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Leaders' Responsiveness to Creating Ethical Climate for Whistleblowing and Implicit Retaliation in the Public Sector

Oluwatoyin Olusegun
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Oluwatoyin Olusegun

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2024

Abstract

Leaders' Responsiveness to Creating Ethical Climate for Whistleblowing and Implicit

Retaliation in the Public Sector

by

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2011

MILD, University of Lagos, 1998

BA, University of Ilorin, 1988

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August, 2024

Abstract

Whistleblowing is reporting unethical or illegitimate practices witnessed by a member of an organization. Despite the laws and policies protecting whistleblowers in the public sector, many employees who report observed wrongdoings face retaliation. Creating an ethical climate impacts the responsiveness of organizational leaders to whistleblowing, yet little is known about how middle-level managers navigate organizational factors, situational factors, and personal beliefs to create an ethical climate. The current study aimed to bridge the knowledge gap by exploring how middle-level managers in government organizations in California described how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. Kiser and Ostrom's institutional rational choice theory was used for this study. Data for this generic qualitative inquiry were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 middle-level managers and analyzed using thematic analysis. Four themes emerged to indicate that middle-level managers were willing to create an ethical climate, respond positively to whistleblowing, harness personal factors, and navigate organizational factors to create the desired climate. Participants provided valuable insights into the complex interplay of personal and organizational factors that impact their ability to create an ethical climate. The implications for positive social change include creating a positive work environment that promotes a culture of openness and transparency where prosocial behaviors thrive, and employees may spread positivity to their families and communities, fostering a culture of mutual respect and growth.

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Dedication

To the Almighty God, who has given me the strength, wisdom, and courage to pursue this doctoral program and guided me through every stage of this doctoral journey, I dedicate my study to His glory and honor.

To the loving memory of my beloved sister, Oluwakemi Oluwayomi Adekoya, who may be gone but will never be forgotten. Your love, inspiration, and encouragement were a constant source of motivation for me throughout this doctoral journey. You never doubted that I could do it. My deepest wish was to share the joy of this milestone with you in person. Thank you for being my greatest cheerleader. Forever loved. Forever in our hearts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The organizational climate and leaders' responsiveness are critical antecedents to employees' intentions to whistleblow. There are situations when employees observe non-compliance with policies and disruption of structures and fail to report unethical behaviors for fear of retaliation or reprisal from leaders in the organization. Chordiya et al. (2020) asserted that many public sector employees who witnessed wrongdoings, violations, harassment, corruption, and financial misconduct did not report them for fear of reprisal. The fear of retaliation from managers impedes whistleblowing, but its encouragement can positively impact substantial changes and reforms in government organizations (Antoh & Sholihin, 2021).

Currently, organizational policies and government laws exist to protect whistleblowers. Butcher (2021) found that despite these protective laws and policies for whistleblowers, retaliation rates against whistleblowers have increased up to three times since 2013 and almost twice as much since 2017 in the United States. Rates have almost doubled globally since 2019. Creating an ethical climate in the organization that supports whistleblowing without implicit retaliation is an issue that impacts middle-level managers in the public sector because of the challenges the managers face. Some issues contributing to this problem include the organizational structure and environment (Lee, 2020) and the ethical foundations and ideals managers depend on when making decisions (Luca Casali & Perano, 2021).

The existence of an ethical climate in organizations created by middle-level managers influences employees' attitudes and ethical behavior to create a sustainable, positive organizational culture. According to Pagliaro et al. (2018), an ethical climate is central to organizational life because it portrays and defines the organizational core values, promotes prosocial behaviors, and positively influences the perceptions and emotions of organizational members. Qing et al. (2020) asserted that an ethical climate instituted by ethical leadership positively affects employee work behaviors and increases motivation, engagement, performance, commitment to the organization, and job satisfaction in public sector organizations.

The sections of this chapter will recapitulate prior research and describe the problem statement, the study's purpose, theoretical framework, the nature of the study, definitions of concepts used in the study, assumptions, scope, and delimitations, and limitations. The chapter concludes with the significance of the study.

Background

Whistleblowing in government organizations and how organizational leaders manage it has generated a fair amount of scholarly interest due to perceived bureaucratic effectiveness, accountability, and ethicality (Kang, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Exmeyer & Jeon, 2020; West & Bowman, 2020). Organizations tend to benefit from whistleblowing through prompt identification of wrongdoings (Andon et al., 2018), protection against adverse implications resulting from wrongdoings (Latan et al., 2021), detection of organizational inadequacies to improve administration (Riaz et al., 2022; Lee & Xiao,

2018), and facilitating the resolution of issues internally before exposure to external entities (Near & Miceli, 2016). Whistleblowing is critical in reforming public sector organizations (Latan et al., 2023). Over time, the increase in whistleblowing in government agencies has also increased retaliation (Latan et al., 2023). Although employees are reluctant to blow the whistle for fear of reprisals, Taylor (2018) found that trust in managers in the US public sector encourages knowledge-sharing behavior and cooperation. Trust in middle-level managers encourages the employees because they perceive the managers to be ethical.

Organizational factors encourage whistleblowing as employees must feel comfortable reporting wrongdoings without fear of reprisal. Employees are encouraged to whistleblow when managers promote an ethical climate and comply with the whistleblowers' protection policy that protects them from retaliation (Lee et al., 2021). Organizational support and climate encourage whistleblowing when whistleblowers perceive their managers as fair and ethical. Wells et al. (2021) stressed the importance of organizational leaders building a culture that supports whistleblowing and handles whistleblowing honestly and fairly. Organizational culture is germane to understanding the behavior of members of the organization. Tangsgaard (2021) opined that there are three layers to understanding organizational culture: the physical environment of the organization, the beliefs and values, and the basic assumptions, such as taken-for-granted beliefs and values, that govern behavior and perception. Understanding these principles assists public sector leaders in developing effective whistleblowing protection policies

and adhering to these policies to support whistleblowers against retaliation (Klofstad et al., 2022).

Organizational factors, in conjunction with personal beliefs, can influence public sector middle-level managers' ability to make the choice to be guided by ethics to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. Aryati et al. (2018) affirmed that organizational leaders determine an organization's culture and ethics because organizational climate reflects how managers operate. Middle-level managers play a critical role in establishing an ethical climate that reduces the psychological safety concerns and feelings of powerlessness that discourage employees from reporting wrongdoings in an organization (Hassan et al., 2019).

There is a knowledge gap regarding how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing because, despite the organizational policies and government laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers, many still face retaliation. More information is needed on the ability of middle-level managers to foster an ethical climate (Ancarani et al., 2021). Previtali and Cerchiello (2018) identified that managers must understand the laws and regulations protecting whistleblowers against retaliation. According to Baljija and Rustemi (2021), more training needs to be provided to public sector managers on whistleblowing procedures, legislation protection, and the rights of whistleblowers. In addition, public sector managers may need to be versed in creating a culture of openness and transparency that will foster the ethical climate required for appropriately responding to whistleblowing and whistleblowers (Previtali &

Cerchiello, 2018). A culture of transparency and trust portrays ethical leadership and encourages employees to speak up when they observe organizational wrongdoings (Park & Jeon, 2022). Taylor (2019) stated that identifying organizational and individual practices that enable an ethical climate will assist managers in their responsiveness to whistleblowing. Aside from personal beliefs and values, it is vital to understand how organizational policies and government legislation may assist middle-level managers in making ethical decisions regarding whistleblowing.

The study highlighted how adequate training on whistleblowing procedures, understanding government laws and regulations, harnessing personal beliefs and values, and creating a culture of transparency and trust might help middle-level managers create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation against whistleblowers.

Problem Statement

Currently, organizational policies and government laws exist to protect whistleblowers. However, despite the laws and policies protecting whistleblowers, in the United States, rates of retaliation against whistleblowers have increased. Tiitinen (2020) found that 87% of respondents who witnessed an organization's wrongdoings failed to report it because they had seen some form of retaliation against whistleblowers in their organizations. Smaili et al. (2023) expressed that 75% of whistleblowers observe their reports neglected, and 10-40% face retaliation.

The problem impacts middle-level managers because they face challenges in creating an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation. Many factors contribute to this problem, such as the organizational structure and environment (Lee, 2020) and the ethical foundations and values managers rely on when making decisions (Luca Casali & Perano, 2021). There is a lack of information on the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation from the perspective of middle-level managers.

There have been many studies on whistleblowing based on the perception of whistleblowers. However, there needs to be more information from the viewpoint of middle-level managers in government organizations on their ability to initiate an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation, irrespective of situational influences. According to Lee (2020), there is a need to explore how organizational factors, ethical environment, and managers' responsiveness encourages whistleblowing in government organizations. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by understanding the organizational and personal factors that influence the ability of middle-level managers in California to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation from the perspective of middle-level managers.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this qualitative study is to understand the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that would encourage whistleblowing without retaliation. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that a qualitative study seeks to understand how individuals or groups interpret their experiences or phenomena in real-life contexts. Since organizational factors, personal beliefs, and rationality impact the ability of middle-level managers working in different organizations and under various situations to make ethical decisions because they have diverse realities, the experience of each manager is subjective and unique. The qualitative study helped understand the participants' unique and individual experiences, and their ability to encourage whistleblowing by creating an ethical climate with recourse for no retaliation.

Research Question

The research question for the study is as follows: How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The institutional rational choice theory guided this generic qualitative study. The theory, introduced by Kiser and Ostrom (1982), posits public policy as institutional arrangements comprised of rules and norms that guide the actions and decisions of actors.

The institutional rational choice theory provides a basis for understanding the concepts and relationships that assist our understanding of human behavior. Actors are assumed to be rational, with their traits changing based on their role (Schlager & Blomquist, 1996). Actors, as individuals, cannot alter their organizations' physical or material condition. However, they focus on making decisions and taking actions that can influence behaviors within the constraints imposed by the organizational environment (Ostrom, 1999). Individuals base their decision-making on their perceptions and the valuation of costs that come with the anticipated outcomes (Sabatier, 1999). Chervier et al. (2022) contended that individuals make decisions within the institutional rational choice framework if the benefits they gain outweigh the transaction costs of the desired outcome. Focusing on their organizational roles, middle-level managers may face challenges in creating an ethical climate while navigating their personal beliefs, values, and organizational factors to attain their desired outcomes. Institutional rational choice theory can assist with understanding the choice options of middle-level managers in government organizations in California. There is a more detailed explanation of how institutional rational choice theory is related to this study and research question in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The research approach chosen for this study is a generic qualitative methodology. Quantitative research was unsuitable for this study because the focus is to understand personal insights and explore the perspectives of middle-level managers on their ability to create an ethical climate rather than test causal relationships, collect numeral data, and

examine relationships between variables. The generic qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this study because qualitative researchers conduct their studies in a natural setting and strive to understand the meaning people assign to a phenomenon of interest, how they make sense of their world, and their experiences in the world. With interpretive understanding, qualitative researchers gather information from study participants to explain their subjective realities (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using qualitative methodology allowed for in-depth interviews that provided detailed and rich data to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Based on the selected approach and research question, it is essential to use interviewing to understand the perspective of middle-level managers on their ability to create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing and whistleblowers while navigating organizational, situational, and personal factors.

About 10–12 middle-level managers working in California government organizations were interviewed and selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis assisted in understanding participants' perspectives, perceptions, knowledge, and experience from the data collected from the interviews.

Definitions

Whistleblowing: The act of reporting unethical behaviors in an organization is known as whistleblowing. According to Hechanova and Manaois (2020), whistleblowing

entails disclosing any illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices witnessed by a member of an organization.

Whistleblower: An organizational member who reports witnessed wrongdoing through the whistleblowing channel designated by the organization (Smaili et al., 2023).

Leadership Responsiveness: The receptiveness of managers to whistleblowing and whistleblowers that portrays reassurance to whistleblowers that they will be protected from retaliation (Lee, 2020).

Ethical Leadership: How organizational leaders demonstrate normative conduct through their personal actions and interpersonal relationships, promoting such behavior to employees through two-way communication, support, and decision-making (Jensen et al., 2023)

Ethical Climate: An ethical climate is the predominant organizational characteristics, procedures, and practices that emanate from the most generally used types of moral reasoning by organizational leaders within organizations that shape employees' personal and social norms (Gorsira et al., 2018).

Ethical Behavior: A rational, conscious, and deliberate behavior consistent with organizational norms influencing moral courage to carry out actions consistent with ethical standards (Fernando et al., 2022).

Middle-level Managers: As a semi-executive position in an organization between the upper-level management and lower-level management, middle-level managers play a crucial role in the participation and oversight of day-to-day operations by synthesizing

information up and simplifying commands down within the organization (Robinson et al., 2023).

Top Management: In an organization, top management – usually comprising of the chief executive officers, chief financial officers, presidents, vice presidents, and the board of directors – are primary decision makers that determine the broad strategic decisions, set the pace for the organization, and drive organizational culture (Hsu & Chang, 2021).

Organizational Culture: A multifaced phenomenon, organizational culture is the accumulated shared beliefs, values, and basic assumptions of a group that are deemed valid and, therefore, taught to new organizational members as the right way of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving in organizational situations (Tangsgaard, 2021).

Organizational Climate: Organizational climate is the shared perceptions of the meanings that organizational members attach to organizational practices, policies, and procedures, which reflects on interpersonal relationships, work, and authority in the organization (Wang & Kim, 2023).

Retaliation: Retaliation occurs when an employee who reports a witnessed wrongdoing or violation in an organization faces retribution, reprisal, or discipline from organizational leaders (West & Bowman, 2020).

Personal Beliefs: Beliefs are issues that humans feel strongly about, guiding daily life, linked very closely to morals and values, and they reflect unquestioned subconscious notions about the outside world (Knechel & Mintchik, 2022).

Personal Values: Values are underlying cultural attributes that cognitively represent primary motives, specifying what is essential and socially acceptable in a culture, serving as a basis for evaluation, motivating attitude, and directing human behavior (Knechel & Mintchik, 2022).

Moral Philosophy: Moral philosophy systemizes, defends, and recommends concepts about right or wrong and influences organizational leadership's ethical decision-making (Bridges, 2018).

Assumptions

This qualitative study aimed to understand how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing without retaliating against whistleblowers while navigating organizational, situational, and personal factors. Middle-level managers have subjective realities of truth and are experts in their knowledge and experiences. Burkholder et al. (2020) affirmed that subjectivity of truth indicates that there may be more than one truth, and these truths depend on the individuals affected. The assumption is that the managers would provide critical insights into their ability to create an ethical climate from their perspective through in-depth interviews. Patton (2015) stated that interviewing captures people's experiences, beliefs, fears, and triumphs and takes the researcher inside another person's life and worldview. I also assume that the participants' knowledge through these interviews was gained through their previous experiences with whistleblowing, organizational factors, personal beliefs, and employee interactions.

Values are personal and influence decision-making (Skimina et al., 2021).

Middle-level managers may make decisions based on different value sets and situations.

There was the assumption that values are part of reality, guiding the choice or decision to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation. Based on the qualitative nature of the study, participants' responses were subjective as they pertain to the study, and interactions with the participants were only for data collection purposes.

The intention was to understand, elucidate, and identify potentially relevant data to answer the research question. Therefore, the assumption was that a generic qualitative study is most appropriate for the study to achieve the stated purpose of the study.

Scope and Delimitations

The study addressed the responsiveness of middle-level managers to whistleblowing and how they create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias to retaliate against whistleblowers. Specifically, I focused on how organizational and personal factors influence the ability of middle-level managers in California government organizations to create the appropriate organizational climate that supports whistleblowing and whistleblowers. Previous studies have separately explored leadership responsiveness (Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022; Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Bentzen, 2022; Eun-Jee & Park, 2020) and ethical climate (Akhtar et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018; Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021; Zhou et al., 2018) as factors that encourage whistleblowing in organizations. However, additional research is needed on the ability of

middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing from their perspectives.

The target population for the study was middle-level managers in government organizations in California. The managers described in their own words how they can create an ethical climate for whistleblowing despite organizational and personal factors. The criteria for participants include at least 2 years of managerial experience, with at least 1 year of working in their current organization in a mid-level management position. The intent was to ensure that the participants had the experience and knowledge to provide in-depth data-rich information that would meet the study's purpose through the institutional rational choice framework. There was no restriction on the sector of the government organizations where the potential study participants work. The participants could work with the State government, the Counties, or the Cities. They could work in any department within a government organization, which may increase the transferability of the study in the public sector.

Limitations

Some of the limitations may include sample size, reliability of data, and limits associated with self-reported data. Middle-level managers may be reluctant to share their experience about retaliation against whistleblowers and their organizational standpoint. Therefore, recruiting an adequate number of participants willing to share their perspectives in interviews may result in a limitation for the study. Using purposive sampling may also be a limitation as the researcher's judgment of obtaining a

representative sample may be hampered by vulnerability to errors, causing low reliability and high levels of bias, which may lead to the inability to generalize the study's findings.

I engaged in reflexivity during the data collection to help mitigate the researcher's bias. I documented my thoughts through journaling, ruminated on my perceptions, and practiced self-awareness to ensure that my personal beliefs and values were not reflected in the data interpretation. I strived to be open-minded without attempting to confirm preconceived assumptions. There was no conflict of interest because the participants were volunteers from a purposeful sample population.

There is limited research regarding middle-level managers' perspectives in California government organizations on their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation against whistleblowers. I used qualitative methodology to address this research problem. The findings from this study were constrained by the interpretations derived from the knowledge and experiences disclosed by the participants.

Significance

The study filled a gap by providing awareness that legal measures through whistleblower protection laws may still be insufficient in encouraging whistleblowing in organizations but that it also requires an ethical climate fostered by middle-level managers to encourage whistleblowing without bias for retaliation. The study contributed to the literature on decision-making when faced with ethical dilemmas in organizations. The findings of the study should help organizational middle-level managers understand

the importance of harnessing situational or organizational factors to make ethical decisions regarding whistleblowing because organizational factors can play a role in encouraging whistleblowing (Exmeyer & Jeon, 2020; Ugaddan & Park, 2019; Nawawi & Salin, 2019).

The result should also help public, nonprofit, and private organizations develop training and programs designed to enhance leadership ethicality and skills in handling whistleblowing that promotes fairness and a positive organizational environment. Leadership ethicality and a positive organizational environment can promote positive social change, increasing employee satisfaction. An ethical organizational climate can encourage whistleblowing by fostering trust and an expectation of open communication (Taylor & Curtis, 2018). Employees will be able to speak out about observed wrongdoings without fear of reprisal from management.

The acceptable degree of unethical behavior in an organization can foster an adverse work environment and increase the potential for retaliation against whistleblowers by organizational leaders (Park et al., 2020). Positive social change can result from creating an ethical climate that promotes a positive working environment. A positive working environment can lead to a considerable improvement in the happiness of a substantial part of the population because employees make up a significant part of society. The personal dispositions of employees directly affect the well-being of other family members and, by extension, the community. A satisfied community may enhance mutual respect, growth, and peace, resulting in a more decent society.

