

**THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL CLIMATE ON THE LEVEL OF AMBIGUITY IN
RELATION TO THE CLIENT: A STUDY OF POLICE OFFICERS**

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THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL CLIMATE ON THE LEVEL OF AMBIGUITY IN RELATION TO THE CLIENT: A STUDY OF POLICE OFFICERS

This paper uses a cross-sectional, survey-based, self-report strategy to examine whether the quality of the social climate affects role ambiguity for Australian police officers in relation to their clients. The major finding is that the quality of the subordinate-superior management relationship in the Leader Member Exchange (“LMX”) provides a logical link to explain how the social climate affects police officers’ level of ambiguity in relation to clients (the public) by affecting their level of satisfaction with information-sharing and their perception of self-determination. This new information explains why it is imperative for public sector managers to implement a new management agenda so as to enhance the quality of the social organisational climate. The findings suggest that an effective social climate is vital if employees are to be effective in meeting the needs of the public and therefore must be a priority for managers at all levels of the hierarchy. Moreover, since governments determine budgets, if it is a real goal of government to become client-focused, new management agendas must be explored.

Keywords: Organisational Behaviour, Public Sector and Not for Profit, Human Resource Management and Development.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of social exchanges affects organisational outcomes (such as productivity and client satisfaction) because it affects the behaviour and motivation of employees (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Huselid, 1995). This in turn, affects the social climate embedded within an organisation (Evans & Davis, 2005). The organisational social climate is a reflection of the norms, values and beliefs of employees that determine how employees and managers interact whilst working (Smith, Collins & Clark, 2005). A theoretical framework used to explain how social exchanges impact on organisational outcomes is social exchange theory (SET). SET argues that when employees and supervisors/managers develop good workplace relationships, a reciprocal arrangement develops that not only benefits individuals involved, but also benefits the organisation as a whole (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard & Werner, 1998; Cole, Schaninger & Harris, 2002). The organisation benefits because effective relationships amongst employees at different levels of the organisational hierarchy results in a reciprocal information sharing environment and a more participative decision-making so that employees feel empowered to solve organisational problems efficiently and effectively (Haskin, 1996).

Over the last twenty years the public sector has seen significant changes to both organisational structures and to practices resulting from the selective implementation of new public management practices (NPM) over the last twenty years (Flynn, 1997; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2004, 2005a, b, 2006). The implementation of NPM involved a move towards a private sector model of management (including the selective use of strategic planning, program budgeting, risk management and increased use of accountability to achieve stated outcomes), although some authors argue that the important political objective was cost-cutting (Brunetto, 2002, Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2004, 2005a,b, 2006; Kirkpatrick and Lucio, 1995). One of the stated aims of NPM was to make public sector firms more **client-focused**. The belief was that a change in focus from inputs to outcomes was achievable with good management practices ensuring a more efficient use of resources. To achieve these goals, the role of managers and supervisors had to change. This is because managers were given increased responsibility to monitor, measure and were required to assess performance of human resources to a far greater extent (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald, & Pettigrew, 1996). Moreover, managers were often placed in the difficult position of having to mediate between achieving organisational and professional/culturally-embedded goals and values, often forcing them to shoulder the burden of having to ration and restrict access to public sector services (Whittington, McNulty, Whipp, 1994; Brunetto, 2002).

This paper argues that the implementation of NPM led to changes in public sector management that may have changed the nature and substance of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, and in turn, affected the quality of the social climate. Moreover, it is argued that when the social climate is compromised, then it is difficult to embed the types of workplace relationships that foster effective information-sharing and participatory decision-making required to problem-solve effectively so as to achieve a strong client focus. As a result of a poor quality social climate, police officers' have experienced client ambiguity. The hypotheses are used to guide data collection.

