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Article

Impact of an Ethical Climate of Principles on Employees' Burnout in the Colombian Electric Sector: The Moderating Role of Work Autonomy

Carlos Santiago-Torner ^{1,*}, Elisenda Tarrats-Pons ^{1,*}, Mònica González-Carrasco ²,
Rafael Alberto Miranda Ayala ³ and Nury-Milena Muriel-Morales ⁴

¹ University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia

² Department of Psychology.; University of Girona (Spain); Quality of Life Research Institute (Spain)

³ Universitat de Girona

⁴ Faculty of Economic Sciences studies. University of Antioquia

* Correspondence: carlos.santiago@uvic.cat

Abstract: Burnout is a factor that affects organizational performance. Researchers agree that the emotional stability provided by an ethical climate and adequate work autonomy often has a buffering effect on chronic stress. However, despite the abundant literature analyzing the relationship between work autonomy and burnout, whether work autonomy acts as a stress-reducing resource or a stress-increasing demand is not sufficiently well established. It is also unknown to what extent work autonomy contributes to explaining the relationship between ethical climate and burnout. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between an ethical climate of principles and norms on burnout, using the moderating effect of work autonomy. A multivariate moderation analysis was used to address the issue. The sample consists of 448 employees in the Colombian electric sector. The results show that an ethical climate of principles and work autonomy relate positively to burnout. However, when a rule-demanding work environment is related to a high perception of work autonomy, the relationship with burnout syndrome changes from positive to negative. In conclusion, when employees have significant control over their usual tasks, they develop a behavior pattern that includes both the organization's internal standards and the principles that shape individual morale. In this case, employees are able to balance the workload with the high psychological demands of an ethical climate of principles, without it representing a disturbance to their emotional well-being.

Keywords: principled ethical climate; burnout; work autonomy; emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; ethical climate

1. Introduction

Ethical climate in a work environment is associated with promoting positive behaviors and preventing irregular or deviant work behaviors [1]. It plays a key role in organizational regulation and is indispensable for interpreting individuals' emotions, feelings, and attitudes [2,3]. Despite this, little attention has been paid to the possible influence of ethical climate as a factor that attenuates burnout syndrome [4]. In fact, the belief that there are absolute principles that determine right, and wrong behavior can become a double-edged sword. In other words, an ethical work environment may not act as a protective factor preventing employees' risk of burnout [5]. For example, promoting an ethical climate in the work environment is related to improved employee satisfaction and commitment, which are key factors in increasing happiness and work performance [6–8]. Similarly, Ayub et al. [9] establish an indirect relationship between ethical climate and burnout through the theory of role stress. According to this perspective, an ethical climate is a key factor that mitigates the effects of ambiguity in work roles and prevents excessive emotional tension. Similarly, Rivaz et al. [10] and Saleh et al. [11] argue that an ethical climate functions as a context that counteracts the

negative effects of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, thanks to a high perception of organizational support. However, the first study analyses ethical climate in general terms. That is, it does not propose a differentiation between its dimensions. The second study only analyses ethical climate at an individual level.

On their side, Atabay et al. [12] observe a positive correlation between a rules-based ethical climate and moral discomfort. An ethical climate whose primary concern is norm compliance and specific organizational regulation criteria builds a work environment that prevents employees from feeling autonomous [13]. Therefore, this apparent rigidity may clash with the employees' perception of autonomy and may be associated with higher levels of moral distress [14]. In fact, moral distress arises when personal ethics conflict with institutional constraints, such as autonomy. Therefore, what employees consider correct faces organizational barriers, and this situation limits the ethical course of action they deem appropriate. Under such circumstances, moral distress often leads to burnout [15].

Given the lack of empirical evidence, it is essential to evaluate the impact of an ethical climate of principles on burnout [2,9,15]. The term "burnout" emerged in the United States in the 1980s to describe negative responses associated with work, such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal development [16]. This research follows the approach of Elçi et al. [2], omitting the evaluation of the perception of personal realization as it is considered a consequence of the first two dimensions.

According to Elçi et al. [2], burnout is a significant factor in employee behavior and represents one of the most damaging outcomes at the organizational level. This persistent feeling of fatigue and stress affects employees' physical and emotional health and has detrimental consequences for the progress of organizations. On the other hand, an ethical climate of principles is sustained through personal ethics, the standards proposed by the organization, and a related rule system, possibly more general, external, and complementary [17]. In this sense Santiago-Torner [18], in a recent study, considers that an ethical climate of principles seeks not only for employees to accept norms without any justification but also to interpret them according to the ethical scenario they have to face. However, employees need a wide range of work autonomy for this to happen.

Work autonomy has a positive impact on individuals in several ways. First, it emotionally relieves employees and gives them the authority to decide and choose the best way to perform tasks according to their own criteria [19]. Therefore, work autonomy is a factor that can prevent burnout. Work autonomy shows an inverse relationship with emotional exhaustion, which helps prevent chronic stress by significantly affecting work satisfaction [20]. However, work autonomy also implies a certain domain over time. Employees can decide when to conduct work activities and the time dedicated to their completion. In this sense, the job demands-resources theory suggested by Bakker & Demerouti [21] considers that work autonomy is a resource that only affects work results positively. However, this favorable theoretical trend depends not only on employees accepting greater job responsibility but also on their level of self-efficacy. That is, individual differences can be a determining factor in the scope, beneficial or not, of work autonomy [22]. For example, work autonomy is often associated with extensions of effort as this focus on persistence can lead to longer work shifts. Therefore, a context without limits hinders the proper management of workloads and threatens the employees' mental health [23].