Summary

Chapter 1 outlined the expectation that employees who witness illegal practices or violations in their workplace have a right to report the wrongdoing without fear of retaliation from organizational leaders. Reporting these illegal or immoral practices or behaviors is known as whistleblowing. Despite the laws that protect whistleblowers, they still face retaliation. Organizational leaders, specifically middle-level managers, must create a suitable ethical climate. The study addressed a gap regarding understanding how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation against whistleblowers while navigating organizational and personal factors. The theoretical framework for the study is institutional rational choice theory. The study utilized the generic qualitative methodology appropriate for conducting in-depth interviews to obtain data-rich information that answered the research question. There was a description of the assumptions, scope and delimitations, and potential study limitations. There was also the significance of the study, which noted how it would add to the body of knowledge, contribute to organizational practice, and potentially create positive social change.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework for the study and a synthesis of the literature related to the concepts of the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to understand how middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation. There is a need for middle-level managers to navigate situational influences such as their personal beliefs, values, moral philosophies, and organizational factors to foster an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing without retaliating against whistleblowers. Ethical leadership is crucial in supporting whistleblowing and reduces the possibility of retaliation. Previtali and Cerchiello (2022) stated that there is a need to understand the organizational factors, such as organizational structure, perceived leadership responsiveness, and organizational culture and viewpoints, all of which influence the creation of an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing.

This chapter reviews the extant literature and research on the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation. Due to the dearth of peer-reviewed literature directly related to the phenomenon in the public policy field, the review expanded research into other areas such as law and management, business ethics, and accounting and finance for peer-reviewed articles. The literature review begins with restating the problem statement and purpose of the study and transits into the examination of the theoretical framework for the study. The

theoretical framework is the institutional rational choice theory, which suggests that individuals are assumed to be rational, and perceptions or beliefs and situational factors guide their choices.

Literature Search Strategy

There were numerous search attempts for relevant literature on whistleblowing, retaliation, and organizational ethical climate in various databases. The databases include Complementary Index, Business Source Complete, Supplemental Index, Education Source, Business Source Complete, Social Sciences Citation Index, Academic Search Complete, Directory of Open Access Journals, ScienceDirect, Public Administration Abstracts, ProQuest, Emerald Insight, Sage Journals, as well as in a Thoreau multi-database search, and Google Scholar search engines. The keywords used in the search for relevant literature of the study included *whistleblowing, leadership, retaliation, ethics, ethical leadership, ethical decision making, managers, management, middle-level managers, top management, trust in leader, ethical culture, whistleblowing intentions, internal whistleblowing, external whistleblowing, leadership responsiveness, personal beliefs, personal values, moral philosophy, organizational climate, locus of control, commitment, the severity of the fraud, state whistleblower laws, ethical climate, organizational trust, decision making, perceived ethical climate, compliance, psychological safety, and organizational culture*. The focus was on peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles written in the last 5 years.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Rational Choice Theory

Sociologists and political scientists have attempted to develop theories regarding the idea that individuals are fundamentally rational, and they calculate the possible costs and benefits of their actions before making decisions. Kiser and Ostrom (1982) developed institutional rational choice to depict the effect of the incentives from individuals' calculated costs and benefits and their ensuing behavior. Ostrom (1999) stated that the theory has developed over the years to incorporate patterns of human behavior across three tiers of decision-making: constitutional, collective choice, and operational decisions. This study focused on individuals' behavior patterns in operational decision-making situations regarding policies, such as whistleblowing and regulations in organizations. Kiser and Ostrom (1982) posited that the actions taken, and outcomes achieved due to operational decisions directly affect individuals in any setting.

The institutional rational choice theory provides a foundation for understanding the concepts and relationships that help understand human behavior, such as the patterns of human actions and the outcomes of interdependent choice-making situations. The theory can be helpful in assisting individuals, both in governmental and non-governmental contexts, in producing desired good governance outcomes through public policies. Institutional rational choice theorists Kiser and Ostrom (1982) considered public policies as institutional arrangements, which are rules that permit, require, or forbid actions by public officials. Institutional arrangements transform the actions of these

public officials, as individuals, into outcomes that affect them and others within the institutional structures (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982). There are multiple definitions of institutions, but for this study, institutional rules refer to the shared concepts that exist in the minds of individuals or are shared as implicit knowledge of what is allowed or forbidden (Ostrom, 1999). Nedergaard (2009) asserted that within the context of institutional rational choice, institutional rules affect individual behavior.

Schlager and Blomquist (1996) enhanced the understanding of institutional rational choice theory by reiterating the composition of the decision situation, including institutional arrangements, the factors influencing the decision, and the organizational environment. The framework attempted to describe how institutional factors, in combination with individual attributes, explain actors' actions, activities, and strategies in certain situations. The individual actors could alter the institutional arrangements through their decisions and actions because although actors operate within rules, they may also create or modify the rules. The intent may be to realize their preferences and produce a desired outcome. Schlager and Blomquist (1996) opined that the behavior of individual actors depends on the resources, the ability to process information, the consideration of the outcomes, and the criteria for choosing a particular action.

Ostrom (1999) further assessed the institutional rational choice theory and surmised that the action arena is the conceptual unit used to evaluate, forecast, and rationalize human behavior within institutional arrangements. The action arena constitutes the setting for the action and the actors involved in the setting. Ostrom (1999)

stated that the action situation consists of the individuals, positions of the individuals, outcomes, connections between the action and outcome, the controls exercised by the individuals, available information, and the cost and benefits ascribed to the outcomes. Ostrom (1999) asserted that individuals with different traits would make different choices, while the same individual would make different choices as the decision situation changes. While the trait of the individual making a choice is essential, the decision situation is also vital in the rationality of the desired outcome.

Assumptions of Institutional Rational Choice Theory

Institutional rational choice theory rationalizes how organizations and individuals make decisions based on their objectives and existing constraints (Ostrom, 1999). The theory assumes that institutional rules could change the behavior of rational individuals motivated by self-interest, such as middle-level managers, acting in what they perceive to be in the organizations' best interests (Ostrom, 2007). The framework assumes that within the institutional structures, the behavior of these individuals comprises five working parts. The five working parts include the decision-maker, the organizational environment impacted by the decision, the desired outcomes, the organizational factors influencing the individual decisions, and the context in which the individuals make choices (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982). There is a need to be cognizant of all the working parts, as overlooking any of the parts may misrepresent the decision-maker's environment and the desired outcomes.

The institutional rational theory also assumes that actors within the institutional environment, such as middle-level managers, have their preferences or desired outcomes, engage in behavior that maximizes attaining those desired outcomes, and calculate the costs and benefits of the actions (Ostrom, 1999). The assumptions regarding the actors include the resources available to the individual, the value the individual assigns to actions, how the individual acquires, processes, and retains information, and the individual's decision-making process (Ostrom, 1999). The theory assumes that human beings are intendedly rational actors and make decisions based on the decision situation and how the individual views and values the world.

Prior Application of Institutional Rational Choice Theory

Using institutional rational choice to explain the perception of public policy effectiveness, institutions, and belief systems, Lubell (2003) asserted that situational variables play critical roles in influencing decision-making to attain desired outcomes in the action arena. The action arena comprises the decision situation, institutional processes, and individual actors. The actors weigh the costs and benefits of their choices, relying on their beliefs, the available information, and the institutional environment. Lubell (2003) found interdependence between belief systems and institutions as the assumed rational actors' beliefs might result in a behavior geared towards generating a preferred outcome.

Another study examined public corruption in Sweden using fundamental institutional rational choice understandings. Erlingsson et al. (2008) focused on how

institutional arrangements' impact on corruption level changes can result in policy plans to change institutions to achieve a preferred result. Although there were explanations that corruption indicates the morally depraved psyches of the actors, as evident in the corrupt practices, this may not be the case. An argument based on institutional rational choice suggests that incentives influence human behavior, and the institutions affect these incentives. Erlingsson et al. (2008) found that the institutional environment impacts public servants because it gives them the discretionary power to either engage or not engage in corrupt practices.

Applying the institutional rational choice theory in the field of public administration to analyze the behavior of public servants and donors regarding foreign aid in developing countries, Araral (2009) surmised that the behavior of both actors depends on the roles they assume and the composition of the context they face. The context plays a critical role in structuring, constraining, guiding, and influencing the actions taken by the actors.

Lee and Yoo (2012) used institutional rational choice theory to examine the factors influencing collaborative governance between the EPA and state governments. Lee and Yoo (2012) asserted that within the action arena, which consists of the action situation and actors, the actors consider the cost and benefits of their actions and make decisions based on their personal preferences and perceived incentives. Within the action arena, the actors are influenced by exogenous constraints, make decisions relative to

existing institutional arrangements or rules, and engage in patterns of interactions that lead to desired outcomes.

In analyzing collaborative governance and intergovernmental relations, Ki (2023) applied institutional rational choice to explain that reduction of transaction costs is a widely accepted approach to collaborative governance that assists with understanding institutions and their cooperation. Ki (2023) affirmed that reduction of transaction costs is a core principle of institutional rational choice that plays a critical role in the decision-making process of actors. The actors assess the costs and benefits to determine the collaboration risks and make decisions to minimize transaction costs.

Institutional rational choice has been helpful in the analysis of human behavior in diverse situations, including public policy studies. In exploring the relevance of policy analysis in a complex governance network, Morçöl (2018) found that governmental actors are not unified rational actors that can implement decisions as intended and do not represent the collective will of the public. Also, contrary to the basic assumption that individuals are rational actors who can make cohesive decisions and actions, Morçöl (2018) argued that rational actors are self-seeking individual actors who self-organize to generate desired outcomes. Morçöl (2018) concluded that the effectiveness of the governance process could be determined by the capacity of governmental actors to self-organize to attain desired outcomes.

Rationale for Using Institutional Rational Choice Theory

Using Ostrom's (1999) institutional rational choice theory in this study might enhance the understanding of middle-level managers' intentional rationality to engage in ethical conduct and create a favorable environment for whistleblowing and whistleblowers. Using the rational choice perspective in an organizational environment, their perception of relevant facts is the most crucial compelling cause behind a manager's decisions and actions (Grossman, 2019). The decisions reflect the institutional environment in which the managers operate. Claassen et al. (2023) indicated that the institutional environment comprises governmental laws, norms, and values prevalent in organizations, shaping organizational actions and policies. For example, middle-level managers may engage in ethical behavior because they perceive that their actions are consistent with the norms and values of the organization.

While organizational policies and government laws protect whistleblowers, middle-level managers have the discretionary power to choose ethical behavior and comply with organizational policies and governmental laws regarding whistleblowing and whistleblowers. These managers may make decisions or choices based on available knowledge generated through experiences and interactions, and there could be more than one truth based on their perception. Although institutional rational choice postulates that human beings are intentionally rational, middle-level managers may tend to make decisions or choices that will benefit them based on their assumption of truth and with available information in striving to create an ethical climate.

Relation of Theory to Study

Personal preferences or beliefs and organizational factors influence the choice options of actors in institutional environments. There is an assumption that actors are rational in their traits and can change based on their roles (Schlager & Blomquist, 1996). The actors define their organizational role based on themselves and with whom they interact. The assumed roles add predictability for actors while assisting in their decision-making process. The traits of an individual actor are a combination of their rationality and how they view their role in society. Based on their role in the organization, the individual actors, such as middle-level managers, may harness their personal beliefs to make decisions or take actions that they perceive to be consistent with the norms and values of their organizations. The decisions or actions may also stem from the perceived benefits of the desired outcome. However, personal beliefs, preferences, and perceived norms and values could accentuate the organizational and personal factors that influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation against whistleblowers. As individual actors, the middle-level managers do not exist in a vacuum. They function as members of an organization, and the institutional rational choice approach can explain how they evaluate their choices and make decisions.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Many studies on whistleblowing have been from the perspective of whistleblowers and primarily as quantitative studies. Researchers have used questionnaires and surveys to collect empirical data from large population groups, mainly

frontline employees. This qualitative study aims to understand from the perspective of middle-level managers in government organizations in California how they can describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. The key concepts that will aid in understanding this phenomenon include whistleblowing, how leadership responsiveness encourages whistleblowing, and the impact of organizational ethical climate. Other vital concepts include how top and middle management support whistleblowing, the importance of organizational culture and climate, and the impact of retaliation against whistleblowers. The laws and policies guiding whistleblowing – federal vs. states and United States vs. other countries - are also essential to understanding the phenomenon.

Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is a way human beings divulge information about a practice or action in an organization that is considered illegal, immoral, fraudulent, or dangerous (Near & Miceli, 2016). These practices include immoderate billing, discrimination, harassment, abuse of power, concealed violations, and falsifying certifications. Over the past 40 years, public sector employees made whistleblowing a standard option for reporting organizational wrongdoings (Kang, 2023). Some organizational misbehaviors that could affect human beings, organizations, and the public interest stay unreported; however, whistleblowing reveals these frauds, corruption, and unethical behaviors that could have otherwise gone unreported in organizations. (Pillay et al., 2018). By reporting

wrongdoings, whistleblowing increases good governance, accountability, transparency, and the possibility for proper transformation and reform in the public sector (Pillay et al., 2018). Organizations can domesticate a culture of accountability, openness, and integrity by appreciating the cost of whistleblowing, addressing the difficulties that arise from it, and ethically incorporating technology. Whistleblowing could be internal or external.

Internal whistleblowing is when an employee informs any other organizational member of the trouble, such as through managers, human resources employees, or an internal hotline. This type of whistleblowing aims to fix the problems without exacerbating the mistake and encourages responsibility (Stubben & Welch, 2020). Unless the organization ignores the reporting, there is little media attention or public trials. Organizations avoid future loss and reputational damage by responding to complaints as soon as they arise. Internal whistleblowing raises workers' morale and the organization's trust if workers sense their issues are being treated effectively.

Reporting an organization's wrongdoing to an external member, which includes government enforcement agencies, the public, or the media, is called external whistleblowing. Insufficient internal alternatives, solutions failure, and retaliation against whistleblowers may encourage external whistleblowing (Near & Miceli, 2016). Reporting environmental issues, dangers to the general worker's health, or organizational wrongdoing to outside authorities are some examples of external whistleblowing. Additionally, it enables impartial investigations and can cause legal repercussions, regulatory movement, extensive litigation, or public strain for reform. In addition,

external whistleblowers may additionally endanger losing their jobs, facing court cases, and suffering other monetary repercussions. The public views and support of outside whistleblowers can affect how powerful their efforts are. Organizations need to decide to develop a subculture that favors internal reporting and resolves troubles for that reason, preventing outside whistleblowing.

Whistleblowing benefits organizations by preventing fraud, safeguarding integrity, and ensuring organizational ethics. Bringing to light the early signals of dishonesty and immoral or unethical behavior in organizations eliminates financial losses and harm to the organizations' recognition (Hozouri et al., 2018). Whistleblowing fosters public interest, stakeholders' interest, and organization governance values. The system enables organizations to discover and resolve violations of policies and irresponsible behavior, consequently ensuring ethical organizational practices. Whistleblowing can contribute to sound change and reform in organizations by raising awareness of unreported or neglected issues, making organizations liable for resolving troubles, adhering to moral requirements, and ensuring internal control protocols (Palumbo & Manna, 2020). Whistleblowing can also create a surrounding of continuous exchange and ethical increase, for that reason ensuring a transparent and responsible culture in organizations (Tremblay et al., 2019). Open conversation with employees fosters trust and loyalty so that they can feel satisfied and stable at work. Effective whistleblowing programs, enabled by managers, can create avenues for employees to voice their concerns

without worrying about punishment, growing transparency and fostering a more profound sense of dedication (Pagliaro et al., 2018).

A significant challenge that whistleblowers regularly face includes fear of reprisals and retaliation from organization managers. Some retaliatory moves include demotion, dismissal, isolation, or harassment (Kenny & Fotaki, 2023). Whistleblowers may go through severe emotional repercussions. The unfavorable reactions and personal consequences may make whistleblowers experience anxiety, stress, and mental issues (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Due to their involvement in exposing misconduct, whistleblowers may suffer litigation, legal fights, or difficulties getting future work. Curtis et al. (2021) indicated that discrimination and ostracism inside their professional networks hamper whistleblowers' employment prospects.

Whistleblower protection assurance is fundamental to guarantee the security and welfare of individuals who practice whistleblowing on bad behavior. The Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989, for example, lays out lawful protections towards the counter and gives channels and approaches for detailing wrongdoing (Kampourakis, 2021). Organizations must provide a safe and encouraging work environment for whistleblowers. Qing et al. (2020) affirmed the need for organizations to develop a supportive infrastructure for whistleblowers and create explicit anti-retaliation rules, raise understanding of whistleblower rights, and educate personnel participants on the reporting manner and its safeguards.

Leadership Responsiveness and Ethicality

Leadership responsiveness can create a positive environment that encourages employees to report corruption incidents without fear of retaliation. Leaders shape ethical decision-making, integrity, and standards of ethical behaviors in the organization. The most common factors that influence ethical decision-making by organizational leaders are personal values, code of conduct, and organizational culture (Luca Casali & Perano, 2021). Ethical leaders play a critical role in building integrity in an organization (Hechanova & Manaois, 2020). How leaders respond to unethical behaviors, such as ignoring, condoning, facilitating, or authorizing them, demonstrates to employees what leadership deems acceptable. Anita et al. (2021) affirmed that when employees perceive that leaders will act positively and do the right thing in their response to reporting unethical behaviors without adverse consequences, it motivates employees and encourages whistleblowing. Leadership responsiveness reassures potential whistleblowers of protection from retaliation (Lee, 2020). Responsible leadership indicates the presence of principled individuals who strive to establish an environment that encourages ethical behaviors (van Niekerk & May, 2019). The focus of responsive leaders is on the employees while striving to display accountability and transparency in their actions. The transparency of managers builds trust and promotes an atmosphere of psychological safety from reprisal for employees. Akhtar et al. (2020) asserted that responsible leaders are considered trustworthy and ethical, cultivating an ethical and trustful environment that neutralizes the fear of retaliation and motivates employees to

report wrongdoings. Trust in the leadership has a significant role in employee perceptions of ethical leadership, and this promotes employees' comfort and security in deciding to report wrongdoings.

Trustful leadership and organizational fairness are vital in boosting employees' whistleblowing intentions (Ugaddan & Park, 2019). Employees show trust when they perceive fairness, consistent policies and procedures, and supportive and ethical leadership that addresses whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. Employee trust represents a positive expectation of the leaders' practices, policies, and actions. The leaders' emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of trust (Geng, 2021), and a high level of trust in organizational leadership encourages whistleblowing (Tyas & Utami, 2020). Trust plays a significant role in facilitating a positive organizational environment where employees are willing to report wrongdoings. Bentzen (2022) defined trust as the willingness to accept the risk of being susceptible to another party. The presence of trust in the organization empowers employees to report wrongdoings willingly, believing that the leadership will support them.

Employees feel empowered and secure to report wrongdoing without fear of reprisal because trust and leaders' ethical conduct are motivational factors behind whistleblowing (Khan et al., 2020). Ethics influence the leaders' responsiveness to whistleblowing by focusing on what is right and how to do things right within the organization (Cheng et al., 2019). Ethical leaders create an ethical environment that facilitates whistleblowing by protecting the employees against the risk of retaliation,

discouraging retaliation, and encouraging wrongdoing reporting. Kwon et al. (2021) claimed that leaders shape employee perceptions and actions, and the organization's perception of fairness and procedural justice encourages whistleblowing. Leaders set ethical standards and encourage employees to connect in a principled way by emphasizing adherence to organizational policies and practices that demonstrate fair organizational procedures (Gupta & Bhal, 2021). When the laid down procedures portray fairness and transparency, it builds trust in organizational leadership and nurtures a supportive working environment.