Context of the study

The context of the study is the public sector police workplace environment in the Australian police force. Whilst the implementation of NPM has led to significant gains in efficiency and reduced per capita expenditure, it has also led to increased workloads and paperwork for police officers (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2005a, b). On the one hand, police officers now have access to manuals and other documents detailing their responsibilities in relation to a new policy, and as a result, in terms of service delivery, there are now standardized practices for servicing clients with routine issues and this has probably enhanced efficiency gains. However, police officers are now subjected to far greater levels of accountability via increased performance monitoring (increasing their level of record-keeping and data-collection) and increased workload and pace/intensity of work (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005, a, b; Kirkpatrick & Whipp, 2000; Brown & Hales, 2002; Butterfield, Edwards & Woodall, 2005).

The implementation of NPM was supposed to achieve an empowering work environment centred on achieving better client satisfaction, however, most authors argue that these practices have rarely been adopted (Ackroyd, 1996; Kitchener, et al, 2000; Butterfield, et al, 2005; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2003, 2005b). In its place, supervisors appear to have adopted a practitioner managers' perspective instead of a custodial mentoring role towards police officers (Butterfield, et al, 2005). Hence, the supervisor-subordinate relationship appears to have changed and it may have affected police officers' perception of empowerment by affecting the quality of access to information and meaningful feedback, (consequently affecting their ability to problem-solve in the workplace) and in turn, affecting decision-making and power distribution (Yukl & Fu, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Seibert, Silver & Randolph, 2004; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2006). These hypotheses are used to guide the data collection process.

The SET conceptual Framework

The quality of organisational relationships is a product of the embedded organisational climate. Social Exchange Theory (SET) argues that when there are effective workplace relationships, then both the individuals and the organisation benefits (Lin, 2001). Past research suggests that the quality of the social climate is a product of the quality of organisational management and human resource practices and that these factors in turn affect the quality of organisational outcomes (such as the level of client satisfaction) (Ostroff and Bowen, 2000; Ostroff, Kinicki and Clark, 2002; Simons and Roberson, 2003; Gollan, 2005). Based on this literature, if the implementation of NPM has improved the quality of organisational management and communication processes embedded within, then police officers should experience lower levels of role ambiguity and as a result, should deliver better services to the public. Similarly, Seibert, Silver & Randolph (2004, p333) argued that workplace empowerment is a reflection of managerial structures and practices, which in turn, affected employees' perceptions of empowerment. They argue that the structures and practices are evident in the quality of (a) information-sharing (which refers to the extent to which potentially sensitive information is shared), (b) boundaries (which refers to the extent to which goals processes and responsibilities are clearly communicated) and (c) team accountability (which refers to the extent to which teams are the decision-making locus of control) variables. However, Seibert et al (2004, p345) suggested that future research should examine the issue of management practice so as to explain the "remaining between-groups variance in psychological empowerment". Hence this study examines the quality of the social climate by examining the effectiveness of management in promoting participative decision-making and information-sharing. In particular, the SET framework has often been used to conceptualise the quality of the subordinate-superior management relationship using the Leader-Member Exchange Framework (LMX).

The Quality of Leader Member Exchange (LMX)

LMX theory argues that supervisors do not handle all employees the same. Effective LMX relationships are characterised by a high level of mutual support, trust and respect (Mueller & Lee, 2002; Gerstner & Day, 1997) and officers' appear to be liked by their supervisors, irrespective of their performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As a result, the in-group receives increased access to information, support and participation in decision-making, which in turn, makes it easier for them to undertake tasks and solve work-related problems (Haskins, 1996). Moreover, supervisors can count on these employees to provide them with extra support for their decisions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Mueller & Lee, 2002;

Wayne, et al., 1997). In contrast to the in-group, the characteristics of the out-group tend to have poor levels of information-sharing and involvement in decision-making.

