analysis of reliability, structural validity, and hypothesis testing.

4.2. Reliability and Validity of the Instruments

In order to ensure the psychometric accuracy of the measurements used, the levels of internal consistency, as well as the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs included in the model, were evaluated. This procedure is essential to confirm that the selected scales robustly capture the underlying theoretical dimensions and that the indicators do not overlap between different factors.

4.2.1. Internal Consistency

The reliability of each scale was estimated using Cronbach's α coefficient. Following the criteria of Bonett and Wright (2015), values equal to or greater than 0.70 are considered to indicate acceptable consistency. In all cases, the coefficients obtained were within optimal ranges: benevolent ethical climate ($\alpha = 0.88$), job autonomy ($\alpha = 0.87$), emotional exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.90$), and depersonalization ($\alpha = 0.90$). These figures indicate a high degree of homogeneity among the items that make up each factor, even exceeding the reference values reported in the original validation studies (Victor & Cullen, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995; Schaufeli et al., 1996; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2000).

4.2.2. Convergent Validity

To analyze convergent validity, three key indicators were calculated: composite reliability (CR), critical coefficients (CC), and average variance extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2011), composite reliability values are expected to exceed 0.70 and AVE to be equal to or greater than 0.50. In this study, composite reliability scores ranged from 0.72 to 0.86, while AVE ranged from 0.38 to 0.80. Although some dimensions had AVE values slightly below the ideal threshold, these were considered acceptable given the theoretical support of the constructs and the robustness of their factor loadings (Chin, 1998).

4.2.3. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was verified using the criterion established by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which states that the square root of the AVE of each construct must be greater than its correlation with any other. This requirement was met for all pairs of variables in the model, indicating that the measured factors represent distinct conceptual dimensions without significant overlap. In addition, the factor loadings of all items exceeded the threshold of 0.50, reinforcing the adequacy of the factor structure of the scales (Bagozzi et al., 1998).

Table 2 presents a summary of the reliability coefficients (α, CR), extracted variance (AVE), and discriminant validity between constructs.

Table 2. General validity of the constructs.

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	ALPHA[1]	CC[2]	CR[3]	AVE[4]	DV[5]
BEC	0.88	> 1.96	0.740	0.390	0.620
F	0.72	> 1.96	0.720	0.410	0.640
GI	0.75	> 1.96	0.760	0.380	0.610
CSR	0.84	> 1.96	0.830	0.380	0.610
JA	0.87	> 1.96	0.730	0.800	0.890
EE	0.90	> 1.96	0.810	0.680	0.820
DES	0.90	> 1.96	0.860	0.660	0.810

Note: The table shows the degree to which the measures of items capturing the same concept are correlated (convergent validity) and the theoretical difference between the different constructs (discriminant validity). 1. Cronbach's alpha. 2. Critical coefficients. 3. Composite reliability. 4. Average variance extracted. 5. Discriminant validity. Prepared by the authors.

Taken together, these results indicate that the scales used possess solid psychometric properties and are suitable for inclusion in the mediation analysis model. This assessment ensures the statistical reliability of subsequent results and strengthens the validity of the inferences derived from hypothesis testing.

4.3. Hypothesis Analysis and Mediation Process

The proposed model was tested using a simple mediation analysis, employing the stepwise regression procedure integrated in the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4), developed by Hayes (2018). This approach allowed for the simultaneous examination of the direct and indirect effects of a benevolent ethical climate on the two indicators of burnout considered—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—incorporating job autonomy as a mediating variable. To ensure robust estimations, a non-parametric resampling method (bootstrapping) with 10,000 iterations was applied, computing 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. This technique is particularly suitable for detecting significant mediation effects even in the presence of non-normal distributions and has been extensively validated in studies with complex psychometric models (Hayes, 2018).

4.3.1. Direct Effects

Hypothesis 1 (H1) posits that a benevolent ethical climate mitigates the negative effects leading to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The linear regressions corresponding to the c′ effects of Model 2 ($\beta = -0.060$, SE = 0.030, $p < 0.05$) and Model 3 ($\beta = -0.049$, SE = 0.023, $p < 0.05$) support this proposition and provide empirical validation for H1.