Supportive organizational leadership communicates their support for whistleblowing so that whistleblowers feel psychologically safe with the notion that there would be no unfair organizational consequences such as retaliation (Anugerah et al., 2019). Supportive management inspires confidence and commitment to the organization in employees. The ethicality of leaders enables them to be supportive and respond to whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation (Gakhar & Mulla, 2021). The perceived level of organizational support from leadership is a mitigating factor influencing employees' whistleblow frequency (Kaptein, 2022). Engaging in whistleblowing can assist in achieving organizational success, especially in the public sector, because it promotes accountability, reliability, and transparency. Whistleblowing can prevent wrongdoing, criminal offenses, and workplace fraud at an early stage. Antoh and Sholihin (2021) found that government employees' ability to whistleblow can positively impact organizations because it could result in accountability and facilitation of reforms.

Middle Management vs. Top Management

Management possesses the ability to define organizational culture and values (Bridges, 2018). One of the critical responsibilities of management in an organization is to create a sustainable environment where employees have the courage to report unethical behaviors and practices (van Niekerk & May, 2019). The levels of management in the organization hierarchy include junior management or supervisory, middle management, and top management. The top management is responsible for the organization's strategic direction, setting objectives, and formulating policies. In contrast, the middle management implements the objectives and enforces the policies, and the junior management sees to the organization's day-to-day operations. All levels of management work to ensure the organization's success by exhibiting responsible and ethical leadership, making it imperative to have meaningful engagement between the levels of management. Ethical leadership at all levels of management promotes trust and improves the perception of organizational fairness with employees (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). The top management sets the ethical tone for the organization as lower-level employees take their cues from how top management values ethical actions (Hayes et al., 2021).

There is a dyadic relationship between top management and middle management in that the top management's ethical behaviors may positively influence the ethical behavior of middle management (Wang et al., 2018). Middle-level managers play a pivotal role in shaping the ethical organizational culture of an organization. The managers are uniquely positioned in organizations because they have access to top

management and can influence rank-and-file employees. Middle-level managers are responsible for pursuing organizational objectives and interacting with frontline employees. They can be influenced by ethical issues by those above and below the organizational hierarchy (Hiekkataipale & Lämsä, 2019).

Managers are ethical role models that promote trust with employees and encourage them to whistleblow (Ogunfowora et al., 2021). Middle-level managers play a vital role in communicating shared beliefs or perceptions because employees take cues from the managers regarding what is right or unethical behavior. Observing middle-level managers is easy enough due to their positions and interactions with frontline employees. Ben Mansour (2020) found that middle managers play an essential role in effective whistleblowing process management, and they are more efficient if they have the support of the top management. (Ben Mansour, 2020; Obembe et al., 2021). One of the critical functions of middle-level managers is to ensure compliance with organizational policies. De Graaf (2019) suggested that top management can improve the effectiveness of whistleblowing and address the role of middle-level managers as they play a vital role in the reporting system. By their position in the organizational hierarchy, which is between the top management and lower management, middle-level managers assist in spreading ethical culture in the organization through their interactions with rank-and-file employees. Their proximity in the organizational hierarchy to employees allows them to implement strategies toward achieving organizational goals and standardize ethical values within the organization. Their position in the organization makes it imperative for

them to make every effort to demonstrate a solid commitment to encouraging whistleblowing and portraying ethical behavior.

Middle-level managers play a crucial role in creating an ethical climate in organizations. Tremblay et al. (2019) asserted that managers knowingly or unknowingly influence employees' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors within guiding ethical values, resulting in an ethical culture in an organization. Developing an ethical climate links positive organizational perceptions about justice and ethics to whistleblowing intention (Palumbo & Manna, 2020). The intention to whistleblow may be trumped despite the government's organizational policies and anti-retaliation laws because whistleblowers can still face retaliation (Klofstad et al., 2022).

Middle-level managers are integral to creating an ethical climate, building a positive culture, and fostering a conducive climate in an organization (Obembe et al., 2021). Middle-level managers interact with top management by participating in the decision-making process, interacting with frontline employees by supporting the decisions and fostering a positive working environment and organizational culture (Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018). A lateral trust between middle-level managers and top management promotes cooperation, good communication, work engagement, and willingness to be influenced by organizational factors to attain organizational goals and create an ethical climate. However, Lampaki and Papadakis (2018) asserted that if middle-level managers perceive conflict with personal values, they may engage in actions to promote their self-interests. In dealing with top management, middle-level managers

may present information from a particular strategic perspective and exploit the same influence with frontline employees. Middle-level managers' influence in the organization may be a contributing factor. The goal may be for them to maintain their reputation and strengthen their power and influence in ways beneficial to their designs.

Personal Beliefs, Values, and Moral Philosophy

Ethical decision-making can be intricate, and comprehending the dynamics influencing organizational leaders' ethical decision-making process will assist middle-level managers in creating an ethical climate. People face making decisions about whether to act ethically or unethically, choosing right over wrong and, in some cases, deciding between two seemingly right choices. Personal beliefs, values, and moral philosophy are part of the components of a decision-making process. Kesberg and Keller (2021) stated that personal values are desirable goals that function as standards for evaluating people, events, and actions. Personal values guide organizational leaders' attitudes, perceptions, and behavior. Values signify what people believe to be essential, and beliefs indicate what people consider to be true (Kesberg & Keller, 2021). Personal values may guide ethical decisions, and personal beliefs help determine how to execute the decision (Kesberg & Keller, 2021). Ethical decisions stem from solid values and beliefs that one would want everybody else to emulate. In addition to beliefs and values, Bridges (2018) asserted that organizational leaders might base their ethical decision-making on moral philosophies. Utilizing moral philosophies may aid in making ethical decisions that create an ethical climate that can encourage whistleblowing.

The personal beliefs of middle-level managers influence the recognition and perception of the importance of an ethical issue (Valentine & Godkin, 2019). Beliefs can emanate from different sources, such as individual experiences, worldviews, culture, societal norms, and relationships (Rollins & Grooms, 2019). When the individual accepts these potential beliefs as truth, it becomes part of the individual's belief system. Belief systems are robust and impact actions and decisions. Personal beliefs can empower or limit managers' ethical decision-making processes and actions. London and Sherman (2021) surmised that personality and situational factors can strengthen or change the beliefs of middle-level managers. van Knippenberg (2020) argued that managers are more receptive to embracing organizational objectives when personal beliefs align with organizational values.

When an individual's commitment to personal beliefs grows, they evolve into values and become essential to the individual. Personal values are enduring beliefs about important things, forming standards for decisions and choices (Kesberg & Keller, 2021). Personal values and value priorities control people's existence (Rabušić, 2020). All individuals' core values differ and are unique because life experiences influence their values. Parmer (2018) stated that the individual's value system is a motivator that influences every aspect of one's life. The organizational leaders' value systems guide their behavior and interpretation of events, influencing their actions and decisions (Black & La Venture, 2018). Personal values shape how middle-level managers create an ethical climate to encourage whistleblowing. Articulating positive personal values such as

fairness, honesty, responsibility, integrity, and helpfulness can enable middle-level managers to make rational and ethical decisions regarding whistleblowers.

Moral philosophy deals with right and wrong, including how people should live their lives relative to others. Moral philosophy provides the tools middle-level managers need to make ethical decisions to create an ethical climate. Bashir and Hassan (2020) stated that the two vital aspects of ethical leadership are being a moral individual and a moral manager. A moral person promotes good conduct and acts as a role model, while a moral manager influences employees by setting ethical standards and expectations. McManus (2021) asserted that individuals draw their moral instincts from personal psychological structures coalescing with culture and norms, and Drašček et al. (2021) acknowledged the complexity of organizational leaders' moral choices. When assessing ethical dilemmas such as encouraging whistleblowers, Kesberg and Keller (2021) stated that middle-level managers must recognize ethical problems, make moral decisions, determine moral intents, and choose a moral behavior. Personal moral philosophies of organizational leaders have a significant effect on making ethical decisions that help create an ethical climate. How leaders perceive the ethical problem, understand the importance of ethics, and make ethical or moral decisions indicate the level of their moral development and impact their behavior. Nayir et al. (2018) argued that moral judgments based on moral philosophies depend on the situation and the individual involved.

Ethical Climate

Ethical organizational climate is the holistic impression that members of the organization have regarding practices, policies, and procedures (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021). The development of an ethical climate stems from organizational policies, practices, and leadership. They shape organizational members' ethical decision-making, including behavioral control that fosters ethical or unethical behavior at work. Based on Victor and Cullen's (1988) framework, Weber and Opoku-Dakwa (2022) stated that ethical climate influences organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment, psychological conditions, work behaviors that include unethical behaviors and whistleblowing, and organizational performance. However, Sookdawoor and Grobler (2022) reported that many employees believe their organizations prioritize other goals over ethics, resulting in employees being pressured to compromise standards, witnessing increased wrongdoings, and facing retaliation when they report wrongdoings.

Ethical leadership shapes the ethical climate and drives expected values through employees' shared beliefs, resulting in an ethical climate in the organization. Employees have expectations or assumptions of how leadership should manage ethical issues. Liu et al. (2018) indicated that when the leadership fails to meet employees' expectations, the employees might believe that organizational leaders were unaware of observed wrongdoing and not that they are unwilling to correct the issue. Zhou et al. (2018) opined that in an ethical climate, employees have an interpretation of what the organization

supports, rewards, and considers appropriate and ethical behavior. The components of ethical climate include trust, perceived ethicality of organizational members' behavior, perceived consequences of violating policies, and the nature of organizational practices. Smaili (2023) emphasized that an organization that succeeds in creating an ethical climate by encouraging whistleblowing will strengthen the organization's ethical culture. A favorable organizational culture increases employees' trust in the organizational leadership's responsiveness, making employees feel confident to report wrongdoings and believing the organization will support whistleblowing. Antoh and Sholihin (2021) found that the high moral capacity of leaders and policies that enhance ethical climate encourage whistleblowing in an organization.

While ethical climate is exigent in all types of organization, government organizations operate in an institutional environment with expected values, such as the protection of the rights of individuals, accountability, lawfulness, equality, equity, responsiveness, and representation (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021). The values indicate how government organizations act toward their employees and the public. Although Chordiya et al. (2020) argued that government organizations may not always measure up to these ideals, an ethical climate dissuades rule-bending behaviors, promotes perceptions of whistleblowers' protection, and encourages whistleblowing. Potipiroon and Wongpreedee (2021) stated that the presence of an ethical climate created by managers positively influences perceptions of psychological safety and whistleblowing intentions. The perceived level of psychological safety indicates how employees feel safe

about reporting witnessed unethical behaviors (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021). In such a psychologically safe environment, employees would assume that whistleblowing will not result in personal harm. The presence of an ethical climate heightens the perception of psychological safety because organizational leaders tend to be honest and trustworthy, encouraging employees to speak out with the expectation that there will be no reprisal.

When managers display trustworthiness, fairness, and support for employees, there is encouragement for employees to behave ethically and report observed unethical behaviors. Ethical leadership promotes trust, respect, positivity, and an ethical climate in the organization (Kyu Wang et al., 2018). Leaders must imbibe ethical conduct by creating an ethical climate through their responsiveness to whistleblowing. An ethics-oriented climate, with compliance with laws that protect whistleblowers, effectively improves the protection from retaliation that whistleblowers may face due to their revelations. Chordiya et al. (2020) asserted that structural provisions for ethics management, awareness of whistleblower protection laws, ethical leadership, and ethical climate provide protections for whistleblowers and eliminate the fear of reprisals. Organizational leadership must create and maintain a strong ethical climate, as a perceived ethical climate has excellent value and significance in enhancing employee willingness to whistleblow (Zhou et al., 2018). Organizations must provide an open and ethical environment where managers support employees, and whistleblowers can report wrongdoings without fear of retaliation. Despite the insights regarding ethical climate,

Zhou et al. (2018) suggested that there is a need to research further the mechanisms of how ethical climate encourages whistleblowing because whistleblowing is a complicated process.

Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture is an invisible social force built on collectively accepting trusted differences, beliefs, and values by members of an organization with the common goal of achieving organizational objectives (Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022).

Organizational climate is how organizational members collectively perceive organizational policies, procedures, and practices (Thompson & Siciliano, 2021).

According to Previtali and Cerchiello (2018), the organizational culture and climate portray how employees understand and perceive their organization. Organizational climate and culture with laid-down procedures play significant roles in encouraging whistleblowing. Kuenzi et al. (2020) stated that employees use the organization's climate and culture to make sense of their organization, and they develop through the interaction of the employees.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is germane to understanding the behavior of members of the organization. Amin (2022) defined organizational culture as shared beliefs and values that shape the behavior patterns of employees within an organization. It can also be the integration of members of an organization to perceive, determine, and solve problems.

Amin (2022) stated that organizational structure could be bureaucratic, innovative, and

supportive, such as in the public sector. Tangsgaard (2021) opined that there are three layers to understanding organizational culture. The layers comprise the organization's physical environment, beliefs and values, and basic assumptions, such as taken-for-granted beliefs and values that govern behavior and perception. Embedding and implanting organizational culture with ethical virtues helps to encourage and motivate employees to report unethical behaviors (Farooqi et al., 2017). Organizations can influence employees' decisions by creating a culture that supports openness and active problem-solving rather than silencing employees who try to address those problems (Tiitinen, 2020). Organizational culture and environment play significant roles in encouraging whistleblowing. Leaders must understand the organizational culture to ensure a supportive climate that encourages whistleblowing (Nawawi & Salin, 2019). Farooqi et al. (2017) affirmed that laws and regulations might help protect whistleblowers, but ethical organizational culture is essential to encourage whistleblowing.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate helps employees discern how to behave appropriately within the organization (Kuenzi et al., 2020). The organizational climate signifies the shared perceptions of organizational members, exposed to the same organizational structure and influenced by the conditions of the organization (Al Ghazo et al., 2019). The organizational climate is a function of the organization's culture, structure, communication patterns, leadership styles, and group dynamics. The organizational

climate is an essential antecedent for the whistleblowing behavior of the employee (Kenny et al., 2020) because if the organization expects employees to come forward to report wrongdoings, then the organization has the responsibility to protect the whistleblower from retaliation (Kanojia et al., 2020). The internal environment quality shaped by the behaviors and policies of organizational leaders and perceived by the employees constitutes the working environment. A positive working environment decreases the perceived risk of retaliation and encourages whistleblowing (Kyu Wang et al., 2018). Some underlying factors for organizational climate include leadership structure and support, individual accountability and responsibility, perceptions of risk and risk-taking, rewards and punishment orientation, and organizational values and norms (Kuenzi et al., 2020). These factors influence employees' behavior and their perception of the organization. Eun-Jee and Park (2020) surmised that a supportive organizational climate encourages employees to report wrongdoings without fear of reprisal.

Retaliation

Employees play a vital role in exposing organizational wrongdoings, but unfortunately, they tend to face retaliation from organizational leaders (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021). Retaliation against whistleblowers is common despite the increased knowledge about the significance of whistleblowing and the existence of policies and laws protecting whistleblowers (Curtis et al., 2021). Heese and Pérez-Cavazos (2021) found that in 82% of whistleblower cases, the employees suffered termination from work, forced resignation, or reassignment of duties. Gottschalk (2022) defined retaliation as

negative actions for the whistleblower because of reporting wrongdoing. Retaliation can be in concrete, individualized actions or through a consistent process. Retaliation can also range from minor criticism to outright exclusion of the individual from the organization. Lars and Pedersen (2020) stated that there are two forms of retaliation: formal sanctions employed by managers and informal sanctions from colleagues, which could be cold-shouldering, humiliation, isolation, bullying, or ostracism. Other types of retaliation from managers can include the imposition of hardship, demotion, suspension, reassignment, reduced salary, unfavorable performance evaluation, promotion denial, exclusion from meetings, unwarranted disciplinary processes, and other discriminatory acts.

Vandekerckhove and Phillips (2019) found that dismissal and formal reprisals, such as demotion, relocation, or reassigning job responsibilities, are the most common types of retaliation. Gottschalk (2022) stated that whistleblowers might face retaliation directed at their personal behavior or job performance with the motivation to inflict injury on the whistleblower or remove the person from the organization. Some managers believe that retaliation is justified (Peltier-Rivest, 2018). Some retaliatory acts may be to silence the whistleblower, prevent the knowledge of the wrongdoing, discredit the whistleblower, and discourage potential whistleblowers (Gottschalk, 2022).

Retaliation can be traumatic as whistleblowers can face career termination and workplace bullying, which can result in clinical depression and a range of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Lars & Pedersen, 2020; Kenny, 2018). Facing retaliation can harm the morale and mental well-being of the whistleblower. The

consequences of retaliation are not only detrimental to the health of the whistleblower but can include the family members. Kenny and Fotaki (2023) affirmed that whistleblowers experience the negative effect of retaliation, and their family members and dependents also feel the negative impacts. These negative impacts may include diminished income, health issues, and legal costs. Whistleblowers are often considered traitors, troublemakers, and disloyal to the organization (Peltier-Rivest, 2018; Nawawi & Salin, 2019). Kenny (2018) stated that whistleblowers sometimes experience dehumanization because they are depicted as hollow, passive victims or traitors, not complete and complex human beings. The harsh treatment that whistleblowers may receive can lead to stress, demoralization, and depression. Despite the costs and consequences of retaliation, Heese and Pérez-Cavazos (2021) surmised that it is not conclusive that retaliation discourages whistleblowing. However, Peltier-Rivest (2018) argued that organizations could reduce retaliatory acts against whistleblowers by establishing anti-retaliatory policies that hold managers accountable for such acts.

Law and Policies Guiding Whistleblowing

In the modern world, laws and policies guiding whistleblower protection have become increasingly important. According to Chordiya et al. (2020), the United States led in the development of contemporary whistleblower laws, as no other country had implemented national, state, or provincial whistleblower legislation before 1990.

Whistleblowing involves reporting wrongdoing or illegal activity within one's organization without fear of repercussions (Ugaddan & Park, 2019). As such, proper

legislation must exist to protect individuals who speak up and stand out against wrongdoings in the workplace. Laws about whistleblowers vary across different countries and jurisdictions. In the United States, federal and state laws protect whistleblowers from potential retaliation or other forms of discrimination. Federal law focuses on preventing fraud against taxpayers. State-level laws focus on ensuring employees' safety regardless of the size or type of their organization. Some states also offer incentives for whistleblowers if their case successfully results in recovering stolen funds or other assets. In the United States, whistleblowers have additional legal protection in specific industries, such as healthcare and finance. Internationally, laws may differ significantly from those of the United States. Despite the international endeavors to regulate whistleblowing through laws, Latan et al. (2020) reported that whistleblowing laws might not be effective as court judgments are based on legal technicalities rather than ethics.

Laws and Policies Guiding Whistleblowing in the United States

Overview of Federal Laws. The False Claims Act (FCA) is the most comprehensive and extensively used federal law associated with whistleblowing. The FCA was established in 1963 to combat fraud against taxpayers by incentivizing individuals to alert authorities of any wrongdoings or fraud they witness in their places of work (Heese et al., 2021; Ugaddan & Park, 2019). Individuals who file reports under this Act do not face any repercussions from their employers and can even be offered financial rewards if the case is successfully settled. The FCA covers various frauds, including healthcare, banking, defense contracts, procurement contracts, mortgages, and

applications. Despite its wide application and protection for whistleblowers, it does not cover private companies without a government contract, contact, or violations related to securities trading (Heese et al., 2021).

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) is a federal legislation passed in 2002. It was enacted to protect investors from fraudulent corporate practices and to promote the accuracy and reliability of financial disclosures by corporations (Gordon & Nazari, 2018). The Act requires public companies to improve their internal controls, set up audit committees consisting of independent board members, establish procedures for whistleblowers to report complaints anonymously, protect whistleblowers from retaliation, and expand civil penalties for securities fraud. Specifically, Section 806 of the Act states that employers cannot terminate, suspend, or discriminate against employees who provide evidence of any Securities and Exchange Commission rules violation (Gordon & Nazari, 2018). SOX also imposes criminal penalties on individuals who knowingly violate the Act's provisions, including imprisonment of up to 20 years or fines amounting to \$5 million. SOX has played an essential role in increasing organizational transparency and accountability and encouraging more whistleblowing activity.