Given the few scientific publications on the relationship between a highly regulated ethical climate, as is the case of the principled, and burnout, and on the underlying mechanisms that strengthen or weaken this relation, this study aims to contribute to this limited knowledge from different perspectives. First, an ethical climate of principles that prioritizes norm compliance can increase emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Hierarchically imposing rules without considering all those involved can lead to conflicts with the individual interpretation of appropriate behavior [12]. In this sense, a rigorous work environment becomes a context factor that can lead to emotional tension when perceived as a requirement [24].

Second, work autonomy can represent an opportunity or an obstacle for employees' emotional well-being. Autonomy is, in principle, a key aspect of both occupational health and human

motivation [25]. However, the perception of self-control becomes a psychosocial risk when limits, about the possible demands, between control and resources, are not clearly established. Therefore, organizations need their employees to have developed moral skills. This means that capacity for self-control, responsible management of autonomy, and work commitment come from external standards aligned with the organizational rules. When the organizational climate is based solely on norms, which can be perceived as demands, and the work schedule is not clearly defined, work intensity, task overload, and time pressure may become part of the employees' daily lives [26]. This context, not necessarily voluntary, poses a risk that can result in moral distress, exhaustion, depersonalization, and strong signs of depression.

Finally, organizational rules, mainly extrinsic stimuli, can completely condition personal morale. In fact, codes of behavior or a specific behavior style may lack moral foundations if they do not consider the individuals' intrinsic values and only focus on the consequences of each action. Therefore, personal beliefs and organizational processes may disagree regarding meaning [27]. However, when an ethical climate of principles integrates moral-related behaviors and rules, through different perceptions of work autonomy, motivational forces capable of preventing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization emerge [19]. The self-determination theory adjusted to the organizational context by Deci et al. [28] suggests that work autonomy is related to individual interests and values. Therefore, work autonomy makes it possible for the rigidity established by the rules not to frustrate employees and to build harmony among them. This scenario of freedom reduces the possibility of employees becoming emotionally exhausted and systematically deteriorating their psychological health [20].

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Considering the main objective of this research, to evaluate the impact of an ethical climate of principles on burnout and the effect of work autonomy on this relationship, the following hypotheses and conceptual framework supporting them are proposed.

Burnout is a sustained negative response to a stressful work environment that directly impacts the employees' emotional state. In this sense, an ethical climate of principles is a context factor that can intensify psychological discomfort because it openly influences employees' motivation and behavior [29].

A rigid climate focused on norm compliance is usually subject to high psychological demands and low perception of support [30,31]. Besides affecting employee motivation, this mismatch between resources and demands can lead to negative emotional processes that significantly harm employee health. Strict discipline and imposing a climate aimed at rules compliance induce more bureaucratic and impersonal processes and often result in repetitive and stressful work [32]. An environment with weak feedback is likely insufficient to develop new values that change behaviors internalized by employees [33].

When an ethical climate of principles proposes moral obligations that possibly ignore or disagree with the employees' values, a process of moral demotivation opens as this situation is perceived as a demand [34]. This disproportionate context can have strong emotional impacts that overwhelm employees and cause them to lose valuable personal resources. The conservation of resources theory by Hobfoll & Lilly [35] proposes that when individuals exercise their profession under difficult emotional conditions and depleted coping resources, they commonly enter a spiral of energy loss and mental fatigue. In fact, the theory suggests that organizational policies directly impact the employees' ability to respond to factors that lead to emotional stress. Thus, when conflict exists between the values proposed by the organization and individual beliefs, specific core resources are threatened, and employees may experience chronic exhaustion [36]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed: *H1*. An ethical climate of principles relates positively to burnout syndrome.

Work autonomy is a key factor for correctly designing a job position [19]. In this sense, the tension between autonomy and control becomes more evident in organizational climates that pressure employees to conform to normative expectations. This intentional limitation may

undermine the beneficial approach that many authors attribute to flexibility when performing tasks [20].

Emotional tension increases as job demands become more apparent and employees lack sufficient resources to successfully cope with them. According to Luna et al. [37], the degree of autonomy can be a detrimental factor to the emotional well-being of professionals. First, work autonomy may be related to work conditions, including lack of support and time pressure, as common detrimental effects [22]. Second, when a work environment focuses on seeking uniform codes of conduct, it exerts external control over the employees. The growing need to supervise the achievement of specific objectives and project the value or direction of work become demands that generate high tension, ambiguity, and uncertainty in highly regulated environments [38]. Third, Mazmanian et al. [39] specify that a higher level of autonomy, especially in people with high academic training, implies extended dedication to work, which leads employees to lose control over their lives to the employing entity [40]. This situation can have significant implications for the employees' work-life balance.

Therefore, work autonomy is not necessarily related to well-being and can lead to stress levels that result in chronic emotional exhaustion. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed: *H2*. Work autonomy is positively related to burnout syndrome, especially in highly educated employees.

The true nature of an ethical climate of principles considers the moral values of employees and not just organizational norms. This integrative approach prevents the role conflict that arises when personal values are misaligned with organizational expectations. In fact, providing clear signals about institutional ethical intentions becomes a key aspect to reduce stress levels if employees consider them acceptable [41]. Emotional energy is depleted not only through demanding work conditions but also when sufficient resources do not back work. In this sense, both the conservation of resources theory [36] and the Job demands-resources theory [21] consistently suggest that the loss of resources results in permanent stress leading to burnout. However, the importance of an ethical climate to facilitate or hinder the achievement of specific basic needs, such as autonomy, remains difficult to assess. According to the self-determination theory [28,42,43], autonomy is a work resource that activates and guides human behavior by covering a basic psychological need. Therefore, work autonomy is an essential element that acts as a mediator between work demands and emotional exhaustion [44].