4.3.2. Indirect Effects – Mediation

The mediation analysis revealed that job autonomy functions as an explanatory mechanism in both pathways of the model. First, a significant positive relationship was found between a benevolent ethical climate and autonomy: Model 1 – effect ai – ($\beta = 0.097$, SE = 0.013, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that environments characterized by solidarity and care foster perceptions of self-direction. Second, autonomy was negatively associated with both emotional exhaustion: Model 2 – effect bi – ($\beta = -0.394$, SE = 0.102, $p < 0.05$) and depersonalization: Model 3 – effect bi – ($\beta = -0.249$, SE = 0.068, $p < 0.05$), supporting its buffering role against organizational stress. Mediation was confirmed as the indirect effects of ethical climate on burnout through autonomy were statistically significant: Model 2 ($\beta = -0.038$, SE = 0.013, 95% CI [-0.068, -0.015]) and Model 3 ($\beta = -0.024$, SE = 0.009, 95% CI [-0.044, -0.008]). Since the confidence intervals did not include zero, Hypothesis 2 (H2) was empirically supported. Mediation was complete, as the direct effects of ethical climate on both burnout variables remained significant after including the mediator, indicating that the model integrates both direct and indirect pathways.

Figure 2 presents the final model with the standardized coefficients for each path, while Table 3 summarizes the direct, indirect, and total effects with their respective significance levels.

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Table 3. Mediation analysis results.

Effect	Route	β	p	t	ES	LLCI	ULCI
Model 1(BEC[1]-JA[2]): R = 0.331; R^2 = 0.110; SE = 6.247; F = 18.230; p = 0.001							
BEC - JA	ai	0.097	0.001	7.312	0.013	0.071	0.123
G-JA	-	0.066	0.785	0.273	0.243	-0.411	0.544
S-JA	-	0.096	0.136	1.495	0.064	-0.030	0.223
Model 2 (BEC-EE[3]; JA-EE): R = 0.516; R^2 = 0.266; SE = 28.92; F = 34.224; p = 0.001							
JA - EE	bi	-0.394	0.001	-3.863	0.102	-0.595	-0.194
BEC – EE	c′	-0.060	0.048	-1.901	0.030	-0.117	-0.002
BEC – EE	c	-0.096	0.001	-3.301	0.029	-0.153	-0.039
G-EE	-	0.155	0.768	0.296	0.523	-0.873	1.182
S-EE	-	0.398	0.004	2.862	0.139	0.125	0.671
Indirect mediation effect: β = -0.038, SE = 0.013, 95% CI [-0.068, -0.015]							
Model 3 (BEC- DES[4]; JA-DES): R = 0.496; R^2 = 0.246; SE = 23.91; F = 33.461; p = 0.001							
JA - DES	bi	-0.249	0.001	-3.898	0.068	-0.387	-0.065
BEC – DES (Directo)	c′	-0.049	0.024	-2.322	0.023	-0.184	-0.008
BEC – DES (Total)	c	-0.070	0.001	-3.689	0.019	-0.107	-0.033
G-DES	-	0.186	0.584	0.547	0.341	-0.483	0.856
S-DES	-	0.136	0.133	1.506	0.091	-0.042	0.314
Indirect mediation effect: β = -0.024, SE = 0.009, 95% CI [-0.044, -0.008]							

Note: The table shows three linear regression models. The first describes the effect of (1) benevolent climate on (2) job autonomy along with the two covariates. The second model explains the relationships between the independent and mediating variables along with the covariates on the dependent variable (3) emotional exhaustion. Finally, the third model explains the relationship between the independent and mediating variables along with the covariates on the dependent variable (4) depersonalization. The statistical power (f2) is high (0.360). 95% (CI) (n=448).

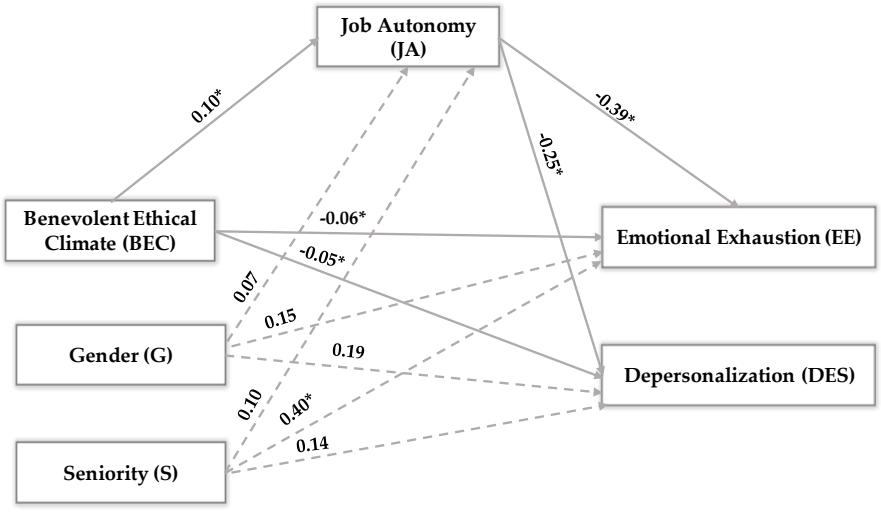

Figure 2. Results of the regression analysis. The figure shows the proposed statistical diagram of simple mediation.