In 2010, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act were passed to protect consumers from fraudulent activity by large financial institutions (Pacella, 2018; Andon et al., 2018). Whistleblowers who report violations of securities, commodities, banking, or consumer protection laws are specially protected under this legislation as companies may not retaliate against them in any way. This successful Act

has helped countless people stay safe while investing their money wisely. The Act ensures that those who report misconduct are duly awarded for their efforts and provides companies with the tools to disclose information related to whistleblower complaints publicly (Andon et al., 2018). It also requires employers to create an internal process for submitting such grievances and furnishes employees and supervisors with appropriate training. With this in place, organizations have a protocol for reporting any wrongful acts they discover or are made aware of quickly and efficiently.

Overview of State Laws - California Laws. California has vast legal protection for whistleblowers. The California Whistleblower Protection Act (CWPA) is a state law enacted in 2000 to protect whistleblowers from workplace retaliation. Specifically, the CWPA prohibits retaliatory actions such as termination, suspension, demotion, transfer, or threat of dismissal by an employer towards an employee because they reported alleged violations of the law. It forbids employers from issuing gag orders that prevent employees from discussing issues related to legal violations with outside parties. Employees are also protected from punitive measures for refusing to participate in illegal activities or notifying law enforcement of a violation. Lastly, the CWPA protects employees who file reports with state authorities regarding any suspected violations of federal, state, and local laws. Exmeyer and Jeon (2022) reported that California clarified actions that constitute retaliation against individuals disclosing wrongdoing. In addition to the California Whistleblower Protection Act, there are California Labor Codes that protect whistleblowers.

California Labor Code 1102.5 is the principal statute protecting whistleblowers from retaliation. The statute forbids employers from retaliating against any employee who reported legal or regulatory wrongdoing (California Legislative Information, n. d.a). The statute clarified that whistleblowers exercise their rights by disclosing information to any power that may investigate, discover, or correct the wrongdoing. Any employer that violates this statute will be liable for a penalty of not less than \$10,000 for each violation (California Legislative Information, n. d.a). The whistleblower is still protected by the statute even if the investigation revealed that the employer did not commit a violation. Also, the employer cannot retaliate against an employee if the employer believes that the employee will whistleblow.

California Labor Code 98.6 deals with whistleblowers reporting wrongdoing to the California Labor Commissioner. The statute protects whistleblowers who report violations regarding failure to comply with minimum wages and failure to pay for overtime hours. The statute also protects job applicants who reported wrongdoings at a former employment. The statute states that any employer who willfully refuses to hire or restore a former employee who engaged in whistleblowing is guilty of a misdemeanor. The employer will be liable for a civil penalty of \$10,000 per employee and violation (California Legislative Information, n. d.b). The statute also prohibits retaliating against an employee who is a family member of the whistleblower.

California Labor Code 6310 is like California Labor Code 98.6. The statute protects employees who report occupational health and safety violations such as unsafe

working conditions or work practices (California Legislative Information, n. d.c). The statute mandates the employer to reinstate and reimburse lost wages and benefits to any employee who suffered threats of termination, demotion, suspension, or termination due to engaging in whistleblowing.

The California State Auditor's office (State Auditor) oversees the implementation of the California Whistleblowers Protection Act. The State Auditor has the authority to investigate and report on substantiated improper activities, such as unjustifiable neglect of duty, wastefulness, illegal payments, misappropriation of state resources, attendance abuse, and illegal hiring. The protection of whistleblowers' identities by the State Auditor is to the maximum level the law allows. Retaliation against whistleblowers is prohibited and may result in fines and imprisonment (California State Auditor, 2022). From January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021, the State Auditor received 1,281 calls and inquiries and investigated 1,527 retaliation allegations (California State Auditor, 2022). The State Auditor does not perform enforcement functions. The enforcement of the corrective action responsibility rests with the appropriate state agencies that must regularly inform the State Auditor of their actions relating to the investigations from beginning to end.

Laws in Other States. After passing the federal whistleblower protection legislation, the False Claims Act Amendments of 1986, California and Florida were part of the six states that expanded protection for whistleblowers in the public sector (Exmeyer & Jeon, 2022), and New York was one of the first states to implement whistleblower protection law in the early 1980s (Sherno, 2015).

The New York Labor Law of 1949 was implemented to protect the rights and livelihoods of private and public sector employees. This law grants workers the right to express their misgivings about illegal activities or unethical practices in the workplace without facing any form of punishment from employers, such as suspension, termination, or other retaliatory measures (Sherno, 2015). This groundbreaking legislation also prohibits employers from acting against an employee who speaks up regarding health concerns, labor standards violations, or other unlawful behavior at work. With the New York Labor Law, individuals who file a complaint with the Department of Labor are shielded from blocklisting by their employer and can still acquire new employment. This law offers comprehensive legal safeguards for whistleblowers in any organization or industry across America. It guarantees protection to those who come forward and report potentially illegal behavior they have witnessed, regardless of how large or small it may be.

In Florida, the Whistleblower Act, Section 448.102, of the Florida Statutes protects employees from retaliatory action for reporting misconduct or potential law violations within their organization (Exmeyer & Jeon, 2022). The Act applies to all employers, regardless of size, and requires that any employee who makes a good faith report in writing must be protected against retaliation by their employer. It also protects employees who testify in court proceedings or participate in an investigation of such misconduct. Furthermore, complaining or testifying about these matters cannot constitute grounds for termination, demotion, suspension, or disciplinary action.

Comparison Between Federal and State Laws

The scope of federal and state whistleblower laws varies depending on where the employee resides. At the federal level, the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA) applies only to employees of agencies in the federal government's executive branch and does not cover private sector workers. On the other hand, most states have enacted whistleblower protection laws that extend coverage to all employers regardless of size and public or private status.

Regarding penalties for violating these laws, both federal and state statutes are similar in that they provide civil remedies for whistleblowers whose employers retaliated against them due to reporting misconduct. The WPA allows individuals to file complaints with administrative bodies such as the Office of Special Counsel or the United States Merit Systems Protection Board and seek damages for violations. Meanwhile, many states have implemented similar whistleblower laws allowing individuals to file civil lawsuits for retaliation or discriminatory practices against the employer. Damages in these cases can range from back pay, reinstatement of job position, attorney's fees, and other compensatory costs as determined by a jury or judge. In addition to civil penalties, some states also provide criminal penalties for retaliating against whistleblowers. For example, in California, employers found guilty of retaliating against an employee who reports illegal activities may face fines of up to \$10,000 and up to six months in jail (California Legislative Information, n. d.a). This protection is not available at the federal level.

Comparison Between the United States and Other Countries

Canada vs. United States. The legal frameworks that govern whistleblowing in the United States and Canada are vastly different. In the United States, several federal laws protect whistleblowers working in public and private sectors, such as The False Claims Act, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, and the whistleblower protection act. These laws offer certain protections to those who report misconduct or fraud within their organizations. For instance, the False Claims Act shields those who blow the whistle from being demoted or experiencing other forms of retaliation by their employer.

In contrast, Canada does not have legislation governing whistleblowing at a national level. However, provinces have adopted whistleblowing programs with varying degrees of employee protection, such as Canada's Public Service Disclosure Protection Act (PSDPA), passed in 2005 (Bron, 2019). Ontario is one example where the Public Service of Ontario Act protects those disclosing information regarding public sector wrongdoing. This Act protects workers from any form of punishment if they report misconduct or fraud within their organization. Regarding the penalties for whistleblowers, the United States has a much harsher stance than Canada. Under federal law, whistleblowers can face up to 10 years in prison and hefty fines if found guilty of disclosing classified information. In contrast, Canadian laws are lenient when it comes to whistleblower retaliation, as employers can only be fined up to \$500 for intimidating or retaliating against an employee who discloses illegal activities taking place within the workplace.

United Kingdom vs. United States. The United States has crafted various statutes, such as the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA), to create a legal framework for whistleblowing. These laws safeguard individuals who bring forward information about their employers or other organizations engaged in fraud and unlawful behavior. Nevertheless, many states have implemented whistleblower protection acts that provide additional security measures for those brave enough to report misconduct. In the United Kingdom, whistleblowing is regulated by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) (Al-Haidar, 2018). This Act grants whistleblowers legal protection from various forms of retaliation, such as dismissal, demotion, threats, or any form of discrimination that may arise due to their disclosures. Unlike United States whistleblower laws, it also applies to all sectors of the private sector.

In contrast, in the two countries, US whistleblower protection only encompasses those employed by federal entities, while state laws apply to both public and private sectors. On the contrary, in the UK, PIDA covers any worker without distinction in the sector, further extending protection to whistleblowing concerning health and safety regulations, environmental issues, and corporate misconduct (Al-Haidar, 2018), making it more comprehensive than American legislation. Finally, another significant difference between US whistleblower laws and those in the UK is their respective remedies for unlawful retaliation against whistleblowers. The US has no general statutory framework for awarding damages to whistleblowers, but some states allow for awarding damages in certain circumstances. On the other hand, PIDA provides a range of remedies, including

reinstatement and compensation for lost earnings and an order that prohibits an employer from further victimizing a whistleblower.

Overall, laws and policies governing whistleblowing differ significantly across the world. Lee et al. (2020) argue that adopting whistleblowing laws from other countries may be challenging as each country has a unique historical background and institutional systems. In the United States, both federal and state-level laws exist to protect employees from any form of retaliation at work for reporting misconduct or illegal activities. These laws vary in terms of scope and penalties for violating them. Compared to other countries, the US offers more comprehensive protection for whistleblowers and harsher penalties for employers who violate these laws. This ensures that individuals can come forward without fear of repercussions and speak up against any wrongdoings they witness in the workplace.

Summary and Conclusion

Whistleblowing is the disclosure of any illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices witnessed by employees to employers, persons, or organizations that may be able to initiate action (Kaptein, 2022). Illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices are unethical behaviors that result from circumventing policies and structures that create an unethical climate in an organization. The unethical climate gives rise to employees' need to report the witnessed unethical behaviors. Employees need to be able to come forward to report wrongdoings without fear of retaliation and feel more secure doing this in an ethical climate. Laws and statutes are designed to protect whistleblowers from retaliation, such

as the Labor Code section 1102.5 in California, which encourages employees to report state and federal law violations by their employers without fear of retaliation. Even though the laws are intended to protect them from retaliation, whistleblowers may still experience retaliation in terms of demotion, adverse action, salary reduction, marginalization, dismissal, or being forced out of the organization. Heese and Pérez-Cavazos (2021) found that although most whistleblower laws include anti-retaliation provisions, prior studies show that retaliation is prevalent, and 82% of the whistleblowers were dismissed, resigned under duress, or were reassigned in their duties.

Leadership support and an ethical climate help whistleblowers reduce the fear of retaliation (Kwon et al., 2021). Employees anticipate leaders will promote an ethical organizational climate supporting whistleblowing intention (Scheetz & Fogarty, 2019). With top management's support, middle-level managers play a critical role in creating an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing. Organizational leaders need to create an enabling environment that ensures compliance with the whistleblower protection laws because, according to West and Bowman (2020), establishing organizational policies and procedures on whistleblower protection and legal protection will encourage whistleblowing. Lee et al. (2020) asserted that whistleblowers face retaliation despite the laws; however, anti-retaliation protection policies and procedures, values, ethical climate, and organizational culture will improve the ability of middle-level managers to create a conducive environment for whistleblowing.

Prior studies focused on why and how whistleblowers have the courage to voice their concerns and reveal corruption or wrongdoings in situations where the organization's ethical climate is unpredictable and there is insufficient legal protection for whistleblowers (Nurhidayat & Kusumasari, 2019). Organizational factors such as leaders' responsiveness and the organization's conduciveness impact employees' willingness to report wrongdoings. Hechanova and Manaois (2020) asserted that leaders create and promote an ethical climate, and their responsiveness can enhance a positive environment that encourages employees to call out corruption incidents without fear of retaliation. When leaders make unethical decisions, the organization suffers consequences such as financial loss, legal consequences, reputational loss, and low morale of employees. An ethics-oriented climate and compliance with laws that protect whistleblowers improve the protection of whistleblowers from retaliation that they may face due to their revelations (Chordiya et al., 2020). However, more than whistleblower laws and policies may be required, as leaders must strive to create an ethical and supportive culture in managing whistleblowers.

Many of the prior quantitative studies have explored whistleblowing from the perception of the whistleblowers. However, only some have explored the role of middle-level managers in creating an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing (Ugaddan & Park, 2019). Lee (2020) suggested that future research explore how organizational leadership's responsiveness and support influence non-retaliation against whistleblowers. Building an ethical culture in the organization is vital to whistleblowing, where

whistleblowers may feel psychologically safe to report wrongdoings without fear of retaliation (Farooqi et al., 2017). It is critical to understand how middle-level managers make ethical decisions in their interactions with whistleblowers without bias for retaliation. Bridges (2018) posited that leaders rely on moral philosophies in making ethical decisions that create value and shape organizational culture and climate. There is little or no literature on whistleblowing and unconscious bias from the perception of middle-level managers in government organizations in California who create either a positive or troubling organizational environment through their decision-making process. Unethical decisions create unethical environments with a troubling organizational environment that could result in retaliation for whistleblowing. The attitude and approach of some middle-level managers, moral judgments, and organizational environmental characteristics contribute to the problem of unethical decisions. The qualitative study would assist in understanding how these middle-level managers describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

This study aimed to understand the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. Organizational factors, situational factors, personal beliefs, moral philosophies, and values impact the ability of middle-level managers in various organizations and under diverse situations in their ethical decision-making because they possess diverse realities. The experience of each manager is personal and unique. The qualitative study could help understand the participants' unique and individual experiences and their ability to encourage whistleblowing by creating an ethical climate with no recourse for retaliation.

The chapter includes the research design and rationale used for the study, the role of the researcher, the research methodology, the sampling strategy, the instrumentation, the data collection instruments, the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and measures for ethical consideration for the protection of participants.

Research Design and Rationale

The information in the literature review established the availability of literature on how organizations may promote an ethical climate with compliance with laws and policies that guide whistleblowing and protect whistleblowers. However, there is very little or no data on how middle-level managers can, in their own words, create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation while navigating individual,

situational, and organizational factors. The research question formulated to collect relevant data for the study is as follows:

RQ: How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation?

Some of the concepts that provide insight into the phenomenon include how leadership responsiveness and organizational ethical climate impact the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing.

Ouakouak et al. (2020) opined that employees consider ethical leaders as role models who shape the organizational ethical climate and assist employees in reporting observed wrongdoings. Employees perceive ethical leaders as responsive leaders who demonstrate trustworthiness, honesty, fairness, and care that promote an organizational ethical climate (Tsai, 2023). Leaders' responsiveness enhances the organizational ethical climate where employees feel psychologically safe to report wrongdoings without fear of retaliation.

Other crucial concepts of the study include how top and middle management encourage whistleblowing by creating a positive organizational culture and climate that discourages retaliation against whistleblowers. The employees expect the middle-level managers, as ethical leaders, to communicate and establish ethical standards in their responsiveness to whistleblowing and ensure compliance with laws and policies protecting whistleblowers (Ouakouak et al., 2020). Expounding on the federal and state

laws that guide and protect whistleblowers is also essential to understanding the phenomenon.

Many scholars have studied whistleblowing using quantitative research design. Quantitative research uses numerical data and statistical analysis to investigate a phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2020). Quantitative research methods include descriptive, correlational, and experimental research designs. Descriptive research describes the characteristics of the phenomenon of interest, correlational research studies causes and effects, and experimental research studies the relationship between study variables (Burkholder et al., 2020). A variable is a measurable attribute that varies in value and represents the phenomenon of interest, measured or manipulated into quantifiable measures using specific procedures (Burkholder et al., 2020). The research instruments for quantitative studies include surveys with closed-ended questions, questionnaires, experimental controls, structured observations, and an existing database. The utilization of quantitative research includes finding patterns and averages, making predictions, testing causal relationships, and generalizing research findings. Although quantitative research is objective and focuses on impartiality in its data collection and analysis approach, it often involves control over variables through manipulation to establish cause-and-effect relationships (Gilad, 2021).

A quantitative study is apt for testing or confirming a theory or hypothesis, whereas a qualitative is appropriate for understanding concepts or experiences.

Quantitative researchers use the variance approach that focuses on attributes of the

variables and the relationships among them. In contrast, qualitative researchers use the process approach to explore the phenomenon of interest to explain how individuals participate in and influence the events (Mele et al., 2020). In contrast with qualitative research that tends to align with constructivism, the assumption that there is no one single truth because it can vary from context to context, most quantitative research inclines to be aligned with positivism, which assumes that there is one actual reality or truth (Burkholder et al., 2020). Also, Gilad (2021) argued that quantitative data could not be converted into qualitative data. However, standardization and reduction make it possible to convert qualitative data into quantitative data, indicating that qualitative data provide a more detailed description of cases in context (Gilad, 2021). Quantitative research was unsuitable for this study because the focus was to understand personal insights on the ability to create an ethical climate rather than test causal relationships. Also, the plan was not to collect statistical information and examine relationships between variables.

This study aimed to understand how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing. Using qualitative research assisted in gathering data from middle-level managers and enabled them to share their viewpoints and experiences through in-depth interviews. Yu et al. (2021) affirmed that the strength of qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews, is evaluating how participants give meaning to their experiences in their contexts, use language, express their beliefs, and provide explanations of their behaviors. The qualitative research inquiry uses interpretive research methods to study participants in a natural setting and strive to understand the

meaning people assign to a phenomenon of interest, how they make sense of their world, and their experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative research uses functional tools, such as case studies, interviews, personal experiences, observations, and other materials, that describe issues and meanings in individual lives to understand better the phenomena of study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The qualitative study uses data obtained through in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, direct observations, and document analysis (Patton, 2015) to understand or explore a phenomenon of interest.

Different approaches for qualitative research include generic qualitative study, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and ethnography. Some of the qualitative approaches considered for this study include a case study and phenomenology. Yin (2018) stated that a case study allows for a thorough study of a phenomenon of interest in a natural context to provide a holistic and practical perspective. How middle-level managers respond to ethical issues and incorporate beliefs, values, and moral philosophies in decision-making is unique. A case study helps describe and compare different viewpoints of a research problem. This study does not seek to compare the ability of middle-level managers in this regard but to understand their uniqueness in creating an ethical climate and encouraging whistleblowing.

According to Patton (2015), phenomenology focuses on lived experiences and shared meaning as understood by an individual or individuals. Phenomenology illustrates the fundamental nature of a phenomenon or event as lived, perceived, and interpreted by those with the lived experience. Therefore, phenomenological research attempts to

uncover and interpret an affective, emotional, and intense human experience representing the phenomenon's essence (Burkholder et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). This study aimed to understand how middle-level managers navigate organizational and personal factors to create an ethical climate without retaliating against whistleblowers.

This study utilized the generic qualitative research inquiry approach to understand the phenomenon better and answer the research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that generic qualitative research study stems philosophically from constructionism and phenomenology. The approach would help understand the participants' experiences, the meaning ascribed to those experiences, and how they make ethical decisions. Although the generic qualitative approach may explore beliefs, values, and moral philosophies, the primary purpose is to understand middle-level managers' ability in California government organizations to create an ethical climate without bias for retaliation.