When an ethical climate of principles is able to integrate the employee's moral character with the organizational rules, considering the importance of individual values, it limits uncertainty and possible rule breaches [30]. Consequently, a climate with a less rigid orientation that provides employees with the necessary tools to face ethical dilemmas can protect their emotional well-being by satisfying the basic need for autonomy.

In fact, when employees perceive that the environment surrounding them does not limit or pressure their behavior or way of thinking, their psychological resources improve through a greater feeling of autonomy. In this sense, work autonomy can activate different motivational processes and a certain psychological freedom that prevents burnout. On the other hand, rules linked to an ethical climate of principles can prevent employees from being exposed to a succession of overwhelming demands that exceed both their autonomy and emotional limits, leading to exhaustion [45]. Examples of such overwhelming demands may include role overload, work settings with excessive work, or abusive leadership styles. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed: *H3*. Work autonomy inversely moderates the positive relationship between an ethical climate of principles and burnout.

2. Method

2.1. Data Collection and Sample

A cluster sample was used, including Colombia's main cities (clusters). The sample selection had a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. Most of the companies in the Colombian electric sector concentrate in the five capitals of the country's key departments (Cundinamarca, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Risaralda, and Caldas). The research project was presented at the

Colombian electric sector's community action meeting in mid-2021. More than 50% of the 35 participating organizations expressed interest in the study, precisely 18. The selection process considered market share, location, seniority, and number of employees. Eventually, the six collaborating organizations were chosen because of their sector visibility and location in the country. During the second stage, confidentiality agreements were signed, and the following documents were sent: voluntary consent and waiver, data protection, and objectives presentation. The questionnaire was supervised by a group of experts and sent to the participants online using the Google Forms tool. The survey was written in Spanish by a bilingual researcher using the conventional "back translation" method [46]. All the research was subject to an ethics committee at the end of 2021. The survey took an estimated time of about 35 minutes to be completed.

The final sample is formed by 448 professionals who work in the Colombian electric sector, specifically in six organizations with central offices in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Manizales, and Pereira. Regarding gender, 175 (39%) participants were women, and 273 (61%) were men. The average age is 37.18 years (SD = 10.059; range: 20-69). A total of 364 professionals have permanent work contracts (81.25%), while the remaining 84 have fixed-term contracts (18.75%). Mean seniority in the organization is 13.06 years (SD = 8.82; range: 0-38 years). Regarding work activity, 86.6% (308) are analysts, 8.9% (40) have intermediate jobs, and 4.5% (20) are managers. All (100%) of survey participants have university studies, and 57.4% (257) have graduate studies. Some 58% (260) have children

2.2. Instruments

Control Variables: Seniority and gender are treated as control variables. In fact, seniority may be a critical occupational factor linked to chronic stress [47]. Furthermore, considering the different backgrounds, it is possible to assume that women experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion than men. The imbalance in domestic workloads between men and women is likely to be a key factor justifying women's greater physical and mental exhaustion [48]. To measure seniority, survey participants were asked to indicate how long they had been working using a scale with one year as the minimum. Gender was coded as 0 for men and 1 for women.

Ethical climate based on principles: One of the subscales proposed by Victor & Cullen [17] was used to evaluate the ethical climate of principles, composed of 11 items organized into three subdimensions: (1) Personal morale (three items), (2) Rules and procedures (four items) and (3) Laws and professional codes (four items). The Cronbach's Alpha obtained through the original scale was 0.72, using a five-point Likert scale. The impact of personal morale, rules, procedures, and professional codes and laws on employee attitude is assessed. This research used a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Items for example include: "Individuals are expected to follow the law and professional standards above other considerations." This is used by Cullen et al. [49] with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.72. This research obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.74 (see Table 2). Bonett & Wright [50] consider a Cronbach's alpha value equal to or greater than 0.70 as standard. Likewise, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated. The results indicate that CR is optimal (CR = 0.74) and AVE is adequate (AVE = 53%). According to Bagozzi et al. [51] and Chin [52], these two values are relevant as they are above 0.70 and 50% respectively.

Work Autonomy: The one-dimensional scale suggested by Spreitzer [53] was used to measure work autonomy using three items. The Cronbach's Alpha obtained through the original scale was 0.72, using a five-point Likert scale. It assesses whether employees have sufficient independence to decide the direction and intensity of their efforts when performing their work and to assume firm control over it. This research used a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Items for example include: "I can decide on my own how to do my work." This is used by Santiago-Torner [54] with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87. This research reaches a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87 (see Table 2). Additionally, results indicate that CR is optimal (CR = 0.73), and AVE is adequate (AVE = 80%).

Emotional Exhaustion: Emotional exhaustion was measured using the five items proposed by Schaufeli et al. [55]. The Cronbach’s Alpha obtained through the original scale was 0.85, using a five-point Likert scale. The effect of the workload on individuals’ emotional resources is evaluated. This research used a six-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Items for example include: “I am emotionally exhausted at my job.” Used by Santiago-Torner [56,57] with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.90. This research achieved a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.90 (see Table 2). The results indicate that CR is optimal (CR = 0.81), and AVE is adequate (AVE = 68%).

Depersonalization: Depersonalization was measured using the five items proposed by Schaufeli et al. [55]. The Cronbach’s Alpha obtained through the original scale was 0.78, using a five-point Likert scale. It assesses whether the workload gradually consumes employees’ emotional resources until a distance is created between them and the rest of the organization’s members. This research used a six-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Items for example include: “I have become more cynical about whether my work contributes anything.” Used by Salanova & Schaufeli [58] with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.84. These authors eliminated item number 13 due to its low factor loading. The same criteria apply in this study. This research achieved a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.90 (see Table 2). The results indicate that CR is optimal (CR = 0.86), and AVE is adequate (AVE = 66%).