Using the lens provided by SET framework, the theory suggests that the in-group would receive higher quality LMX. A high quality LMX is associated with increased information flow and empowering relationships as a result of supervisors allocating increased levels of organisational resources (time) towards each subordinate (Mueller & Lee 2002; Sparrowe & Linden, 1997). In addition, when high quality LMX relationships are present, supervisors provide employees with meaningful feedback, (consequently increasing their access to relevant information about the organisational changes) and delegate decision-making and power (Yukl & Fu, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Seibert, Silver & Randolph, 2004). Hence, using the SET framework, it seems likely that the quality of LMX could affect employees' level of ambiguity in relation to the client.

Hypothesis 1: The quality of LMX affects police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to the client.

The Quality of Information-Sharing

Researchers generally argue that the quality of information-sharing is crucial in ensuring employees have the knowledge and feedback processes necessary to become more client-focused (Gray & Laidlaw, 2002; Keller, 1994). Moreover, the quality of LMX significantly affects the quality of information-sharing embedded within a workplace (Wood, 1999; Mueller & Lee, 2002). The quality of the communication process is the prime determinant of the quality of information-sharing. Communication process refers to the process whereby individuals and/or groups transact in a variety of ways and within different contexts with the aim of carrying out organisational goals (Smidts, Pruyn & van Riel, 2001). Within the communication construct, there are a number of key variables that affect the quality of information-sharing. In particular, Jolke & Duhan (2001) argue that communication frequency, mode, formality and direction affect the quality of information sharing.

Firstly, **communication frequency** (which refers to the quantity of information exchange between individuals in organisations) affects employees' job effectiveness (Patrashkova-Volzdoska et al. 2003) and in turn, their level of job performance (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Johlke & Duhan, 2000). In particular, limited communication between employees and supervisors may lead to limited information-sharing, which could affect employees' ability to service their clients (Kacmar et al. 2003). Secondly, **communication mode** (which can be either formal (such as a manual) or informal (such as face-to-face interactions)) can also affect employees' level of ambiguity (Johlke & Duhan, 2000). For example, if

police officers are only given information about a new policy via a formal briefing and written documents, then it is likely that they will require informal communication processes such as conversations with their supervisor to clarify important gaps in their knowledge (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2005d). Thirdly, **communication content** (which can be either direct using control methods or indirect relying on participative empowering relationships) can affect employees' role clarity which in turn, affects their ability to make effective decisions on the job (Johlke & Duhan, 2000). Finally, **communication flow/direction** (which refers to the quality of feedback loops) between superiors and subordinates affects employees' access to relevant information (Dubinsky & Yammarino, 1992) and therefore is likely to affect their ability to problem solve in the workplace (Mueller & Lee, 2002) and in turn the level of ambiguity in relation to customers (Gray and Laidlaw 2002).

Hypothesis 2. The quality of information-sharing affects police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to the client.

Employees' perception of self-determination

Employees' perception of self-determination has been identified as one aspect of their perception of empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Seibert, Silver & Randolph, 2004; Gomez & Rosen, 2001). It is examined because of its impact on employees' motivation in particular and organisational outcomes in general (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Seibert, Silver & Randolph, 2004; Gomez & Rosen, 2001). Whilst there are numerous definitions and understandings of self-determination, most authors agree that there are probably four aspects that must be included in any construct including a "meaning" (which refers to a work goal moderated against an employees' own beliefs and values), "competence" (which refers to self-efficacy about an employees' capabilities to undertake tasks), "autonomy" (which refers to an employees' sense of self-efficacy about workplace choices) and "impact" (which refers to an employees' beliefs about their impact in the workplace) (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Keller & Dansereau, 1995; Gomez & Rosen, 2001). In relation to the third category – self-determination, De Jonge (1995) also argued that it was determined by employees' perception of perceived autonomy in the workplace, because it affected their ability to make decisions about how and when to undertake workplace tasks.