Vinarski Peretz (2020) opined that it is apt to use qualitative research inquiry to capture rich details of middle-level managers' experiences and perceptions on navigating individual, situational, and organizational factors to create an ethical climate. Generic qualitative research inquiry is also suitable for finding answers when the inquiring elements are subjective and rational (Rafique et al., 2023). With interpretive understanding, qualitative researchers gather information from study participants to express their realities, and this aligns with the research's philosophical assumptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Researchers chose their research method based on their

philosophical foundation and worldview. Wadas (2018) stated that the choice of research method answers the question regarding ontology (description of reality), epistemology (type of knowledge), and axiology (aims, objectives, and values). The indication is that participants construct their reality based on interactions, co-create their knowledge, and base their values on their perspectives.

Informed by constructivist epistemology, Lapworth et al. (2018) affirmed that generic qualitative inquiry helps to deeply explore individuals' perspectives that would result in a thorough understanding of the personal context of the phenomenon of interest. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), constructivism, which is a relativist position, postulates that truth may be viewed differently, depending on the context. The intention of organizational policies and government laws that protect whistleblowers may be interpreted differently, depending on the context and who is interpreting it. Gilad (2021) asserted that qualitative research is usually linked with the constructivist worldview because of the belief in the multiplicity of how individuals construct their realities. The implication is that truth is subjective, that there may be more than one truth, and that these truths depend on the individuals affected.

As a researcher with a constructivist worldview, I recognize there is a complexity of views instead of limiting meanings to a few ideas. The goal was to rely on the participants' views and their construction of meanings because a constructivist worldview relies on participants' perspectives to understand the phenomenon of interest. Raskin and

Debany (2018) affirmed that constructivism signifies that people actively build and adapt knowledge to achieve desired results.

Knowledge comes from previous experiences and interactions, and organizational leaders sometimes base their knowledge and decisions on assumed organizational values if they seem more favorable to their cause. Raskin and Debany (2018) argued that when it comes to ethical decision-making, people construct their perspectives to manage relationships and create parameters for standard behavior. Human beings tend to act in self-interest in making choices when faced with a competitive situation or conditions of uncertainty based on their values. Values represent people's preferences based on what they consider excellent or ethical in their interactions with others.

In examining the concept of value from an axiological stance, Raadschelders (2019) opined that it is pertinent to recognize that, based on perspectives, different value sets may inform and motivate people's choices in situations, making them select some values over others. According to Smith and Shaw (2019), what researchers value or consider right affects how they conduct research and what insight it produces in their findings. As a researcher, my axiological standpoint rests on believing that values are part of reality and should guide decisions and behavior, or they could be momentary and change over time depending on the situation.

Applying a constructivist worldview and using a generic qualitative study research design allowed for in-depth exploration and understanding of the challenges that

middle-level managers in government organizations in California face in their efforts to create an ethical climate.

Role of the Researcher

A qualitative researcher strives to access the participants' beliefs, opinions, and perspectives. As the primary instrument of the research, the researcher's role is vital in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher is the human instrument that facilitates the data collection; therefore, the researcher must be cognizant of germane attributes of self, such as beliefs, preconceptions, or experiences, to ensure proper data collection. The implication is that the researcher must show genuine interest in the participants' words without preconceived notions or judgment. It is pertinent for the researcher to foster an empathetic relationship with participants and strive to establish excellent connections by displaying good comprehension of their statements, compartments, and perceptions. Ravitch and Carl (2021) asserted that the researcher develops the research design to mold the collected data into its outcome.

There is an inclination for the researcher to change into varied roles and personalities during the study. These roles could be in response to the participants, the research settings, the researcher's social identity interpretation, and self-interpretation. The various roles proceed from the researcher's engagement with participants and understanding the study's phenomenon. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that researchers can have various roles, which can shift and change over time.

In the role of the interviewer, it is pertinent to create an atmosphere that establishes rapport and trust and use effective interview strategies to engage the participants and enable them to contribute as much as possible to the study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted that interviewing should be gentle, cooperative, and respectful. Being cognizant of the interviewer's role should be reflected in the interview questions, participants' selection, interview protocols, interaction with the participants, and data analysis.

The capability to portray reflexivity and recognize the researcher's positionality in taking on the interviewer's role during data collection is significant. Lu and Hodge (2019) described positionality as how the construction and understanding of knowledge are shaped by how researchers see themselves, how others see them, and the researcher's role within the contexts and structures of the research. Positionality remains active throughout the data collection process, and transparency of positionality and the intents of the researcher should be central to research efforts. According to Duffy et al. (2021), reflexivity is the researchers' practice of self-critique of their prejudices that may impact the production of knowledge in the research. Ensuring reflexivity in the research process entails researchers acknowledging that participants are experts in their own experiences and conducting interviews from an inquiry standpoint (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Displaying reflexivity during the research will help control the researcher's bias to produce reliable data.

I work as a middle-level manager in a government organization, and this could be a basis for a potential conflict of interest or bias regarding how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing in government organizations. Resnik (2019) reiterated the importance of disclosing a significant conflict of interest in research as it promotes transparency and trustworthiness of the study. However, no conflict of interest is anticipated because the middle-level managers will be from diverse government organizations and departments within the organizations.

As the significant instrument that processes the data collected, it was essential for me to maintain documentation that contains the observations and thoughts on the probable influence of the data. The documentation could be journaling, memo-writing, or field notes (Shufutinsky, 2020). Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) affirmed the importance of detailing contextual information in qualitative research because journals, field notes, or memos constitute a vital component of rigorous qualitative research. I utilized journaling to help record my thoughts, reflect on perceptions, enhance self-awareness, and focus on my role as a researcher during data collection.

The study explored the effect of ethics, indicating that the research is value-laden, with potential biases stemming from the researcher's worldview, upbringing, and cultural experiences. The approach was to study the phenomenon with an open mind without trying to confirm preconceived notions, assumptions, and values. Mwita (2020) surmised that despite the potential researcher bias in qualitative studies, qualitative methodology is

apt to understand participants' feelings, perceptions, values, and attitudes about the phenomenon of the study, expressed in their own words.

A way to confront my bias was to actively engage in bracketing to help keep my mind open and put aside my beliefs and perspectives on the phenomenon. Janak (2018) defined bracketing as mitigating potential researcher bias by putting presumptions that may negatively impact the research process in abeyance. Preconceived notions may be filtered into different stages of the research process. Therefore, I acknowledged and examined the preconceptions before conducting my analyses (Janak, 2018) and bracketing enhanced self-awareness. Self-awareness ensured that the data reflected the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, and beliefs rather than my perceptions. Recognizing that middle-level managers are experts in their own experiences facilitated the conduct of the interviews from an inquiry standpoint.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Getting accurate data in research depends on the target population's choice based on their knowledge and experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The target population for this study was middle-level managers in government organizations in California. Middle-level managers play a significant role in organizations and act as the bridge connecting top management and frontline employees. Ravitch and Carl (2020) asserted that a qualitative researcher purposely selects the participants that will assist in understanding the research problem and research question. The participants were middle-level managers

with at least 2 years of managerial experience and at least 1 year of working in their current organization and position in a California government organization. As middle-level managers, there is a tendency to have varied challenges in terms of organizational and personal factors. Therefore, the participants were selected from diverse government organizations in California. By their position in the organizational hierarchy, which is closer to rank and file, middle-level managers can influence the promotion of ethical values within the organizations. The base for recruiting the participants was the employee organizations in the public sector with middle-level managers as members.

Sample size can be a challenge with qualitative research approaches. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that there are no set rules in qualitative research when it comes to the sample size because it depends on what the researcher seeks to understand, the purpose of the study, the issue at hand, the usefulness, the credibility, and what can be achieved with available time and resources. Purposeful sampling helps to deliberately select individuals with experience who meet specific demographic requirements or have knowledge of the phenomenon of interest. Ravitch and Carl (2021) affirmed that the objective is for the researcher to answer the research questions thoroughly, rigorously, and ethically to attain multifaceted and multiperspective understandings that are valid and contextualized.

For the study, there was a sample size of 10 participants. Participants were selected based on their potential to provide pertinent information to answer the research question (Farrugia, 2019). Sim et al. (2018) contended that establishing the sample size beforehand in qualitative studies could be inherently problematic because sample size

may be adaptive and emergent. Sample size can be determined by information power, which is influenced by the purpose of the study, the precise characteristics of the participants in relation to the purpose of the study, the theoretical background, the quality of the interviews, and the analysis strategy (Sim et al., 2018). However, according to Bekele and Ago (2022), 6 – 15 interviews may be enough to achieve optimal data saturation in a qualitative research study.

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to deliberately and purposefully select participants that would be most valuable in providing appropriate answers to the research question (Farrugia, 2019). Purposive sampling is the selection of participants based on the possession of specific experience or knowledge of the phenomenon of study and who will be able to provide appropriate and valuable information (Burkholder et al., 2020). When only a few people responded to the initial recruitment, I continued to recruit more participants through snowball sampling. Farrugia (2019) identified snowball sampling as a technique where ascertained participants are asked to suggest other potential participants.

Mthuli et al. (2022) found that most studies indicated that saturation should be the determining factor for sample size in qualitative studies. Saturation is when no new information is gathered from the data collected, and the data is adequate to answer the research question (Burkholder et al., 2020). Participants' interviews concluded when information started repeating, and no new insights emerged, signaling the point of data saturation. Reaching saturation is critical because it denotes that the collected data have

captured the multiplicity, depth, and nuances of the phenomenon of study, thereby indicating content validity (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). When research participants provide rich information regarding their experiences, perceptions, and knowledge about the phenomenon, it will facilitate efforts to reach data saturation.

Instrumentation

The researcher is the main instrument during data collection in qualitative studies (Mele et al., 2020). As the main instrument, it is pertinent for the researcher to be cognizant of preconceived notions, biases, and subjectivities during the data collection because the context may influence participants' responses (Mele et al., 2020). Patton (2015) reiterated the importance of the research instrument assessing what it is supposed to measure without any biases and assumptions that can serve as distractions to ensure the validity and credibility of the study. The primary data collection tool was semi-structured interviews. Interview protocols were utilized to ensure consistency across participants' interactions to guide the interview process (Appendix A). The interview questions incorporated institutional rational choice theory concepts of the rationality of actors, acting per perceived norms and values of the organization, and making decisions based on preferences to achieve a desired outcome into the guide. The developed interview questions aligned with the study goals. The created questions depicted the theoretical framework concepts that would produce meaningful data to answer the research question. The interview guide contained a list of interview questions and was an effective tool to help remain focused and consistent during the interview. It also focused on the

phenomenon of interest, the areas to explore, and the potential sequence for asking the questions. The interview guide contained open-ended questions and was free of terminology, straightforward, and concise for participants' easy understanding. Participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts because the language of the questions was not suggestive or coercive. The semi-structured interviews provided insight into the participants' perspectives.

Procedures for Recruitment and Participation

As a result of my working relationship with employee organizations, potential participants were drawn from about three public-sector employee organizations such as California Correctional Supervisors Organization (CCSO), the Association of California State Supervisors (ACSS), and the California Association of Managers and Supervisors (CAMS). ACSS is the most extensive employee organization for managers and supervisors, with about 11,200 members. The CAMS and ACSS also have a considerably large number of middle managers as members. I contacted the senior representatives of the employee organizations and requested they help advertise my study. When they agreed, I provided a flyer explaining the scope and purpose of the study to the senior representatives (Appendix B). The senior representatives sent the flyer to their members using the organization's forum. From the responses garnered, I emailed interested volunteers the participants' screening questions (Appendix C) to ensure they met the selection criteria. After determining that the volunteers met the requirements of the study participant, I sent an informed consent form to reiterate the voluntary nature of their

participation and to ensure they understood the risks and benefits of being in the study (Appendix D).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are an excellent data collection method to gather detailed information because participants can share information in-depth in their own words and perspectives. Interviews permit participants to express their views and perceptions using their words, reducing the researcher's probability of imposing their perspective or constraining the scope of the discussion (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted that interviews elicit illustrations, descriptions, histories, stories, and clarifications, substantiating answers firmly in the participants' experiences, and are generally conducted in a supportive, nonconfrontational, and gentle manner.

For the interviews, I used Zoom, a video conferencing platform. Irani (2019) affirmed that video conferencing provides accessibility to verbal and non-verbal data and enhances flexibility for both the researcher and the participants. The interviews were an average of 45 minutes to one hour at the agreed date and time. Zoom video conferencing enabled the recording and transcription of the interview.

At the interviews, I reiterated the purpose of the study and asked if the participants had any questions. I also reminded the participants that they could call the number of the Walden University representative provided in the informed consent if they had concerns about their rights as participants.

Data Analysis

In data analysis, it is imperative to be transparent to establish rigor and validity. Qualitative data analysis is the planned, methodical analysis of data at many phases of the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Data analysis helps make sense of the collected data through coding, which entails labeling concepts, themes, and examples connected to the research question (Saldaña, 2016). Codes are words or short phrases that convey and summarize a significant characteristic of a portion of data (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive and in vivo codes were identified in the first cycle. The codes with similar characteristics were grouped into categories in the second cycle. Classifying the codes into categories made detecting consistent and overarching themes possible. The emergence of themes through the structured process of data analysis results in findings that help answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The approach to developing ideas, meaning, and understanding through the coding process of collected data was thematic analysis (Ozuem et al., 2022). The researcher closely examined the data to find common themes, such as ideas and patterns of meaning that occur repeatedly in the data. Thematic analysis is helpful when the researcher wants to understand participants' perspectives, perceptions, knowledge, and experience from a qualitative data set such as interview transcripts (Ozuem et al., 2022).

For this study, I used Braun and Clarke's (2021) six steps for thematic analysis: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) generating initial themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The six-

phase analytic process of thematic analysis assisted with reviewing the data, deciding the themes, and presenting the findings with clarity and validity (Byrne, 2022).

The familiarization step involved getting a thorough overview of the interview transcripts by reading through and taking initial notes to become familiar with them. Getting familiar with the dataset is beneficial to identifying appropriate information that may be relevant to the research question and helps with immersion into the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The best way to achieve familiarization with the data is by reading and re-reading the data to identify patterns across the data (Muir, 2023).

The second step was coding. Coding entails highlighting the data relevant to answering the research question, including words or phrases, and devising codes to describe the content. Braun and Clarke (2022) asserted that coding is a data interpretation process that results from profound and prolonged engagement with the data. Phrases and words that are potentially relevant are highlighted as potential codes, and these codes allow for a condensed overview of the key points and common meanings that repeat in the data.

There are different coding techniques, including concept coding, in vivo coding, descriptive coding, axial coding, eclectic coding, emotion coding, pattern coding, and process coding (Saldaña, 2016). The two coding techniques used to analyze data for this study were descriptive and in vivo. Descriptive coding assigns labels to summarize data sections into a word or short phrase to denote the primary message of the section (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding uses the words or terms expressed by participants to

organize and conceptualize their world (Gibbs, 2018). The selected two coding techniques were appropriate to meet the analytical needs of the study. Saldaña (2016) recognized that the selection of coding techniques should be based on the methodological perspective, the methods used, and the research question being addressed.

In generating the initial themes, the researcher looked over the created codes to identify patterns and categorize them to generate themes. Braun and Clarke (2022) stated that themes are not summaries of meanings about a topic but are patterns of meaning appended by shared ideas or concepts. Themes are broader than codes because they result from a combination of codes. The themes portray helpful narratives that function as meaningful interpretations of the data. Muir (2023) opined that it is vital to ensure that the themes cover the depth and breadth of the data.

The next step was to review the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and cross-check with the data to identify possible omissions. Based on the review, there could be a creation of new themes, a combination of themes, and a discard of irrelevant themes. At this stage, a central organizing concept may appear, and this is the anchor that links each theme through a shared meaning (Muir, 2023). In reviewing the potential themes, it is essential to check if they are coherent enough to form a meaningful data narrative and provide the most appropriate interpretation to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

By defining themes, the researcher formulated meaning for each theme and figured out how it helped to understand the data. Defining themes entails an in-depth

analysis of the underlying data items to extract data that portray a cohesive narrative addressing the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This step also involved developing succinct names for each theme. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasized the significance of creating concise and informative names because the theme names are the first indication of what was captured from the data.

The last step was the completion and final inspection of the analysis, which established the order of the themes to ensure they were logical and consequential to produce a rational narrative of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The report provided enough information to enable the reader to assess the rigor of the analysis. The themes built on each other, remaining consistent and able to communicate that the findings are relevant to the phenomenon of the study and the research question.

I used qualitative data analysis (QDA) software to generate quality data coding and organize the study. It facilitated the coding process because I was dealing with a large volume of data. The QDA software programs facilitate data analysis, organization of data, coding, interpretation of texts, and creation of reports, thereby increasing the credibility and validity of the study. Using ATLAS.ti minimized the risk of omitting relevant codes. ATLAS.ti can centralize relevant research information, facilitate organization, and enable the researcher to analyze data in the software (Soratto et al., 2020). ATLAS.ti can help locate, code, and annotate findings in the transcribed data by assessing their importance and highlighting their intricate relations.

Soratto et al. (2020) asserted that using ATLAS.ti can significantly help with the phases of thematic analysis, which include pre-analysis, material exploration, and interpretation. The steps in ATLAS.ti for the pre-analysis phase entail adding documents, grouping documents, and writing initial memos. The material exploration phase steps in ATLAS.ti involves reading the data, selecting sections of the data, creating quotations, creating codes, writing memos, and categorizing the codes. The steps in ATLAS.ti for the interpretation phase include exploring coded data, linking codes on a conceptual level, memo writing, and generating reports (Soratto et al., 2020). The QDA software helps to store all relevant data in one place, provides better data management security, and eliminates manual tasks. ATLAS.ti helps thoroughly analyze a small or large dataset.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research design, trustworthiness is critical (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Trustworthiness entails continuous, thorough reasoning involving a calculated, purposeful, transparent, thoughtful, and ethical process. The researcher must disclose the methods used, document each step of the study, engage in bracketing to decrease researcher bias, and ethically conduct the study to ensure trustworthiness (Daniel, 2018). Trustworthiness issues arise when a study lacks credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Expert validation from experienced researchers and practitioners who understand the study's context can enhance a study's trustworthiness. Validation entails seeking inputs from others who can provide insights, feedback, and additional data that can check

on the accuracy and validity of portraying the essence of the phenomenon of study (Patton, 2015). Borim-de-Souza et al. (2020) reiterated that validation by experts as sources of knowledge helps to determine if the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure, if the methodology is appropriate, and if the findings answer the research question. To validate the instrument, I sought input from two Walden professors with experience and knowledge in the public policy and administration field. I also received feedback from an expert with experience in similar studies who meets the criteria of potential participants to enhance the study's trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility is the confidence that the findings and interpretations accurately reflect the participants' truth (Langtree et al., 2019). The themes mirrored the truth value of what the participants perceived as the factors influencing their ability to create an ethical climate supporting whistleblowing without retaliation. Triangulation techniques with data from interview transcripts and observation notes, also ensured credibility. Daniel (2018) stated that triangulation is converging data from two or more sources to ensure the study is robust and comprehensive. I also employed transcript validation to validate the accuracy of the information shared by participants (Patton, 2015). Reviewing transcribed data with participants for potential corrections assisted in guaranteeing a precise interpretation of their perspectives. Furthermore, achieving data saturation in my data collection process was instrumental in establishing the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the themes concerning the participants' perspectives about their ability to create an ethical climate despite organizational, situational, and personal factors can have applicability in other contexts. According to Langtree et al. (2019), it is necessary to reflect on some factors before determining the transferability of the study. The factors include describing the context, the data collection method, the criteria for participants' selection, the participants' recruitment, and the data analysis method. Providing a comprehensive description of the findings is essential to promoting the transferability of the study. The findings of this study may apply to other individuals, groups, contexts, and settings because of the alterability in participants and contexts, as well as thematic similarities.