2.3. Data Analysis

First, descriptive analyses of the evaluated variables were conducted, including means, standard deviation, Kurtosis, and Skewness. Second, a correlation analysis between the study variables was done. Third, model 1 (simple moderation) proposed by Hayes [59] was used and tested with a regression-based analysis, with a confidence interval (CI) of 95% and a total of 10,000 bootstrapping samples. This statistical method calculates each equation independently. Models 1 and 2 approximate the independent variable to the moderating variable, along with the different covariates concerning the dependent variable. In fact, the only change between the two models is the dependent variable. The PROCESS Macro Hayes [59] of the SPSS statistical program is used for this end.

Before the moderation analysis, the data was checked in terms of linearity, normality, and multicollinearity issues. Kurtosis, asymmetry, and Mahalanobis distance scores were examined to determine linearity and normality. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) and Condition Index were used to assess multicollinearity issues. Condition Index values must be below 30 and VIF values below 10 to meet the assumption of normality. Outliers were verified using Mahalanobis distances as suggested by [60]. No multicollinearity issues were identified, and the data was normally distributed.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analyses calculated first are presented in Table 1. Negative skewness values suggest that the data distribution is slightly skewed to the right. Kurtosis values below 2 indicate a distribution similar to the normal distribution. However, the positive sign indicates a leptokurtic distribution. That is, data values are more concentrated around the mean, and there are fewer outliers. Generally, the data are considered normal when kurtosis is between -7 and +7, and skewness is between -2 and + 2 [61].

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis.

Constructs	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ethical Climate of Principles (ECP)	49.94	2.43	-0.24	1.28
Work Autonomy (WA)	1.91	2.54	-0.33	1.27
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	23.11	2.56	-0.40	1.25
Depersonalization (DE)	20.97	3.60	-0.44	1.32

The correlation analysis conducted second showed that the gender control variable (G) did not correlate significantly to the analyzed scales or subscales. In contrast, seniority (SE) was related to

work autonomy (WA) ($r = 0.12$; $p < 0.01$) and to emotional exhaustion (EE) ($r = 0.13$; $p < 0.01$). The ethical climate of principles (ECP) showed a positive relationship with WA, EE, and depersonalization (DE). Finally, WA is related to EE and DE (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between variables and discriminant validity.

Constructs	N	G	SE	ECP	WA	EE	DE
Gender (G)	1	x					
Seniority (SE)	1	0.04	x				
Ethical Climate of Princ. (ECP)	11	0.08	0.04	0.72			
Work Autonomy (WA)	3	0.04	0.12*	0.24*	0.89		
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	5	0.03	0.13*	0.16*	0.20*	0.82	
Depersonalization (DE)	4	0.04	0.07	0.23*	0.14*	0.59*	0.81

Note: The table shows the Pearson correlations and also includes discriminant validity (diagonal). Discriminant validity depends on the square root of AVE being greater than the different correlations between variables [62]. (N) Number of items. Significant correlations* ($p < 0.05$). CI (95%) ($n=448$).

3.2. Moderation Analysis

Figure 1 and Tables 3 and 4 reveal the results of the double analysis of simple moderation. The regression coefficients used are not standardized. Bootstrapping samples are over 10,000, and confidence intervals are around 95%. The LLCI and ULCI values operate as lower and upper bounds. Hypothesis 1 proposed that an ethical climate of principles would relate positively to burnout syndrome. The linear regressions corresponding to effect a1i of model 1 ($\beta = 0.11$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.01$) and of model 2 ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = 0.01$) justify this assumption (see Tables 3 and 4). Hypothesis 2 proposed that work autonomy would relate positively to burnout syndrome. The linear regressions corresponding to effect a2i of model 1 ($\beta = 0.57$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = 0.01$) and of model 2 ($\beta = 0.69$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$) validate this assumption (see Tables 3 and 4). Hypothesis 3 proposed that work autonomy would inversely moderate the positive relationship between an ethical climate of principles and burnout. The linear regressions corresponding to effect a3i of model 1 ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.01$) and of model 2 ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.01$) confirm this assumption. Low, medium, and high indirect effects confirm work autonomy’s moderating effect (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Model 1, moderation of ethical climate of principles– emotional exhaustion 95% (CI) ($R^2 = 0.260$).

Effect	Route	β	p	t	SE	LLCI	ULCI
ECP on EE	a1i	0.11	0.01	5.16	0.15	0.15	0.69
WA on EE	a2i	0.57	0.01	5.32	0.25	0.12	0.63
ECP x WA on EE	a3i	-0.02	0.01	-3.62	0.05	-0.05	-0.01
Covariable S		0.42	0.01	3.02	0.14	0.15	0.69
Covariable G		0.09	0.86	0.18	0.12	-0.94	1.12
Moderation WA (ECP -EE)	Low (8)	-0.03	0.48	-0.71	.003	-0.09	0.04
	Med. (10)	-0.06	0.05	-1.94	.003	-0.12	0.01
	High (13)	-0.11	0.01	-2.65	.004	-0.19	-0.03

Note. ECP: Ethical climate of principles. EE: Emotional exhaustion. WA: Work autonomy. S: Seniority. G: Gender.

Table 4. Model 2, moderation of ethical climate of principles - depersonalization 95% (CI) ($R^2 = 0.230$).