Because Spreitzer (1995) identified the third psychological empowerment variable – "self-determination" to be the variable most related to work effectiveness, it is also likely to be the variable most likely to affect police officers' ability to service the client. This is because work effectiveness is itself dependent on whether employees receive adequate information to solve problems related to

addressing the needs of the client, and this may affect their perception of self-determination to make effective decisions in the firm. As such, police officers' perception of self-determination may be an important variable to examine in relation to their ability to better serve the client.

Using the SET framework, it is argued that the quality of the LMX relationship (because it affects the level of reciprocity of trust, respect and therefore information-sharing and decision-making) is likely to affect police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to clients, by affecting their perception of self-determination and satisfaction with communication variables.

Hypothesis 3: The quality of LMX mediates police officers' perception of ambiguity in relation to the client by affecting their satisfaction with communication processes and their perception of self-determination.

METHODS

A cross-sectional, survey-based, self-report strategy was used to examine the impact of LMX and the quality of the information-sharing environment on police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to client (Ghuri & Gronhaug, 2002). This method was used even though there is criticism of this method (because of the problems of common method variance and same source bias etc), because it was the best way of identifying a trend in the behaviour of police officers' perception of self-determination from their perspective.

Measures

Parts of two validated instruments and one additional constructs were used to measure employees' perception of self-determination. They were:

- a) Leader-member exchange (LMX) questionnaire (Mueller & Lee, 2002) was used to measure the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship,
- b) The Johlke and Duhan (2000) validated instrument was used to measure employees' level of satisfaction with communication processes between supervisors and police officers. The instrument includes the following independent variables: "Communication frequency", "Informal communication mode", "Indirect communication content", "Bi-directional communication flows" and "Ambiguity regarding clients".
- c) Employees' perception of self-determination (which aims to measure employees' perception of their ability to make decisions about how and when to undertake workplace tasks) (Cronbach alpha reliability score .657).

Construct “c” was developed based on a review of relevant literature. An example of a question used to test “Employees’ perception of Self-determination” was “*I hardly ever have to do things on the job that are against my better judgment*”. Police officers indicated their perceptions about communication and organisational practices using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree).

Sample

The implementation of NPM has affected the practices of police officers in a number of countries such as Australia and the UK. Hence, the impact of NPM will be similar no matter which police service is examined. This study was focused in Queensland because it is typical of other police services (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002).

Police sample

Within each state, the management decision-making of police services is regionally based. Each large region comprises a number of districts. The district chosen comprised about five hundred and forty police officers ranked at constables, senior constables and sergeants. Each district conducts its own training on a regular basis. Random sampling of police officers attending training in their district office occurred for a period of a month. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed to police officers as they entered the training session. They were also given a brief explanation of the purpose of the survey before the training programs began. A sealed collection box was left for completed surveys. One hundred and eighty useable surveys were collected. The sample comprised eighty-six constables, seventy-one senior constables and twenty-three sergeants. The response rate was 45 percent of those attending training sessions and approximately one-third of police officers within the region.

RESULTS

Demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 details the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients amongst the variables for each variable. The findings indicate that police officers’ satisfaction with LMX and information-sharing, perception of “Self-Determination” and “level of Ambiguity in relation to Client” are mostly significantly related to each other, except the control variable – length of service.

Hypothesis 1: In order to address the first hypothesis (*Hypothesis 1: The quality of LMX affects police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to the client*) a regression analysis was undertaken. The hypothesis was accepted because the findings suggest that 21.1% of the variance of police officers' "level of Ambiguity in relation to clients" can be explained by the quality of LMX ($F=47.49$ $p<.000$, $R^2 = 21.1\%$) (See Table 3, column one for standardized beta coefficients).

Hypothesis 2: In order to address the second hypothesis (*Hypothesis 2: The quality of information-sharing affects police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to the client*), multiple regression analysis was undertaken. The hypothesis was accepted because the findings suggest that 15.6% of the variance of police officers' "level of Ambiguity in relation to client" can be explained by the quality of "Bidirectional Communication" ($F=8.098$ $p<.000$, $R^2 = 15.6\%$) (See Table 4).