Dependability

Dependability is the consistency of repeatability of themes or findings of the study if replicated in the same context, with similar participants and methods (Janis, 2022). For there to be dependability in a study, there must be consistency in the processes used for data collection, analysis, and reporting (Burkholder et al., 2020). Dependability is assessed by taking into cognizance the decisions and steps taken during the research process (Langtree et al., 2019). Dependability is vital in research because it indicates that the study is consistent and repeatable.

Confirmability

Confirmability indicates that the study's findings reflect the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's biases, assumptions, or characteristics (Langtree et al., 2019). Neutrality in data analysis and triangulation of sources helps reduce researcher bias's impact. It was exigent to practice reflexivity to ensure the confirmability of the study. Therefore, there was checking and rechecking throughout the data collection and analysis to ensure results can be confirmed or repeatable by similar studies.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations arise from all research involving human beings as participants, and their protection is paramount. The protection involves obtaining informed consent from all participants, protecting them from harm, including deception, and protecting their privacy and confidentiality. I accurately informed them of the purpose of the study. I obtained their written consent to participate to ensure there was documentation of the participant's willingness to participate in the interview. The participants received the informed consent by email, and they replied to the email with their consent, stating, "I consent."

I informed the participants about the interview expectations and let them know the type of interview questions to expect and the anticipated time frame for the interview. The participants were aware of their choice of whether to participate in the interview or not and that their participation in the study was voluntary. They had the choice to terminate their involvement at any time. At the interviews, I created a welcoming, non-

threatening, and anti-authoritative ambiance that enabled the participants to freely express their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings to ensure an atmosphere of power equality.

There was strict adherence to the ethical guidelines Walden University and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided. The IRB approval was obtained before the recruitment of participants and the commencement of data collection processes. There was no need for institutional permission from the State of California because the interviews were not generalized to one department or agency. There was an opportunity for any State employee who met the selection criteria to participate in the study. I followed up with volunteers regarding selection or non-selection.

The participants provided information on their ethical and organizational values; therefore, I masked their names and those of their organizations in the study. Achieving this required not attributing the data collected from participants to the person being interviewed. I protected the data, at a minimum, using passwords and encryption for computer files and digitized audio or video files. The encrypted data would be securely kept for at least 5 years as required by the IRB, after which the data will be disposed of by data shredding. I strictly adhered to all measures to maintain the confidentiality of the participants as specified by the IRB.

Summary

Chapter 3 explains the rationale behind the chosen generic qualitative study. There was a description of my role as a researcher, identifying any personal or

professional relationships with the participants and explaining how any researcher assumptions and biases would be managed. The methodology presentation also included the participant selection logic, instrumentation, the procedures for participants' recruitment and participation, the data collection process, and the data analysis plan. The chapter also depicted the issues of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures for treating human participants. The methods outlined in Chapter 3 set the stage for data collection and analysis, which will be portrayed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This generic qualitative study aimed to understand the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing without implicit retaliation. Middle-level managers navigate situational influences such as their personal beliefs, values, moral philosophies, and organizational factors to promote an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliating against whistleblowers. The study findings provide insight into understanding the participants' unique and individual experiences and their ability to create an ethical climate that supports them without recourse to retaliation.

The research question that guided the generic qualitative study was as follows: How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation? Qualitative data were collected from 10 participants using semistructured videoconferencing interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis. The organization of this chapter includes setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

Setting

Following IRB approval, I sent the recruitment flyer explaining the study's scope and purpose to the senior representatives of three employee organizations. Participants were recruited based on their responses to the recruitment flyer. Seven participants responded to the flyer, and three were recruited through snowball sampling. I sent the screening questionnaire to the potential participants and ensured that they met the criteria for the study. Then, I sent an informed consent form to the participants to restate their voluntary participation, ensuring they understood the risks and benefits of being in the study.

Each participant received the informed consent form via email and responded with "I consent." The consent form was reviewed at the beginning of each interview to ensure that participants understood the contents and their consent. Participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that they could be interviewed at any time. Following the receipt of consent to proceed with the interview, the interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature. There were no identifiable personal or organizational factors that could have impacted participants or their involvements, thus preserving the integrity of the research findings. I used Zoom videoconferencing for the interviews of the 10 participants, conducting virtual one-on-one semistructured interviews from my home using Zoom, while participants were also in their homes for added comfort. This setting ensured minimal distractions, as well as privacy and confidentiality.

As indicated in Chapter 3, I continued to hold interviews until information started repeating, and no new insights emerged, which indicated the point of data saturation. Achieving data saturation indicated that sufficient data had been collected to draw necessary conclusions. Further data collection would not have provided any additional insights (Chitac, 2022).

Demographics

The demographic population was middle-level managers working in government organizations in California with at least 2 years of managerial experience and at least 1 year of working in their current organization and position. A total of 10 participants took part in the study. The middle-level managerial experiences of the participants ranged from 3 years to 15 years. I did not report the specific job titles and names of the organizations in order to protect the privacy of the participants. In addition, the personal demographic information of participants, for example, age and gender, was irrelevant to the study and, therefore, was not reported in the findings. I identified the participants using alphanumeric codes P01 to P10 in the narrative.

Data Collection

The research method used for the study was a generic qualitative inquiry and a thematic analysis of data collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews. The data were collected using an adapted interview guide (Appendix A), which was validated by two Walden professors with experience and knowledge in the public policy and

administration field and an expert with experience in similar studies who met the criteria of potential participants to enhance the study's trustworthiness and improve credibility.

I used 12 open-ended questions to guide one-on-one, semistructured interviews conducted virtually from my home through Zoom. The interview guidelines created ensured consistency in participant interactions and guided the interview process. The semistructured interviews ranged from 17 to 51 minutes in length. Interview recordings were made using the Zoom cloud recording feature and transcribed via Zoom Closed Caption transcription. Each participant's transcription was moved from Zoom Closed Caption transcription to individual Microsoft Word files. To address any distorted, misprinted, or vague words, I reviewed the recordings of all 10 interviews. Recordings and transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. I adhered to all data collection protocols outlined in Chapter 3.

Data Analysis

Transparency is crucial in data analysis as it ensures the process is thorough and reliable. Ravitch and Carl (2021) define qualitative data analysis as a deliberate, systematic examination of data throughout the research journey. In qualitative studies, data analysis plays a significant role in validating the findings, and this process helped in making sense of the collected data from the semi-structured interviews with 10 middle-level managers. By following a structured approach to data analysis, researchers can better understand the data and derive meaningful insights to address their research objectives. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six steps for thematic analysis: (a)

familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) generating initial themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

Upon familiarizing myself with the 10 interview transcripts, I imported them into ATLAS.ti for analysis. I created a new project named “Creating Ethical Climate.” I used the research goal feature to generate initial codes using open coding. After reviewing the generated initial codes, I manually conducted two additional rounds of coding using in vivo and descriptive coding. The identified and developed codes revealed the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon of interest and how middle-level managers can create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation. Some generated codes include accountability, communication, transparency, leadership, integrity, organizational culture, trust, commitment to ethics, fairness, authenticity, policy compliance, pursuit of ethical conduct, responsive policymaking, alignment with organizational values, ethical and legal considerations, trustworthiness, and training. Table 1 shows the sample open, in vivo, and descriptive codes. See Appendix D for total codes grouped into categories based on Braun and Clarke’s (2021) thematic analysis.

Table 1*Sample Codes*

Sample Codes (Open, In Vivo, Descriptive)	No of Participants Providing the Codes (<i>n</i> =10)	No of References to the Code in the Data
Commitment to ethics	10	54
Accountability	10	46
Communication	9	42
Transparency	10	41
Leadership	10	37
Integrity	10	32
Trustworthiness	8	31
Deference to organizational goals	9	27
Policies and procedures compliance	8	27
Precedence of organizational norms	10	26
Alignment with organizational values	10	19
Organizational culture	8	15
Training	9	12
Pursuit of ethical conduct	10	12
Encouragement	9	11
Supportive leadership	6	8
Confidentiality	8	8
Responsive policymaking	4	7
Legal protection	5	6
Ethical and legal considerations	3	3

The third step of Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis comprised generating initial themes. The codes, open, descriptive, and in vivo, identified in the first cycle were organized and grouped relatedly into categories in the second cycle because they share some characteristics. The codes were categorized into 10 categories: creating ethical climate, desired ethical climate, acts of retaliation, encouraging whistleblowing, personal factors, rational decision-making, outcome preferences, organizational factors, organizational challenges, and organizational culture. Figure 1 shows the developed categories based on the generated codes in the second cycle coding grouped into categories.

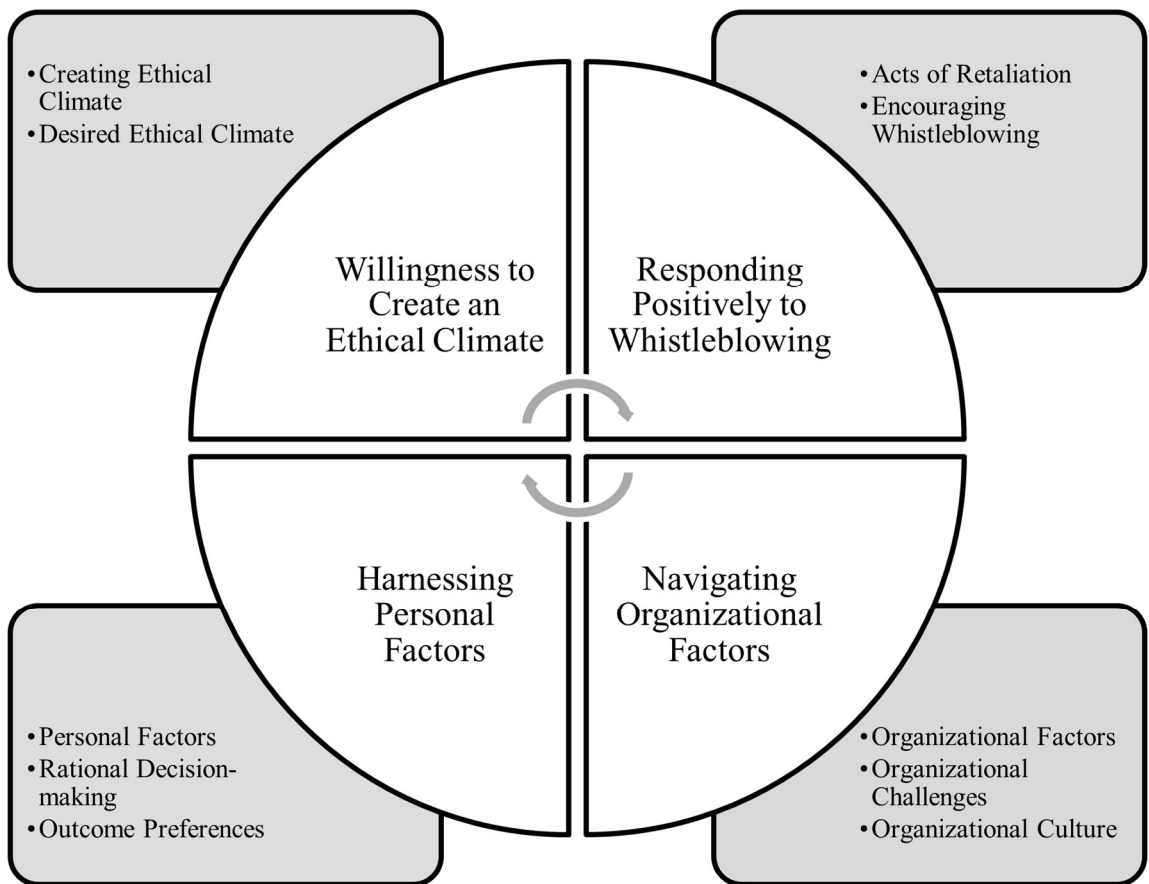
Figure 1*Categories*

Categories
Creating Ethical Climate
Desired Ethical Climate
Acts of Retaliation
Encouraging Whistleblowing
Outcome Preferences
Rational Decision-Making
Personal Factors
Organizational Culture
Organizational Challenges
Organizational Factors

Organizing the codes into categories from the transcribed data made detecting consistent and overarching themes possible. Through the structured process of data analysis to make sense of data, themes emerged. The themes ultimately turned into findings that helped answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As illustrated in Figure 2 below, four themes emerged from the categories that summarized the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing without implicit retaliation. The themes are willingness to create an ethical climate, responding positively to whistleblowing, harnessing personal factors, and navigating organizational factors.

Figure 2

Categories and Themes



The fourth stage of Braun and Clarke’s (2021) thematic analysis involved the review of potential themes. During this stage of thematic analysis, I reviewed the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. I also cross-checked with the data to identify possible omissions. Based on the review, there was a combination of themes and a discard of inapt themes. In reviewing the themes, I checked to ensure that the themes

were coherent enough to form a coherent data narrative and provide the most applicable interpretation to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the fifth step of the process, themes were finalized and described. This phase included comparing themes to the research question to confirm their relevance in addressing the research question. The final stage of Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic approach entailed creating a report of the results. The report was structured around the research question and its corresponding themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the findings in the study are well-founded. These aspects contribute to the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Langtree et al., 2019). This section defines these themes, and the steps taken to enhance the study's trustworthiness are elaborated upon.

Credibility

I conducted transcript validation following the in-depth, open-ended interviews with study participants to ensure credibility. These checks enabled me to validate my comprehension of the participants' perspectives (Patton, 2015), allowing adjustments to my notes and transcriptions before the coding process commenced. Additionally, although data saturation was reached after completing eight interviews, to bolster the study's credibility and to confirm saturation, I conducted two more interviews, totaling 10 interviews.

Transferability

Transferability involves creating detailed, context-specific statements and leveraging the various contextual elements in a study's design for application in another study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To improve transferability, I employed various important tactics. This included using an interview protocol, recording Zoom interviews accurately, transcribing these recordings, conducting transcript validation, and offering thorough explanations of the research methods and procedures. These in-depth descriptions of the study methods and procedures aim to assist other researchers in replicating the study in various settings and situations. Additionally, I bolstered transferability by outlining the context surrounding the ability of middle-level managers to cultivate an ethical climate amidst organizational, situational, and personal influences, detailing the data collection approach, outlining participant selection criteria, elucidating participant recruitment methods, and explaining the data analysis technique.

Dependability

Ensuring dependability is essential for maintaining consistency and repeatability in a study. This includes the findings, recommendations, and conclusions from the collected data, as outlined in Chapter 3. To uphold dependability in this research, meticulous documentation of the procedures throughout the data collection and data analysis stages was crucial. By accurately recording all study methods and processes, dependability was established for this research study. O'Kane et al. (2021) noted that maintaining integrity as a qualitative researcher involves avoiding assumptions, biases,

personal desires, and principles. To uphold this integrity and ensure dependability, an audit trail was utilized to validate the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study process while preventing assumptions and biases. The preservation of interview audio and video recordings, transcripts, and related fields further enhanced the dependability of the data collected.

Furthermore, a systematic approach was used for data collection and analysis to enhance dependability. This involved various stages, such as sending the screening questionnaire to interested participants, conducting interviews via Zoom with participant consent, recording and transcribing these interviews, reviewing the data for errors, confirming with participants, and using triangulation techniques. Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic approach was followed to analyze qualitative data, encompassing data familiarization, code development and coding procedures, theme development, theme review, theme finalization, and report generation. Adhering to these systematic procedures ensured the study's replicability and dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability, as defined by Ravitch and Carl (2021), refers to a researcher's capacity to ensure that the research data and analysis accurately capture the participants' perspectives. It necessitates that the researcher set aside their viewpoints and instead focus solely on the accounts provided by the participants. To mitigate any potential bias as the researcher, I concentrated solely on the data obtained from the interviews and sought clarification from participants as needed.

Systematic documentation of the study methods and procedures was crucial in promoting confirmability and guiding others to replicate the study. Furthermore, the process of coding was crucial in enhancing confirmability. Throughout the thematic analysis, I meticulously reviewed and categorized developing codes based on their shared characteristics, reinforcing the confirmability of the study.

Results

The research question for the study was: How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation? Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis germane to answering the research question. The themes are willingness to create an ethical climate, responding positively to whistleblowing, harnessing personal factors, and navigating organizational factors.

Table 2 shows the research question and the study themes relevant to answering the research question. The themes reflect the truth value of what the participants understand as how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without implicit retaliation against whistleblowers.

Table 2*Themes Pertinent to Answering the Research Question*

Research Question	Study Themes
How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Willingness to create an ethical climate 2. Responding positively to whistleblowing 3. Harnessing personal factors 4. Navigating organizational factors

Theme 1: Willingness to Create Ethical Climate

All participants expressed a strong willingness to create an ethical climate. All 10 participants displayed keenness and self-motivation toward creating an ethical climate. The participants shared their understanding of an ethical climate. The ethical climate in an organization was described as a combination of integrity, transparency, and positive energy as displayed and fostered by organizational managers. P04 stated, “Ethical climate, based on my understanding, is an organizational environment that is transparent, full of people of integrity and openness.” According to P01,

It’s a combination of things we talk about when we talk about ethics. We’re talking about morals, we’re talking about good attitudes, we’re talking about having positive energy in management, we’re talking about integrity. I think integrity is very important because it allows for transparency in doing things the right way.

Participants further defined an ethical climate in an organization as a shared sense of values and principles that guide decision-making and behavior. P05 stated,

I will define it as a climate that allows for the workplace where all staff feel they belong, and then also they can contribute to the building of that department and to the work being done in that department without feeling unduly pressured or forced to do the job.

P02 understood ethical climate as “the climate set from the tone from the leadership that determines quite a number of things, especially the perception and the conduct of the people that are working within the organization.” P06 concurred with the other participants, stating, “I would describe it as an environment where staff feel safe to disagree and can express their opinion.”

In their desire to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without recourse to retaliation, the participants asserted the importance of striving to create an environment that fosters the pursuit of ethical conduct, accountability, fairness, integrity, and transparency. P03 stressed the importance of creating a work environment that promotes transparency, honesty, and accountability and the need for a balance of knowledgeable and ethical team members to create a safe space for whistleblowing and ethical decision-making. All participants believe there should be open communication where employees’ voices are being heard, employees are encouraged to expose wrongdoings, and managers set ethical standards. P08 affirmed this: “I believe that managers are responsible for setting standards and communicating them either formally or informally through their own behaviors and decisions.”

In creating the desired climate, P07 would strive to “develop individuals who are not only willing but have the knowledge of transparency, being honest, being open, and ensuring the team creates safe spaces for other people.” In the same vein, P08 also stated, “I will transform every member of the organization to be honest, trustworthy, responsible and sincere people, which I believe will then translate to an ethical climate where whistleblowing will be encouraged”, and P09 would “create an enabling environment for speaking up, for disclosure.”

Theme 2 - Responding Positively to Whistleblowing

All the participants generally regarded whistleblowing as positive for maintaining workplace integrity, especially with the California state laws that protect employees who report improper activities. According to the participants, whistleblowing reduces mismanagement and wrongdoing in organizations. P08 stated that “whistleblowing helps to keep people in check in the organization. It reduces cases of mismanagement and wrongdoing and with time, such will be eliminated.” P06 affirmed, “I think it’s a good thing. I think it can really bring about positive changes, and it gives employees an opportunity to anonymously report concerns that they may have”. P07 expressed that “whistleblowing helps to maintain the integrity of workplace,” and P10 asserted that “whistleblowing, I think it’s a good thing. It keeps, I would say, the organization aligned with their mission and value.”