Together, these findings support the idea that ethical environments not only directly impact employees' emotional well-being but also activate key personal resources—such as autonomy—that enhance resilience against work-related strain. This integrative perspective contributes to a more dynamic understanding of the factors that modulate burnout in complex organizational contexts.

5. Discussion

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This research examined the effect of a benevolent ethical climate on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, considering job autonomy as a mediating mechanism. The results support both proposed hypotheses. This study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature as one of the first analyses confirming the buffering effect of a benevolent climate on emotional resource depletion, thereby addressing specific knowledge gaps on the topic.

H1 confirms that a benevolent climate prevents the progression of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. A supportive and inclusive climate compensates for the loss of employees' psychological resources (Li & Peng, 2022). Paying attention to emotions and creating a setting that reduces conflict serves as a useful guide for professionals. In fact, an atmosphere grounded in collective interest and strong relationships significantly reduces negative behaviors and feelings among employees; that is, it becomes an additional psychological resource that helps to effectively cope with stressful situations.

According to COR theory, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization result from a continuous drain of emotional resources without timely replenishment (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore, friendship at work is a key element in the social exchange system of any organization, as it provides valuable emotional resources (Rathert et al., 2022). Friendship becomes a coping strategy that alleviates stress. Improved communication, shared values and experiences, along with open and honest exchange, likely enhance psychological and social well-being (McClelland et al., 2018). Moreover, mutual trust and understanding are critical psychosocial variables that can positively reshape emotional conflicts typically leading to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Doolittle, 2021).

Additionally, the collective interest promoted by a benevolent climate helps prevent mismatches between job demands and resources. Fostering psychologically safe spaces at work plays a prominent role in preventing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Rathert et al., 2022). The social support provided by a benevolent climate stimulates interpersonal interactions and prevents emotional isolation. In fact, it intentionally seeks psychosocial support through environments of empathy and reciprocity (Santiago-Torner, 2023c).

Finally, the corporate social responsibility promoted by a benevolent ethical climate significantly reduces the likelihood of employee emotional exhaustion. COR theory suggests that alignment between organizational and employee values, along with the perception that social responsibility reflects a life purpose, prevents resource loss and the negative emotions associated with such deterioration (Chen & Liu, 2023). A climate with a clear community orientation is indeed a contextual resource that prevents employees from feeling overwhelmed, thereby radically reducing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Liu et al., 2023).

Secondly, H2 confirms the mediating effect of job autonomy on the relationship between benevolent ethical climate, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization, significantly expanding the previous literature on ethical climates and burnout (Li & Peng, 2022; Rivaz et al., 2020; Sahi et al., 2022; Saleh et al., 2022).

This finding suggests that a climate centered on collective well-being grants employees responsibility and initiative. In fact, a benevolent ethical climate is built through a horizontal structure that respects employee opinions and identifies work areas that promote collaborative, positive, and efficient performance supported by continuous communication (Kim et al., 2019; Santiago-Torner, 2025). Voluntarily accepting certain responsibilities tends to increase job satisfaction. The concept of autonomy goes beyond merely redistributing daily tasks; expanding opportunities for self-management and considering employees' input is an organizational opportunity to reduce conflict, increase belonging, and avoid burnout risks (Kim et al., 2019). Additionally, job autonomy is a resource that enables a better work-life balance (De Clercq & Brieger, 2022). According to COR theory, the ability to structure and direct work activities suggests a process of resource gain. Autonomy is a key variable that offsets high demands by providing control over them, thus mitigating role stress, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Charoensukmongkol, 2022).

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A benevolent work climate that encourages individual initiative, reduces tension and uncertainty, provides ongoing feedback, and identifies employees' feelings positively impacts their emotional functioning by satisfying basic needs. The ability to direct psychological resources likely involves a series of motivational and energetic processes that prevent affective blockage stemming from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Fernet et al., 2013).

This study offers an original contribution in at least four key dimensions:

It deepens the link between organizational ethics and emotional health, integrating two traditionally separate fields of study. Unlike most previous research, which has explored ethics from a behavioral or normative perspective, this study demonstrates that ethically benevolent climates not only regulate behavior but also protect workers' emotional integrity (Santiago-Torner, 2023d).

It introduces a relational mediation model, where autonomy is not merely a job design feature but a psychological experience emerging from the ethical environment. In this sense, the study reconceptualizes autonomy as a relational condition nurtured by respect, trust, and perceived fairness in everyday work relationships.

It situates the research in an empirically relevant and underexplored context: the Colombian electricity sector. This field has historically been approached from technical or engineering perspectives, with little attention to the psychosocial and ethical factors affecting human talent sustainability.