Effect	Route	β	p	t	SE	LLCI	ULCI
ECP on DE	a1i	0.12	0.01	5.34	0.17	0.23	0.79

WA on DE	a2i	0.69	0.01	4.72	0.35	0.01	1.37
ECP x WA on DE	a3i	-0.02	0.01	-2.75	0.04	-0.03	-0.01
Covariable S		0.16	0.08	1.75	0.09	-0.02	0.34
Covariable G		0.13	0.71	0.37	0.34	-0.94	1.12
	Low (8)	-0.01	0.54	-0.61	.002	-0.06	0.03
Moderation WA (ECP - DE)	Med. (10)	-0.05	0.02	-2.38	.002	-0.08	-0.01
	High (13)	-0.10	0.01	-3.59	.003	-0.15	-0.04

Note. ECP: Ethical climate of principles. DE: Depersonalization. WA: Work autonomy. S: Seniority. G: Gender.

Figure 1 shows the proposed statistical diagram and the results of the simple moderation.

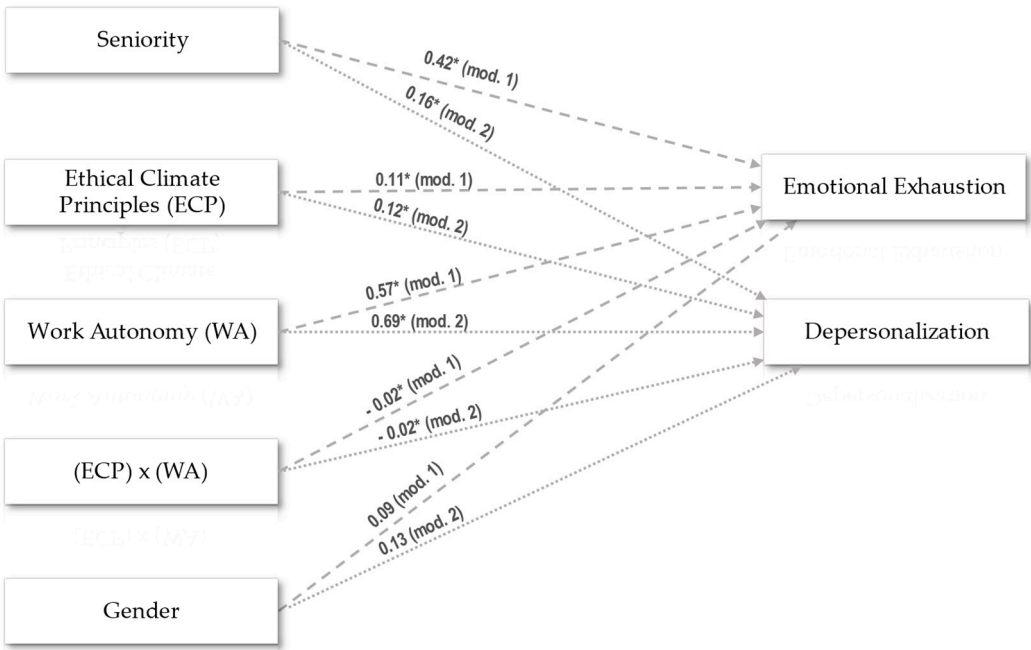


Figure 1. Regression analysis results, model 1 (mod.1) and model 2 (mod.2).

Figure 2 shows the moderating effect of work autonomy on the relationship between an ethical climate of principles and emotional exhaustion. The macro-PROCESS provides three independent values (low, medium, and high). The graph shows that low and medium autonomy levels are not statistically significant. In other words, these two autonomy levels do not influence the impact of an ethical climate of principles (X) on emotional exhaustion (Y). However, a high perception of autonomy changes the meaning of the relationship between X and Y. Therefore, when an ethical climate of principles coexists with high autonomy, it has a buffering effect on emotional exhaustion.

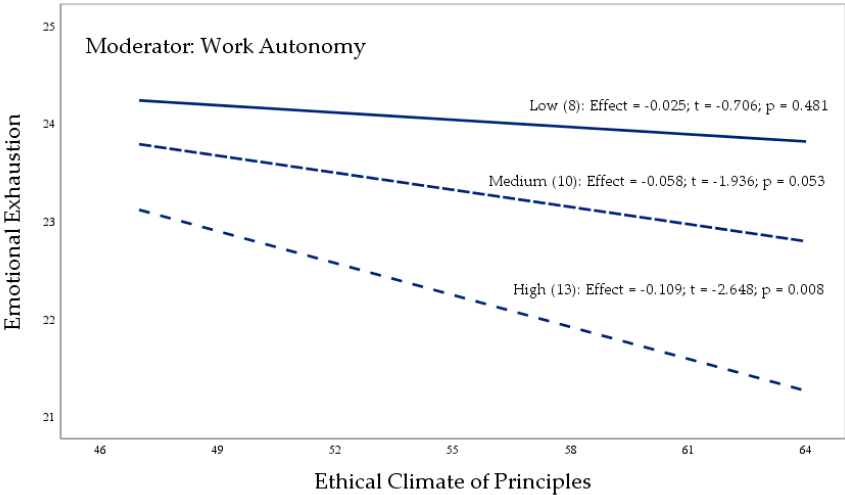


Figure 2. Moderating effect of the work autonomy variable (model 1).

Figure 3 details the impact of an ethical climate of principles (X) on emotional exhaustion (Y), through the multiple moderating values assumed by work autonomy. Work autonomy changes the orientation of X over Y, starting from value 10.054. That is, the influence changes from negative to positive.