The participants acknowledged that despite the laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers from retaliation, whistleblowers face retaliation. P03 stated that

“retaliation is very prominent in government services. And that’s sad to say.” The participants acknowledged that acts of retaliation could include hostility, dismissal, isolation, peer ostracism, bad performance review, change of assignment, demotion, unwanted transfer, adverse actions, unfavorable job assignments, toxic work environment, unfair treatment, bullying, harassment, revenge, and reputation damage.

Although all the participants knew of these laws and regulations, seven participants could have been more conversant with the details of those laws and regulations. For example, when asked about their familiarity with the laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers in California government organizations, below are some of their responses:

P01 – “Well, I don’t know about specific laws. I mean, I know there are laws that guide whistleblowing, but I don’t know the title or their names or any legislation like that.”

P04 – “So I believe that I don’t know the actual code system, but I believe every organization, especially if it’s a public organization, in California do have a unit or department that handles whistleblowing.”

P06 – “Truthfully, I don’t know what the details are. Like, I don’t know all the specifics. I know there’s a hotline number, and I believe it’s through the Auditor General’s office or DOJ.”

P07 – “I would say I know just a little. What I know about it is that it allows California state government employees to report any improper government activities, and these are investigated by the government.”

P08 – “Not very familiar, but I know that members of an organization, government organizations are able to report any wrongdoing and they are protected from retaliation as a result of the whistleblowing.”

Regarding understanding the laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers, P10 stated, “If such rules and regulations are made, and they are unambiguous, people would understand exactly what it entails the most, especially about whistleblowing. And people would know exactly what it means, regarding being discreet about it, not giving away the identity of whistleblowers, and things like that. I believe that it will encourage more whistleblowing because the people would know they’re protected if they do it.”

Understanding the laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers would facilitate the creation of an enabling ethical climate for whistleblowing and creating organizational procedures that will encourage it. In proffering means to encourage whistleblowing, P01 emphasized the importance of a reporting system to address employee misconduct and suggested an easy-to-use system with clear instructions and anonymity options. P01 stated,

The value system of the organization should make it open, make it easy, and make it clear. They should provide access, and they should provide how to go about it.

They should provide who to contact, what number to contact, and what time. It

could be as easy as just making a phone call at any time of the day and leaving a voicemail. I think it should be easy to report without the identity being released. They should be protected from the beginning to the end.

Similarly, P05 stressed the need for easier and more accessible processes and the importance of positive organizational norms and values in promoting psychological safety and transparency. P05 advocated for “a very good and healthy environment where whistleblowers can operate without any repercussion or retaliation against them because the organizational behavior helps to shape how comfortable people could be.”

The findings revealed that middle-level managers are committed to engaging in acts such as providing anonymity and confidentiality for whistleblowers, fostering a fear-free environment that promotes psychological safety, providing protection for whistleblowers, establishing a defined whistleblowing process, enhancing management accessibility, and ensuring legal and policy compliance to encourage whistleblowing without retaliation against whistleblowers.

Theme 3 - Harnessing Personal Factors

The participants attached significant importance to the role of personal factors in influencing their ability to make ethical decisions to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing. The most prominent personal factors are personal beliefs and upbringing. P03 stated,

Being raised by a father who served in the Marines and raised by a mother who was a churchgoer, my moral belief in ethics is high. You know, they teach you

integrity, honesty, courage, and so forth. So, being around that all my life, that's the type of environment I create.

P04 shared a similar view, stating:

I am a Christian, and I am a pastor. My belief system supports integrity and enforcing ethical practices. My belief system is anti-unethical practices. My belief system is against integrity issues, corruption, and nepotism in the workplace. My belief system is anti-hostilities at work, not doing things the right way. So, I will say though, that I think my belief system underscores the whole idea about whistleblowing, supports it and would encourage it all the time.

P10 emphasized that personal beliefs are crucial in decision-making and striving to do the right thing for the organization. P10 asserted, "I strive to do the right thing. I think just having that mentality of, you know, always wanting to strive to do the best and what's also the best for the organization."

P02 emphasized the importance of personal values aligning with the organization's core values for an ethical climate. P02 stated that "when my personal values and my belief system are in contrast with what the organization's values and code of ethics are, then we cannot last because that is a compatibility issue right there."

P08 also stressed the significance of alignment of values because a lack of alignment may hinder the ability of a manager to be responsive, cause disillusionment, and result in subsequent resignation from the organization. The participant described a

situation at a former organization with differing values, which made the participant resign. P08 stated,

I had a hard time sleeping at night. It was like I was doing something unethical, immoral, or something. You know, I couldn't function correctly. And so, I've worked at places where I felt that there were some unethical issues going on, and it just didn't align with my personal beliefs, and I couldn't really stay there.

Despite the importance of aligning personal values with organizational values by P02 and P08, P03 shared a contrary opinion that organizational values or norms may not necessarily be good, and that care should be taken to align with such. P03 further explained that there might be a need to change the organizational norms to attain the desired ethical climate:

Sometimes organizational norms are, you know, they're not necessarily a good thing. Like it could be, you know, perhaps it's time to change things. So, I do consider it in terms of what environment are we working in? How are we doing things like this? I take all that into consideration. But if it was just like, oh, we don't talk about that here. Well, I don't see that as a good enough reason to not do something the right way, just because it's always been done a certain way.

In inquiring about how their personal preference or desired outcome impacts their decision regarding their response to whistleblowing, P01 believed that organizational intentions and expectations should prevail because of the belief that the organizations have appropriate values. The obligation to prioritize making ethical decisions over

personal preferences or desired outcomes in their decision regarding how they respond to whistleblowing was also essential to the participants. P09 affirmed this by stating, “I think it best that personal preferences or expectations are secondary to the organizational expectations, and that should be paramount.” P03 concurred,

Regardless of what my preference is, I believe everything should be investigated objectively, considering all evidence, making interviews, reviewing documents, reviewing phone calls, reviewing all different kinds of things before a final decision would be made. So, I think my own desire doesn’t come to play with the outcome of an investigation into whistleblowing. Organizational beliefs take precedence, and my response will tally with that.

In corroborating the deference to organizational goals or expectations, P07 declared, “Your goals are submissive to the mission, or your goals are submissive to the goals of the organization. You have to tailor your own goals to fit in with the expectations and mission of the organization.”

All 10 participants shared the same opinion about rational decision-making regarding whistleblowing, which requires a commitment to ethics. There was a consensus on deference to organizational goals, showing a sense of responsibility, displaying transparency, acting with integrity, exuding trustworthiness, taking responsibility for actions, and leading by example. P08 summed it up:

I believe in leading by example. So, my actions speak for me and with my own personal belief that you have to be transparent in whatever you’re doing. You

have to have integrity, to be trustworthy. I believe those are the kinds of things that align with my own personal beliefs. And I also take responsibility for my actions. I'm also honest, which is something that I believe my coworkers will see in me.

Theme 4 - Navigating Organizational Factors

The analysis revealed that organizational factors play a vital role in the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without implicit retaliation. Some of the top organizational factors identified that could influence the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing include organizational culture, clear and concise policies, positive environment, open-mindedness, supportive leadership, positive workplace culture, awareness creation, leadership commitment, and compliance training.

Organizational culture is critical in shaping the norms and values of an organization. P02 indicated that “the culture of the organization helps to shape the behavior of employees within the organization.”. An enabling environment cultivates a positive organizational culture that facilitates the creation of a desired ethical climate.

P07 shared the same view:

The climate and culture of an organization are similar. The culture sets the tone for the behavior of employees. It sets the tone for the conduct of organizational activities and sets the tone for the perception that the people that we are serving

would have about how we operate. So, the culture of an organization is a huge determinant of how the values and the work of the organization are shown.

P04 added, “If we want the culture to be effective, more effective, it has to start from the top.” Other participants also perceived committed and supportive leadership as a factor that influences the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing. The participants believe organizations must create an enabling environment for whistleblowing through leadership commitment, training, and reinforcement. P03 stated,

Leadership is very important. Leadership provides visibility and buying into everything. Oftentimes, people will follow the actions and preferences of leadership beyond words. By visibility, I mean communicating in different ways, modes, and channels to ensure that everyone in the organization understands what is expected of them and is reinforced at every opportunity.

Besides leadership, training, and awareness are other major organizational factors identified by the participants as essential for fostering a culture of transparency and accountability to create an enabling environment for whistleblowing. The participants emphasized the need for proper training and education on whistleblowing to ensure employees understand their rights and are protected from retaliation. P03 advocated for more frequent discussions about whistleblowing policy to increase employee awareness and comfort levels. P08 noted that employees should be aware of expectations and

consequences of improper conduct, with opportunities for escalation and accountability.

P09 summed up the issues of leadership, training, and awareness:

Leadership is very important. Training is very important. Awareness is very important. The organization must ensure that the training is on a continuous basis and the organization must ensure that there is the right environment for these disclosures. That environment has to be created, and it can be created if there is a leadership commitment and visible demonstration of it. The environment to encourage disclosure has to be created by the organization, and it has to be continuously reinforced and amplified at every opportunity.

P10 also stated,

When you start seeing a whole change in the leadership team from execs on down, then you know that it was something very serious and significant. So once leadership owns the task, and you have the ongoing training and awareness as to the protections that are available, I believe that goes a long way in ensuring that the climate is sustained and even groomed.

However, middle-level managers face organizational challenges that could hinder their ability to create the desired climate in the organization. Some of these challenges may include ineffective leadership, lack of transparency, lack of confidentiality, lack of understanding of rights, lack of training, and lack of awareness. For example, P06 shared this narrative regarding the lack of transparency from leadership:

When I worked in one department and in the two years that I was there, I never once met the director. The director was sort of like, very protected. He was surrounded by the chief counsel and all his deputy directors, but he wouldn't talk to HR, he wouldn't talk to labor. And I felt like that environment was very, you know, uncondusive. When you are dealing with the labor force, and you're not talking to your labor relations person, that's a problem. And there were just decisions that came down as directives without consulting with all the areas and assessing the impact. So, you know, I think that it's that kind of environment that makes it very difficult to have an ethical climate in an organization.

Summary

This generic qualitative study aimed to understand the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing without implicit retaliation. A generic qualitative approach was used to answer the research question: How do middle-level managers in government organizations in California describe how organizational and personal factors influence their ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation? Qualitative data were gathered from 10 middle-level managers employed in public organizations in California through semi-structured recorded virtual interviews and were analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis process.

Chapter 4 illustrates the results of the thematic data analysis. Four themes emerged from the data. These themes included a willingness to create an ethical climate, responding positively to whistleblowing, harnessing personal factors, and navigating organizational factors. The themes answered the research question. Middle-level managers understand the importance of an ethical climate. They are keen to create the appropriate ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation and respond positively to whistleblowing. The findings show that some personal factors influencing middle-level managers are personal beliefs, commitment to ethics, rational decision-making, alignment of values with organizational values, and deference to organizational goals and expectations. The findings further reveal that organizational factors such as leadership, training, awareness of laws and regulations, and effective communication with organizational members could significantly influence the ability of middle-level managers to create the enabling environment for whistleblowing.

The interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications of the study, and conclusion will be illustrated in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to explore the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that fosters whistleblowing without fear of reprisal. Given that organizational factors, personal beliefs, and reasoning play a significant role in the ethical decision-making of middle-level managers across different organizations and contexts, their experiences are subjective and diverse. Whereas previous research has focused on whistleblowers' perspectives, there needs to be more understanding of how middle-level managers in government organizations facilitate an ethical environment for whistleblowing, regardless of influences. By utilizing a qualitative approach, this study delved into the individual experiences of 10 participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of their efforts to promote whistleblowing safely and ethically.

The findings of the study were related to the literature review in Chapter 2, and they indicated that certain personal factors impacting middle-level managers include their personal beliefs, dedication to ethical principles, rational decision-making, alignment of personal values with those of the organization, and adherence to organizational objectives and expectations. Additionally, the findings of this study highlighted that organizational factors such as leadership, training programs, understanding of laws and regulations, and communication strategies within the organization, play crucial roles in shaping middle-level managers' capacity to cultivate a supportive environment for whistleblowing.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study captured vital insights into how personal and organizational factors might influence middle-level managers' ability in California government organizations to create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing without implicit bias for retaliation against whistleblowers. Using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis, four themes emerged from the study. The themes are willingness to create an ethical climate, responding positively to whistleblowing, harnessing personal factors, and navigating organizational factors. Each theme will be discussed within the context of the literature.

Theme 1: Willingness to Create an Ethical Climate

Creating an ethical climate in an organization does not happen in a vacuum because it involves the willingness of leadership to facilitate the desired enabling environment. Ben Mansour (2020) noted the crucial role of middle-level managers in this process. P08 voiced this assertion: "I believe that managers are responsible for setting standards and communicating them either formally or informally through their own behaviors and decisions." This study found that the participants were willing to create an ethical climate for whistleblowers by indicating their readiness or openness to establish an environment where employees feel comfortable and safe coming forward to report unethical behavior or wrongdoing within the organization. P09 stated that "managers need not only to be willing, but they should also exhibit transparency, be honest, be open, and create safe spaces for all employees." All 10 participants showed keenness regarding implementing policies, procedures, and practices that support and protect whistleblowers

and cultivating an organizational culture that encourages transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior.

Pagliari et al. (2018) asserted that whistleblower programs that managers support have the potential to establish channels for employees to express their concerns without fear of reprisal, thereby enhancing transparency and cultivating a stronger sense of commitment within the organization. A study by Cai et al. (2024) found that the ethical conduct of leaders plays a crucial role in shaping an ethical climate within organizations by motivating employees to improve their work experiences, enhance their connection to the organization, strengthen organizational identification, adhere to ethical standards, decrease instances of unethical behavior, prioritize the organization's interests, and prevent activities that may harm the organization through reporting. From the perspective of all 10 participants, the results of this study supported these findings that middle-level managers acknowledge their role in shaping the organizational ethical climate. The managers are willing to create an ethical climate for whistleblowers and demonstrate a commitment to upholding ethics and integrity in their decision-making process.

Theme 2: Responding Positively to Whistleblowing

Study participants expressed the need to respond positively to whistleblowing by cultivating a culture of transparency and accountability. The belief was that middle-level managers should lead by example, with actions reflecting transparency, trustworthiness, responsibility, and honesty. As noted by Lee (2020), how positively leaders behave and respond to whistleblowing goes a long way to boosting employees' confidence that

whistleblowers will be protected from retaliation. The participants expressed protecting whistleblowers by ensuring confidentiality and fostering an enabling environment that prohibits retaliation. This is consistent with a prior study by Potipiroon and Wongpreedee (2021), which indicated that the level of psychological safety perceived by employees increases their sense of security in reporting unethical behaviors they have observed.

Another way that the participants described responding positively to whistleblowing is by taking all reports seriously, treating whistleblowers with respect, and investigating their concerns promptly and thoroughly. P03, P05, P06, and P10 believe that organizations should visibly demonstrate fairness when investigating alleged wrongdoings and apply ethical standards in decision-making to promote trust and make employees feel empowered and secure to report wrongdoing without fear of reprisal. P05 affirmed that “I want the outcome of an investigation to be what it is supposed to be. Fair and justified. Because, like I said earlier, I handle my dealings with integrity. And I believe this should be prevalent in the organization.” Imbibing such conduct corroborates the assertion from Kwon et al. (2021) that an organization’s commitment to fairness and procedural justice promotes whistleblowing. Kang and Rubin (2023) also found that a fair internal system and leaders’ responsiveness help in encouraging whistleblowing.

Theme 3: Harnessing Personal Factors

There was enough evidence from the analysis that revealed the significance of personal factors in how middle-level managers create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing without implicit bias for retaliation. All 10 participants reiterated that

personal beliefs and values play a crucial role in their decision-making process regarding whistleblowing and whistleblowers, corroborating the research of Kesberg and Keller (2021) that personal values serve as aspirational objectives that act as benchmarks for assessing individuals, events, and behaviors. The participants affirmed that personal values, such as honesty, fairness, and respect, shape their behavior and decisions, creating an ethical climate. Research by Bridges (2018) confirmed that leaders act based on their moral philosophies, and participants corroborated that moral intensity, which refers to their level of concern and commitment to ethical principles, influences their willingness to act ethically.

All 10 participants alluded to their cultural upbringing and background that helped shape their values and moral beliefs, influencing their behavior and decision-making regarding creating an ethical climate. McManus' (2021) study asserted that individuals derive moral intuitions by fusing personal psychological constructs with cultural norms. P01 affirmed this perspective: "I believe in fairness, and I advocate for it. My belief system stems from my upbringing, and this guides my interactions and decision-making process. I respect the rules, and I respect the laws. So, any whistleblowing issue would be handled with the fairness it deserves."

The participants underscored the importance of personal values aligning with the organization's core values for an ethical climate and prioritized aligning decisions with organizational norms and values. As van Knippenberg (2020) found, managers embrace organizational objectives when personal beliefs align with organizational values. The

findings of this study extended that social norms, which is an individual's perception of what is considered acceptable behavior in the organization, and organizational socialization, which includes the introduction to the organization's values and norms, influence the behavior and willingness of the participants to act ethically. Clark (2023) found that the alignment between the managers' personal values and the organization's values is vital because it influences their actions in alignment with these values. P02 confirmed that "what helps our thought process, and our actions are the values that are consistent with what the organization wants. The compatibility of my core values and that of the organization helps to ensure consistency in how employees approach issues."

Theme 4: Navigating Organizational Factors

The results of this study revealed that the behavior and actions of leaders in promoting and modeling ethical conduct have a significant impact on shaping the ethical climate of an organization. According to Kuenzi et al. (2020), some underlying factors for organizational climate include leadership structure and support, individual accountability and responsibility, and organizational values and norms. The findings of the study demonstrate the assertion of Kang et al. (2024) that when managers are open to listening to whistleblowers' perspectives, displaying ethics in organizational conduct, taking steps to address the reported misconduct, and establishing accountability mechanisms, it facilitates the creation of an ethical climate that promotes transparency and fairness. All 10 participants mentioned that the organizational values and culture, as

set by its mission, vision, and policies, play a crucial role in establishing ethical norms and expectations.

Other organizational factors identified by study participants include clear and well-communicated ethical policies, codes of conduct, and practices that can guide managers in ethical decision-making. Effective communication channels encourage open dialogue and feedback on ethical issues and foster a culture of transparency and integrity. A study by Tiitinen (2020) determined that organizations could impact employees' decision-making by promoting a culture that encourages openness and proactive problem-solving rather than stifling employees who attempt to address issues. P07 echoed this by stating, "Creating an environment where everyone feels safe, where everyone feels seen and heard. Ensuring the rules and regulations are not ambiguous, having no retaliation against whistleblowers, and keeping their identities secure. That is the ideal environment."

My study found that training on how to support whistleblowers and understanding the laws and regulations that protect whistleblowers could enhance the understanding of ethical principles and help middle-level managers navigate ethical dilemmas. All participants stressed the importance of training, which supports Kanojia et al.'s (2020) suggestion that if the organization expects employees to come forward to report wrongdoings, then the organization is responsible for protecting the whistleblower from retaliation by ensuring that leadership is adequately trained. The analysis demonstrated that by addressing and strengthening these organizational factors, middle-level managers

can create a positive ethical climate that promotes integrity, trust, and ethical decision-making, encouraging whistleblowing and protecting whistleblowers from retaliation.