It proposes a conceptual framework that articulates Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), providing a solid theoretical foundation for future research seeking to integrate ethics, autonomy, and well-being in complex models.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings support meaningful conceptual advancements for organizational and psychosocial literature:

Toward an Ethics of Organizational Care. The results suggest that a benevolent ethical climate should be understood as a form of institutionalized ethics of care, where affective relationships, solidarity, and a sense of community are not soft or peripheral dimensions but rather core structural components of occupational health. This perspective challenges traditional approaches centered on rules and sanctions and opens the door to more humanistic models of work.

Autonomy as an Emergent Outcome. Job autonomy should not be treated exclusively as an exogenous or structural variable but rather as an emergent experience shaped by the moral and social environment of work. This conceptual shift invites a rethinking of organizational design from an ethical—not merely functional—standpoint.

Integration of Ethics and Mental Health in Predictive Models. The findings indicate that organizational ethics not only predict behaviors such as satisfaction or loyalty but also act as a protective factor for mental health. This connection opens new pathways to incorporate ethics as a key predictor in complex psychosocial models.

5.2. Practical Implications

From an applied perspective, the results offer concrete guidelines for the redesign of organizational policies:

Embedding Benevolence into Organizational Culture. Companies should develop climates where the principles of care, support, and solidarity are not only promoted by leadership but institutionalized in daily practices, such as collaborative conflict resolution, affective mentoring programs, and systems for empathic feedback.

Promoting Structures That Strengthen Relational Autonomy. Job design should include participatory mechanisms, flexible routines, and shared decision-making spaces, ensuring that autonomy is not a privilege limited to specific roles, but a horizontally distributed experience throughout the organization.

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Reframing Burnout Prevention Programs. Beyond individual interventions focused on self-care, a collective ethical-preventive strategy is proposed, in which a benevolent organizational climate functions as emotional containment. This requires the inclusion of relational ethics indicators in workplace climate audits and human resource management systems (Santiago-Torner, 2024).

Applicability to Transforming Sectors. In industries such as energy, which are subject to innovation and transition processes, building ethically robust environments allows for change management based on collective resilience rather than individualized pressure.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although the findings of this study provide solid empirical evidence and a novel explanatory model regarding the role of a benevolent ethical climate in burnout prevention, it is important to acknowledge certain methodological and conceptual limitations that delimit the scope of the inferences and open new pathways for future research.

First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish definitive causal relationships between the variables analyzed. While the observed associations are consistent with existing theoretical and empirical literature, future studies could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to explore how experiences of autonomy and emotional exhaustion vary in relation to perceived changes in ethical climate over time.

Second, data were collected through self-report measures, which may have introduced biases related to social desirability or subjective perceptions. Although statistical controls were implemented to minimize these effects, future research would benefit from triangulated data sources, such as third-party evaluations or objective indicators of occupational health.

A third limitation concerns the specific sectorial and geographical context. The study was conducted exclusively in the Colombian electricity sector, which, while providing contextual relevance and depth, restricts the generalizability of the findings to other economic sectors or countries with different cultural dynamics. Future studies could replicate this model in diverse industrial contexts, or even in public and third-sector organizations, to assess its cross-cultural and functional validity.

Moreover, this study focused solely on two dimensions of burnout—emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—excluding reduced personal accomplishment for theoretical reasons. However, future research could reintegrate this dimension to develop more comprehensive models and explore potential divergent or specific effects of ethical climate on each component of the syndrome.

Finally, further studies could explore new mediating or moderating variables that may enrich the model, such as perceived self-efficacy, leadership quality, or organizational identity. These variables could help explain more precisely the conditions under which an ethical environment enhances emotional well-being or, conversely, loses its efficacy in structurally high-pressure contexts.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that a benevolent ethical climate is not only a desirable normative framework but also a critical organizational resource for the emotional protection of workers. Through a mediation model incorporating job autonomy as an explanatory mechanism, the study shows that organizations promoting values of mutual care, social responsibility, and cooperation significantly reduce levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

From a theoretical perspective, this work proposes a reinterpretation of burnout as a phenomenon that is not exclusively individual but profoundly conditioned by the moral environment in which work practices are embedded. The study provides an integrative model that connects organizational ethics, motivational psychology, and occupational health, thereby opening new avenues for interdisciplinary dialogue and emerging lines of research.

From a practical standpoint, the findings call for a rethinking of burnout prevention strategies, prioritizing the ethical redesign of the work environment as a sustainable path to preserving well-being. It is not only about intervening at the individual level but about transforming the relational structures that shape emotional experience at work.

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In summary, this study offers an original, rigorous, and socially relevant theoretical and empirical contribution, demonstrating that an ethically committed work environment can act as a protective barrier against emotional exhaustion by activating key psychosocial resources such as autonomy. This finding reinforces the need to conceive ethics not merely as a normative aspiration, but as a necessary condition for organizational well-being.

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