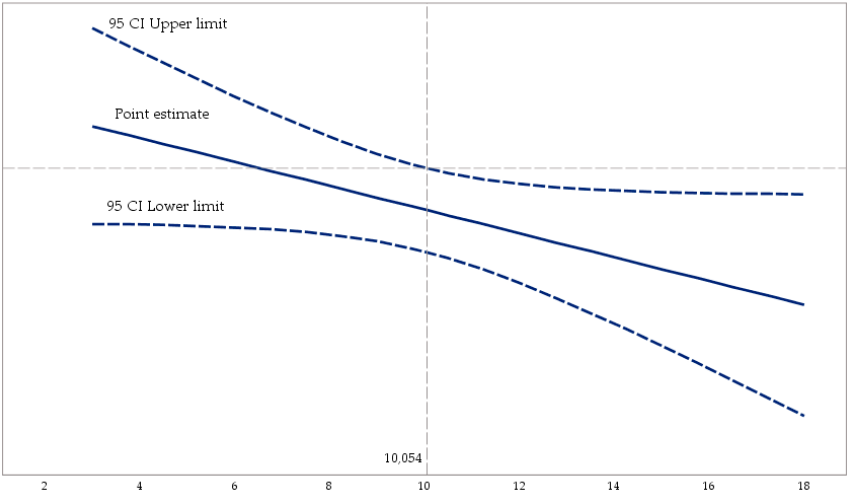


Figure 3. Conditional effect of work autonomy based on the Johnson-Neyman technique. The Johnson-Neyman technique indicates areas of non-significance (interval represented by dashed lines) and areas of significance (interval represented by solid lines).

Figure 4 shows the moderating effect of work autonomy on the relationship between an ethical climate of principles and depersonalization. The graph shows that low autonomy levels are not statistically significant. In other words, this autonomy range does not influence the impact of an ethical climate of principles (X) on depersonalization (Y). However, a high or medium perception of autonomy changes the meaning of the relationship between X and Y. Therefore, when an ethical climate of principles coexists with a medium or high level of autonomy, it has a buffering effect on depersonalization.

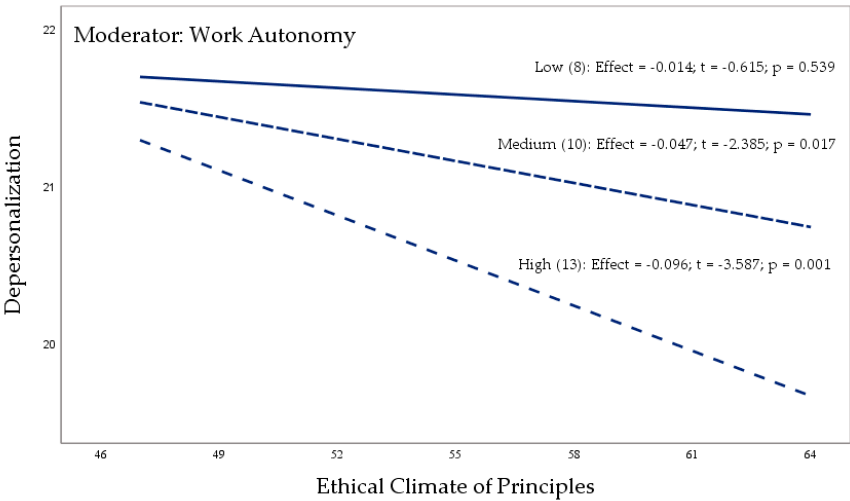


Figure 4. Moderating effect of work autonomy variable (model 2).

Figure 5 explains the impact of an ethical climate of principles (X) on depersonalization (Y), through the multiple moderating values assumed by work autonomy. Work autonomy changes the orientation of X over Y, starting from value 9.517. That is, the influence changes from adverse to favorable.

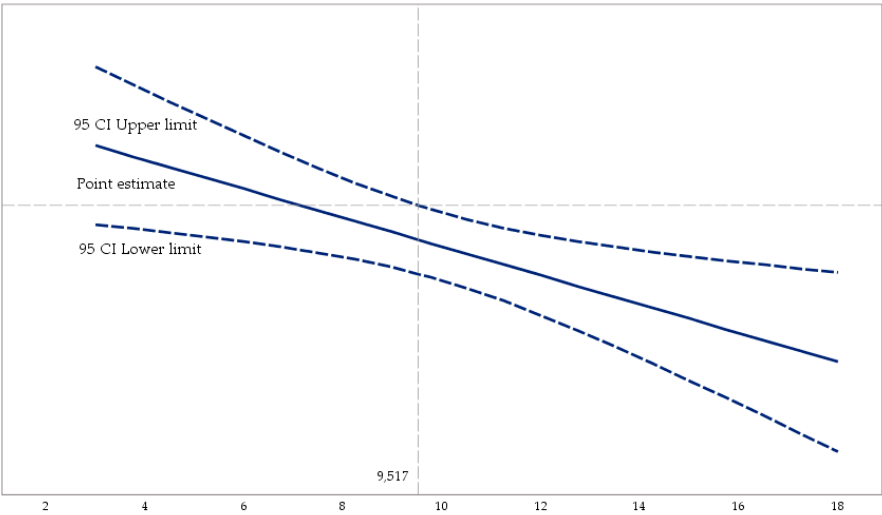


Figure 5. Conditional effect of work autonomy based on the Johnson-Neyman technique.

4. Discussion

This study analyses the impact of an ethical climate of principles on employees’ emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, considering work autonomy as a relevant moderating factor in this relationship. The findings revealed a positive correlation between an ethical climate of principles and these two subdimensions of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*. Furthermore, it was observed that the influence of an ethical climate of principles on burnout was conditioned by the level of work autonomy of employees. That is, a higher presence of autonomy was related to lower levels of burnout.