Interpretation of the Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Framework

I used institutional rational choice theory (IRC) as the theoretical framework for this study. As Ostrom and Kiser (1982) described, the institutional rational choice theory explains how organizations and individuals, particularly middle-level managers, make decisions based on their objectives, existing constraints, and institutional rules. The theory suggested that these individuals consider five critical components in their decision-making process: the decision-maker, organizational environment, desired outcomes, organizational factors influencing decisions, and the context in which choices are made. Additionally, the theory posited that individuals act as purposeful and rational beings, considering information processing, decision-making processes, preferences, and available resources when making choices.

The study's findings relate to the concepts of institutional rational choice theory. The study found that middle-level managers were conscious of their crucial role in creating an ethical climate in an organization. They were mindful of the importance of creating a moral and ethical organizational environment, climate, and culture that would foster a psychologically safe environment for employees without fear of retaliation. In responding to whistleblowing and whistleblowers, the study found that middle-level managers strived to align their desired outcomes with organizational values and objectives. The participants prioritized rational ethical decision-making over personal

preferences. The study further identified the organizational factors, such as supportive leadership, positive organizational culture, ethical norms and values, effective communication, and adequate training, to be vital in influencing the ability of middle-level managers to create the desired ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation. The results of this study revealed that the culture of transparency and accountability promotes a positive context or decision situation in which middle-level managers make choices regarding their responsiveness to whistleblowing.

Limitations of the Study

I employed a qualitative research design involving a smaller sample size than quantitative studies (Patton, 2015). Data saturation often determines the sample size, where no new information emerges from the collected data (Bekele & Ago, 2022). In this study, I used purposeful sampling and concluded the interviews with a sample size of 10 participants once data saturation was reached. While reaching saturation ensures that the data is comprehensive and relevant (Naeem et al., 2024), the saturation issue remains subjective. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to the entire population and may not be representative of other middle-level managers.

As a researcher, I was also aware of the limitations of objectivity and took steps to maintain it. To ensure credibility, I re-checked answers with participants and engaged in reflexivity during data collection to limit my bias. I documented my thoughts through journaling, reflected on my perceptions, and practiced self-awareness to prevent my

personal beliefs and values from influencing data interpretation. While I aimed to be open-minded and not confirm preconceived assumptions, my perspective as a researcher may still impact the interpretation of the data. Ultimately, I chose to value and respect the participants' perspectives, which may be considered a bias but preferable to an alternative bias.

Another limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Participants may not always accurately report their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as they may be influenced by social desirability or other factors (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, participants may have a vested interest in presenting themselves in a certain way, which can lead to biased responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Self-reported data may not capture the full range of perspectives that individuals may have, and participants may need help articulating their thoughts, which can lead to incomplete or inaccurate data and limit the validity and generalizability of the findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To mitigate these limitations, I used a combination of open-ended and structured questions to gather more detailed information, and I used transcript validation to validate the accuracy of the information shared by participants. Despite these efforts, it is essential to acknowledge that self-reported data remains a limitation of this study.

Recommendations

Future Research Recommendations

This study's findings can inform future research and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers' ability to create an ethical climate without implicit bias for retaliation. Before this study, more empirical research was needed on this topic, particularly from the perspective of middle-level managers.

The current study has made a significant contribution to the field by identifying key factors influencing middle-level managers' ability to create an ethical climate, including their willingness to do so, motivation to respond positively to whistleblowing, ability to harness personal factors, and aptitude to navigate organizational factors. To further expand our knowledge in this area, I recommend that future researchers replicate this study in government organizations across other states.

In addition, it would be valuable to conduct a comparative study between government organizations in different sectors and states to examine the level of awareness and understanding that middle-level managers have of laws and regulations that protect whistleblowing. This could help develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing middle-level managers' responsiveness to whistleblowing in the public sector.

Given the study's focus on California-specific laws and regulations, it would be beneficial to conduct future research focusing on a particular sector and organization to

understand how local organizational policies influence middle-level managers. Such a study could provide valuable insights into how organizational policies can either support or hinder the creation of an ethical climate without implicit bias for retaliation.

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size, which restricted the generalizability of the findings. The qualitative methodology and generic research design employed in this study, coupled with a sample size of only 10 participants, may not represent the broader population. This limitation is particularly significant in a study that aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of middle-level managers. Future research should consider this limitation when designing studies. For instance, a quantitative study using a larger sample size could increase the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, combining multiple data collection methods, such as questionnaires, surveys, or archival data, could enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Using a mixed-methods approach, researchers can triangulate their findings and increase confidence in their results. A quantitative study using a larger sample size could help address this study's limitations by providing more comprehensive and generalizable findings. A larger sample size would allow researchers to capture a more comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences that are more representative of the broader population. Additionally, quantitative methods can provide more precise and reliable measures of variables, which can help to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

Future Policy Recommendations

Based on the participants' responses and application of the institutional rational choice theory, many ideas emerged from their perspectives. Middle-level managers could benefit from some policy recommendations to facilitate creating an ethical climate without implicit bias for retaliation. These policy recommendations include developing a program that cultivates an organizational culture that values ethics, transparency, and accountability. The culture should encourage open communication and provide a safe and supportive environment for employees to report concerns and speak up. In this environment, middle-level managers can model ethical behavior and demonstrate a commitment to ethical conduct by promoting ethics and integrity.

Another policy recommendation is the development of clear policies and procedures that outline the organization's expectations for ethical behavior, including reporting and investigating whistleblower complaints. The policies should include robust whistleblower protection strategies, provide confidential reporting mechanisms, steps to ensure that reports are investigated thoroughly, and detail the appropriate actions against those who retaliate against whistleblowers. Clear and concise policies and procedures can guide middle-level managers in making ethical decisions regarding how they respond to whistleblowers and whistleblowing.

Some laws and regulations protect whistleblowing. Establishing compliance annual training and development programs will be expedient in educating middle-level managers on ethical decision-making, ethical conduct, whistleblower protection, and the

importance of appropriately responding to reported concerns. When trained, middle-level managers become more effective in promoting an ethical climate and preventing retaliation.

Implications

Positive Social Change

The study's findings have significant implications for promoting positive social change at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. The research sheds light on the limitations of relying solely on legal measures, such as whistleblower protection laws, to encourage whistleblowing in organizations. Instead, it emphasizes the need for an ethical climate fostered by middle-level managers to support whistleblowing without fearing retaliation.

On an individual level, middle-level managers can use the study's findings as a roadmap to enhance their skills in creating an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing while protecting whistleblowers from retaliation. By addressing the personal and organizational factors that influence ethical decision-making, managers can promote a culture of openness and transparency that drives prosocial behaviors and positively shapes the perceptions and emotions of their teams. Embracing an organizational culture that values fairness and accountability can contribute to a positive work environment and an ethical climate.

At the organizational level, an ethical climate can build trust and create an environment where employees feel comfortable voicing their concerns and reporting

misconduct without facing repercussions. This fosters a positive workplace culture, increasing employee satisfaction and a favorable view of government organizations. Additionally, the findings can assist organizations in developing training, programs, and policies designed to enhance leadership ethicality and skills in handling whistleblowing.

A positive work environment and ethical organizational climate can have far-reaching effects on a societal level, as employees make up a significant portion of society. Improving employee happiness can directly impact the well-being of their families and communities, fostering mutual respect, growth, and peace. Ultimately, a satisfied community contributes to a more harmonious and decent society.

Empirical Implications

The empirical implications of the study's findings suggest an actionable approach toward promoting positive social change at multiple levels. By highlighting the limitations of relying solely on legal measures to encourage whistleblowing and underscoring the importance of an ethical climate fostered by middle-level managers, the research offers a practical pathway for organizations to enhance their whistleblowing practices.

At the individual level, middle-level managers can utilize the study's findings to actively cultivate an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing while safeguarding whistleblowers from potential retaliation. By addressing the personal and organizational factors influencing ethical decision-making, managers can promote a culture of transparency and openness that encourages prosocial behaviors among team members.

This emphasis on fairness and accountability within the organizational culture can contribute to a positive work environment and foster an ethical climate conducive to whistleblowing.

On an organizational level, establishing an ethical climate can foster trust and create a safe space for employees to express their concerns and report misconduct without fear of negative consequences. This, in turn, can lead to a more positive workplace culture, increased employee satisfaction, and a favorable perception of government organizations.

From a societal standpoint, the study suggests that improving employee happiness within organizations can have ripple effects on families and communities' overall well-being. A positive work environment and ethical organizational climate promote mutual respect, growth, and peace within communities, contributing to a more harmonious and ethical society. Ultimately, the study's empirical implications underscore the tangible benefits of prioritizing ethical practices and fostering a supportive environment for whistleblowing in driving positive social change.

Practice Recommendations

Research shows that retaliation is still prevalent in the public sector despite promulgated laws and regulations protecting whistleblowers (Kang et al., 2024). Middle-level managers in government organizations must foster an ethical climate, encouraging employees to speak up and report wrongdoings without fear of retaliation.

One practice recommendation is for middle-level managers to lead by example, demonstrate ethical behavior, and set the tone for the organization's culture. They should model the behavior they expect from others and take responsibility for their actions. They can also create an open-door policy where employees are encouraged to voice their concerns and feel comfortable approaching their supervisor or human resource representative with concerns. This can foster a culture of transparency and openness throughout the organization.

Another practice recommendation is attending regular ethics training that will positively influence the ethical decision-making of middle-level managers, raise awareness of whistleblower policy, and ensure that employees understand their rights and protections under the policy. Some best practices of ethics training include making ethics training a mandatory part of new employee onboarding and regular employee training, emphasizing ethical principles and values, such as integrity, honesty, and fairness, and explaining how they apply to everyday work situations, providing resources and support for employees to report ethical concerns or violations, such as a whistleblower hotline, and conducting regular refreshers or updates on ethics training to keep employees informed of changes in policies, procedures, and laws. Incorporating these best practices into the organization's regular ethics training program can help ensure that middle-level managers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make ethical decisions in their daily work lives. Awareness can be raised by sharing information, providing regular updates, and responding to employee concerns. The managers can also conduct

thorough investigations into allegations of wrongdoing or unethical behavior and ensure that investigations are fair, impartial, and timely.

A third practice recommendation is communicating ethical expectations to all employees, including new hires, contractors, and vendors, and ensuring that all employees understand their role in promoting an ethical climate. Middle-level managers can create ethics programs and regularly monitor and evaluate the ethics program to ensure it is effective in promoting an ethical climate. They can use data and metrics to track progress and identify areas for improvement. Fostering such an organizational climate will mitigate the challenges of organizational factors that could hinder the creation of an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without bias for retaliation.

Conclusion

Whistleblowing has become prevalent in government organizations, and it is expedient to address how personal and organizational factors impact middle-level managers' capacity to foster an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without the risk of retaliation. While the findings expand our understanding of the complexities surrounding this issue and provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities managers face in promoting ethical behavior and protecting whistleblowers, the effectiveness of state laws and regulations protecting whistleblowers could not be ascertained.

The themes identified in this study shed light on the willingness of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing, the importance of

responding positively to whistleblowing, the influence of personal factors on ethical decision-making, and the critical role of navigating organizational factors in promoting a culture of integrity and transparency within government organizations. The participants articulated the significance of creating a moral and ethical climate in the organization and the significance of transparency and honesty in decision-making, mainly when supporting whistleblowers, resulting in transparency in organizational culture. Shim et al. (2023) indicated that fostering an ethical climate within an organization can positively boost its organizational culture by creating a sense of psychological safety among employees. This, in turn, will promote open communication in organizations and create a safe place where whistleblowers are reassured that they will not face retaliation for reporting wrongdoings.

One central consensus among the participants in this study was that middle-level managers play a crucial role in creating an environment where employees feel valued and empowered to report unethical behaviors without fear of retaliation. They also pointed out that mitigating personal and organizational factors helps to promote ethical behavior and protect whistleblowers. Personal beliefs are crucial in creating an ethical climate, and organizational values guide ethical decision-making. The participants emphasized the importance of personal values aligning with the organization's core values for an ethical climate. While the participants expressed their willingness to create an ethical climate and encourage whistleblowing, they reported some challenges, such as lack of transparency, inadequate training, ineffective communication, unfavorable organizational

culture, and unsupportive leadership, hinder the fostering of an ethical climate (Kuenzi et al., 2020).

The willingness of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate is crucial for fostering a safe environment where employees feel comfortable reporting unethical behavior. The participants in this study expressed readiness to implement policies and practices that protect whistleblowers and promote transparency and accountability within their organizations. By demonstrating a commitment to upholding ethics and integrity, these managers play a pivotal role in establishing a culture that values ethical behavior and encourages employees to speak up against wrongdoing.

Responding positively to whistleblowing is essential for building trust and confidence among employees. The study participants emphasized the importance of treating whistleblowers respectfully, investigating concerns promptly, and ensuring confidentiality to protect them from retaliation. By promoting fairness and ethical standards in decision-making, middle-level managers can create an environment where employees feel empowered and secure to report misconduct without fear of reprisal.

Personal factors, such as values, beliefs, and cultural background, influence middle-level managers' decisions regarding ethical climate and whistleblowing support. Aligning personal values with organizational norms and values is essential for promoting ethical behavior and decision-making. By prioritizing ethical issues and challenging unethical practices, managers can create a culture of integrity and accountability within their organizations.

Navigating organizational factors, such as leadership support, ethical policies, communication channels, and training, is crucial for creating a positive ethical climate. By addressing these factors, middle-level managers can enhance their ability to promote transparency, fairness, and ethical decision-making that encourages whistleblowing and protects whistleblowers from retaliation.

Overall, this study highlights the complex interplay of personal and organizational factors in shaping middle-level managers' ability to create an ethical climate that supports whistleblowing within government organizations. By understanding and addressing these factors, managers can play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of integrity, transparency, and accountability that benefits employees and the organization.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Script and Interview Questions

Order of the Interview Questions

Introduction Script

- Hello. My name is Toyin Olusegun. I appreciate your acceptance to be part of my study. The purpose of this interview is to talk about the organizational and personal factors that may influence the ability of middle-level managers to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliation. The interview should last about 45 minutes to one hour, and I will assess your responses for data analysis after the interview. Your identity will be protected, and your responses will not reveal your identity in the study. Only I and my doctoral committee will be aware of your answers. With your permission, I will record this interview for transcription purposes. Please be aware that you can stop this interview at any time.

Do you still want to continue?

Are there any questions before we begin?

(The main questions are bulleted, and the hyphenated questions are prompts)

Question 1

- Tell me a little about yourself and how long you have been in your position.

Question 2

- As a manager, how would you define an ethical (fair or moral) climate in an organization?

Question 3

- Tell me about your perspective on whistleblowing.
 - How did you develop this perspective?

Question 4

- Describe your level of familiarity with the California State laws and regulations regarding whistleblowing.
 - What is your perception regarding the effectiveness of the laws and regulations?

Question 5

- How do you think these laws and regulations impact government organizations in California?
 - In what way do the laws and regulations influence your decision-making regarding whistleblowers?

Question 6

- Share your thoughts on how you think the laws and regulations can be more effective in assisting middle-level managers to create the desired climate that supports whistleblowers.
 - What factors may limit the effectiveness of the laws and regulations?

Question 7

- Let me know what you consider to be retaliation against whistleblowers.
 - What would you do differently?

Question 8

- What role do you believe your personal beliefs play in your ability to create an ethical climate?
 - How do your beliefs motivate you?

Question 9

- Describe the significance you accord to organizational norms and values in your decision-making process.

Question 10

- How does your preference or desired outcome impact your decision regarding your response to whistleblowing?

Question 11

- What do you consider organizational factors that may influence your ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing?

Question 12

- If you had a magic wand that could create an ethical climate that could encourage whistleblowing, how would you use it?

Closing script

- Thank you for your time and your responses. Is there anything else you want to share with me?
- What questions do you have for me?
- Can I contact you if I need any further clarification?

- Would you like to receive a copy of the report summarizing this study's findings?
Thank you once again for contributing to my study.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

INTERVIEW STUDY

seeks

Middle-level Managers in Government Organizations

There is a new study about organizational and personal factors that influence middle-level managers in government organizations in California to create an ethical environment that encourages whistleblowing with no bias for retaliation. For this study, you are invited to describe how organizational and personal factors influence your ability to create an ethical climate that encourages whistleblowing without retaliating against whistleblowers.

About the study:

- One 45- to 60-minute Zoom interview.
- Your names will not be disclosed in the study to protect your privacy. Your identity and that of your organization will be protected.
- Your participation in the study is voluntary.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Two years of middle-level managerial experience, with at least one year in the current organization.
- Work in a public organization in California.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Toyin Olusegun, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Please forward it to others who might be interested.

To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher:

Toyin Olusegun, at Oluwatoyin.Olusegun@waldenu.edu

Appendix C: Participant Screening Questions

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms./Dr.,

Thank you for indicating your interest in participating in my study. To ensure that the selection criteria are met, kindly provide answers to the following questions:

1. Do you currently work in a public organization in California? Yes/No
2. Are you a middle level manager with two years of experience, with at least one year in your current organization? Yes/No

If you meet the selection criteria, you will receive an email with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study. The form will be to obtain your written consent to participate in the interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Toyin Olusegun

Appendix D: Codes and Categories

Codes	Categories
Open communication, Transparency Accountability, Employee's voice being heard, Fairness, Positive work environment, Exposure of wrongdoings, Managers setting standards, Integrity.	Creating ethical climate
Mission-focused, Respect, Positive social norms, Shared values, Inclusivity, Supportive leadership, Trust, Submission to organizational goals.	Organizational culture
Commitment to ethics, Mission oriented, Deference to organizational goals, Policies and procedures compliance, Precedence of organizational norms, Upholding organizational values, Alignment of values.	Rational decision-making
Hostility, Dismissal, Isolation, Peer ostracism, Bad performance review, Change of assignment, Demotion, Unwanted transfer, Adverse actions, Unfavorable job assignments, Toxic work environment, Unfair treatment, Bullying, Harassment, Revenge, Reputation damage.	Acts of retaliation
Authenticity, Honesty, Personal beliefs, Faith, Religion, Respectful disagreement, Personal core values, Ethical values, Moral upbringing, Lead by example, Sense of responsibility, Transparency, Sincerity, Trustworthiness, Take responsibility for actions.	Personal factors
Anonymity, Confidentiality, Psychological safety, Fostering fear-free environment, Provide protection, Defined whistleblowing process, Management accessibility, Encouragement, Policy enforcement, Whistleblowers' empowerment, Prohibition of retaliation, Legal and policy compliance.	Encouraging whistleblowing
Alignment with organizational values, Evidence-based outcomes, Objectivity, Follow rules, Justified outcomes, Impartiality, Fair investigation	Outcome Preferences
Clear and concise policies, Conflict resolution, Inclusivity, Positive environment, Open-mindedness, Supportive leadership, Positive workplace culture, Creation of awareness, Buy-in, Leadership commitment, Compliance training.	Organizational factors
Communication difficulties, Ineffective leadership, Lack of transparency, Organizational culture, Organizational norms, Lack of confidentiality, Emotional control, Whistleblowing process and procedure, Lack of understanding of rights, Lack of enforcement, Different perspectives, Lack of training, Limited knowledge of laws and regulations, Lack of awareness.	Organizational challenges
Non-tolerance of corruption, Employee engagement, Pursuit of ethical conduct, Open communication, Responsive policymaking, Professionalism, Responsibility, Altruism, Morality, Power dynamics.	Desired ethical climate