This research makes valuable contributions to the literature for being one of the first articles to detail how an ethical climate based on principles affects employees’ emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, helping fill an important knowledge gap. Although there is information on the effect an ethical climate can have on burnout, for example, Ayub et al. [9], Rivaz et al. [10], Saleh et al. [11], none of these studies address a model focused on the role of an ethical climate of principles

as a key component of employees' emotional well-being. Therefore, the results obtained in this research represent an important step in understanding ethical climates and their effects.

The findings of this research highlight the detrimental effect of an ethical climate of principles on employees' emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (*H1*). These results suggest that rules generally enable coherent employee behavior. However, when individual behaviors clash with a highly hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structure, for instance the Colombian electric sector with its rigid attitudes towards rules, the independence and dynamic skills needed by professionals tend to be reduced [5]. This mechanical, controlled context with little room for proactivity can lead to moral distress and burnout [32]. In fact, through the development and implementation of its comprehensive anti-corruption program, the Colombian electric sector has defined an ethical climate of principles conditioned by strict policies to counteract bribery, which in turn restricts employee actions [18].

In this sense, Atabay et al. [12] consider that a rules-based climate may be related to higher levels of moral distress. According to these authors, when employees perceive that their intentions, the product of personal interpretation of what is appropriate behavior, are interrupted by a lack of freedom and feel obliged to follow a path with which they disagree, they repress emotions and consume resources until becoming exhausted. Along these lines, Bernuzzi et al. [63] suggest that moral distress is actively related to emotional exhaustion when it is not refocused positively.

The imposition of a strict work environment, in addition to attacking personal morale, causes professionals to confront this stressor with psychological regulation that tends to the expressive suppression of emotions. This strategy modifies the emotions expressed rather than the internal feelings [4]. Therefore, a maladaptive and contrary effect generates an external and internal discrepancy, which ends in negative emotional experiences. According to the COR theory, a work context that recurrently imposes demands, drives subordinates to a progressive energy loss until they become emotionally exhausted and their emotional well-being deteriorates [64].

On the other hand, independence to make decisions based on one's criteria can lead to ignoring formal rules [65]. For example, the Colombian electric sector depends on strong efficiency to solve problems and provide services quickly. Therefore, personal morale may disagree with organizational rules when employees face ethical dilemmas affecting organizational performance, e.g., early delivery of an electrical certification with strong social undertones if such is rapid. A rigid climate stops what personal morale, or codes of conduct consider good intentions, and these types of ethical conflicts can emotionally frustrate employees in addition to requiring more resources. In fact, failure to accept stressors contributes to employees being more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization [66,67].

Furthermore, the Colombian electric sector faces added complexity as its progress depends on continuous innovation. This static context of a climate with a rigid moral guide, through a set of rules with only one meaning, limits organizational development. Disruptive processes and individual creativity are incompatible with the classical moral theory, which seeks to impose a climate in which the highest aspiration is to prevent bad practices [68]. Rigid postures prevent morale change and likely undermine employees' emotional health [63].

This research has introduced work autonomy as an aspect to explain emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (*H2*). The results indicate that work autonomy, far from playing a protective role, contributes to increased stress and negative factors linked to the job position. It is important to contextualize these results, considering that the main characteristic of the Colombian electric sector is the high academic training of its personnel. This differential factor, in this specific sector, is likely to turn the work intensity effort into an aspect valued for possible promotions. In this case, work flexibility can become a stressor because tasks control employees. In other words, work autonomy can become a demand when employees lose certain decision freedom [22,69].

In fact, "*the autonomy paradox*" proposed by Mazmanian et al. [39] states that there is a significant relationship between a greater degree of work autonomy and an increase in the hours dedicated to work, which can lead to a culture of extended work shifts [40]. Task heterogeneity added to deadlines probably influences the low regulation of the time allocated to their completion. In addition, the

Colombian electric sector is obliged to justify all its processes, which entails intense administrative work. The strictness imposed by the sector studied since 2015, with the aim of preventing part of the operation from being diverted into private hands, requires presenting multiple almost immediate reports to demonstrate proper management of the processes.

In the model proposed by Bakker & Demerouti [21], autonomy is considered a work resource when it brings control over the workload and authority to redistribute it to prevent additional demands such as time pressure. When work demands are high and are assumed by employees whose autonomy framework is limited only to being able to face them by extending the work shift, such circumstances result in higher levels of stress, anxiety, and a reduced perception of well-being [22].

Finally, when work autonomy assumes a moderating role, the impact of the ethical climate of principles on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization progressively changes (*H3*). In other words, a gradual increase in work autonomy reduces the positive impact of an ethical climate of principles on employees' emotional exhaustion due to the mentioned reason. An ethical climate of principles provides employees with useful information to successfully deal with ethical dilemmas. In essence, rules and ethical codes seek to regulate individual behavior through a perspective of equity [30]. Thus, when an ethical climate of principles strives to understand the perceptions of its members towards the norms, it is easier for individual behavior to be more stable [70].

Considering personal morale as a critical organizational aspect prevents employees from intentionally deviating from the norm. Therefore, balancing rules and individual ethical codes will likely influence the employees' emotional health [71]. However, this effect is significant across different perceptions of autonomy (low, medium, and high). First, when an ethical climate of principles coexists with low autonomy, its positive effect on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization does not occur. This scenario is coherent with the model proposed by Karasek [72], which studies the relationship between the volume of work demands and the degree of autonomy required to handle them. When linked to low autonomy, a rigid and rule-based work climate fosters greater resource consumption, such as extended work shifts. In this context, an ethical climate of principles represents a demand that causes tension and chronic emotional discomfort.

Second, when an ethical climate of principles coexists with medium or high autonomy, its positive impact on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization changes from positive to negative. In other words, medium and high work autonomy levels, when combined with an ethical climate of principles, have a buffering effect on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In this sense, when employees have greater control over the task, they develop new patterns of behavior, which integrate the organization's internal rules and standards with the external criteria and principles responsible for shaping personal morale. Employees under such circumstances can establish a positive relationship between workload and work autonomy, achieving work goals or acquiring new knowledge without it leading to mental health deterioration [73]. Finally, Zeuge et al. [74] suggest that education level is a relevant characteristic about the responsible use of autonomy.

Although it is not part of any research hypothesis in this study, results suggest that job seniority poses a risk for employees in the Colombian electric sector, as it is positively related to burnout. This result differs from the findings of [75]. These authors consider that lack of experience in the job position is a factor that leads to emotional exhaustion. In other words, an inexperienced person may be subject to longer work shifts due to a lack of maturity in their usual duties and to greater emotional exposure related to burnout.

The Colombian electric sector is subject to multiple social pressures, such as the country's growing economic slowdown leading to strong social instability or the numerous corruption cases recently discovered. In this sense, employees with more seniority are likely to assume these situations as emotional burdens that require constant consumption of resources through coping strategies, which, if not proactive, lead to excessive stress, negative emotions, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization. In fact, low-proactive strategies are maladaptive and involve strong emotional disconnections. That is, these strategies are unable to face the challenges posed by a stressor and to obtain additional resources to face future complex scenarios [76]. Therefore, when these strategies do not help to manage emotions adequately, they are not very effective to buffer burnout as the work

context demands, instead of acting as a resource that encourages self-development, become demands that are impossible to assume [77].

To conclude, the results indicate no significant relationship between gender and burnout, which agrees with the findings of [78]. Traditionally, women have been more likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion at work than men [48]. This could be because women tend to hold back emotions while men tend to release their negative emotions, particularly under pressure. However, the strict and strongly normative climate surrounding the Colombian electric sector causes men and women to control their emotions equally, which may be a valid argument explaining the absence of a relationship between gender and burnout. In fact, emotional displays are generally associated with psychological distress, while emotional suppression behaviors are usually related to strength and balance [79]. This context is crucial as it suggests that burnout may go unnoticed, both in men and women, under a climate that is particularly demanding on standards.

5. Conclusion and Practical Implications

This research contributes to the existing literature on burnout by exploring the impact that an ethical climate of principles and work autonomy can have on mental health. In this sense, organizational ethics is a resource when it is aligned with the individuals' values and behavioral patterns. In fact, it is necessary to establish what is and what is not correct within any institution. However, when a climate is defined exclusively through norms, it can saturate employees emotionally. Furthermore, work environment rigidity tends to increase the hours dedicated to work, and work autonomy changes from being a resource to being a demand. Instead, when a climate of principles becomes more flexible by combining personal morale with specific rules or laws, and also transits through a high level of autonomy, its direction changes from positive to negative and buffers the harmful effects of burnout.

The findings of this research support the concept of the *"dark side"* of the ethical climate of principles and work autonomy. Disproportionately demanding work environments that address problems through strict rules can lead to inefficient resolutions that frustrate and emotionally exhaust employees. Furthermore, high accessibility to work through the constant use of certain technological advances is likely to cause an imbalance between resources and demands, reversing work autonomy's positive effect. In fact, this prioritization of work, detrimental to non-work life, leads, in the end, to emotional exhaustion. Fortunately, this research identifies potential mechanisms that employers can use to reduce the negative implications of work autonomy and of an ethical climate of principles.

First, effective performance depends on employees' self-perception of their own competencies, and on the feedback they may receive from supervisors. A high perception of support prevents role demands from being excessively fueled by emotional resources. In this sense, the rationality of workloads and an adequate organization of time allow employees to understand that their resources are limited and must be used thoughtfully. Additionally, job position audits can help employees better understand their responsibilities and that work autonomy is related to a more effective allocation of time and resources [24].

Second, leaders need to be aware not only of employees' competencies but also of their own behavioral limitations. Therefore, leaders who want to convey the moral principles that govern the organization to their subordinates must have sufficient emotional skills to channel and understand the employees' responses. In fact, leaders are facilitators of the norm, and simply imposing norms prevents employees' voluntary adherence to an ethical climate of principles. Excessive rigidity probably leads to a perception of sustained obligation that tends to exhaustion. Integration of mobile technologies into the organizational culture of the Colombian electric sector can influence the tension between work autonomy and an excessive perception of responsibility. Therefore, once organizations adopt flexible work as a competitive advantage, it is crucial to consider its impact on employees' well-being. As employees gain familiarity with technology and become more efficient, leaders need to communicate digital disconnection policies and their relevance to employees.

Finally, including well-being work teams can be an effective mechanism to change members' expectations. Setting collective goals that consider time off can also promote a work-life balance. In this regard, it is advisable to conduct weekly follow-ups to discuss the progress of projects and to incorporate awareness-raising sessions to help employees realize the importance of their physical and emotional well-being during their time off [23].

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it was transversal and targeted to a specific industrial sector. However, data collection was obtained from different sources, namely from the six participating organizations. Thus, the results are consistent and probably generalizable to other similar sectors. Second, the sample is gender biased as 61% of respondents were men. Third, prior awareness-raising by each participating organization helped mitigate the social desirability bias by explaining the importance of answering all questions with complete transparency. However, the need for social approval is a concept that is difficult to control.

Future research could aim at a longitudinal study, through different waves and with intervals equal to or greater than six months, to strengthen the conclusions obtained regarding the causality of the relationships. Additionally, future research could include other moderating effects such as intrinsic motivation, affective commitment, or psychological empowerment, which could attenuate the impact of burnout as they are individual strengths in principle.

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