Hypothesis 3. In order to address the third hypothesis (*Hypothesis 3: The quality of LMX mediates police officers' perception of ambiguity in relation to the client by affecting their level of satisfaction with communication processes and their perception of self-determination*) the Barron and Kenny (1986) approach was used. This involved regressing police officers' "level of Ambiguity in relation to Client" against (1) "LMX", (2) Communication Frequency, Mode, Content and Bi-direction and "Perception of Self-determination" (Analysis 1 Results - $F=9.088$ $p<.000$, $R^2 = 24\%$). This was followed by regressing "level of Ambiguity in relation to Client" against all variables except "LMX" (Analysis 2 results - $F=6.84$ $p<.000$, $R^2 = 16.4\%$) and finally regressing LMX against all variables (Analysis 3 results - $F=22.531$ $p<.000$, $R^2 = 39.3\%$). Using the same Barron and Kenny (1986) rules, partial mediation was evident because Analysis 3 (LMX against all variables) was significant, and the regression coefficient from Analysis 2 ("level of Ambiguity in relation to Client" against police officers' "Perception of Self-determination" (beta=-.096), "Communication Frequency" (beta=-.033), "Communication Mode" (beta=-.083), "Communication Content" (beta=-.047) and "Bidirectional Communication" (beta=-.317) was larger than that for Analysis 1 ("level of Ambiguity in relation to Client" against "LMX" and their "Perception of Self-determination" (beta=-.041), "Communication Frequency" (beta=-.01), "Communication Mode" (beta=-.059), "Communication Content" (beta=-.033) and "Bidirectional Communication" (beta=-.177). Because there was a reduction in the beta scores for all variables in Analysis 1 compared with Analysis 2, it seems likely that LMX does mediate police officers' 'level of ambiguity in relation to clients by affecting their perception of communication processes as well as their perception of self-determination. Hence, the third hypothesis is accepted (See Table 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper used a social exchange theory (SET) lens to examine how the nature and substance of the supervisor-subordinate relationship affected police officers' level of role ambiguity. Previous research argued that an effective social organisational climate was the product of employees' perceptions of the quality of organisational management and human resources practices embedded within a workplace (Ostroff and Bowen, 2000; Ostroff, Kinicki and Clark, 2002; Simons and Roberson, 2003). Such an environment would be characterised by high quality leader-member exchange (LMX) which would in turn promote reciprocity in respect and trust and as a result would facilitate higher level of information-sharing and participative decision-making. These types of work practices are ideal for promoting role clarity and assisting employees to meet the needs of the public efficiently and effectively.

The evidence from the quantitative data suggests that the quality of LMX and information-sharing processes in addition to police officers' perception of self-determination accounted for a quarter of employees' level of ambiguity in relation to the client. These factors affected their level of ambiguity in relation to the client by impacting on their satisfaction with communication processes and their perception of self-determination. Earlier research had identified the importance of effective information-sharing (Jolke and Duhan, 2000) and self-determination (Spreitzer 1995) in enhancing employees' level of effectiveness in the workplace. This study explained how the quality of LMX mediated police officers' level of ambiguity in relation to the client by impacting on their satisfaction with information-sharing and their perception of self-determination. Hence, the findings from this paper provide insight into why the quality of organisational relationships affects role ambiguity, and in turn, the ability to service the public efficiently and effectively.

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the study is limited to police officers from one state of Australia and therefore further studies are required to confirm these initial trends. Another limitation is the use of police officers from only one district within the state, which could be aberrations and as such, more studies are required to improve the validity of the findings. A third limitation is because of common methods bias caused by collecting much of the data from surveys which use self reporting techniques to gather information. On the other hand, Spector, (1994) argues that self reporting methodology is a legitimate way of gathering data about employees' perceptions, especially when the survey instrument reflects an extensive literature review and pattern-matching is used to support

interpretations of the data. However, this paper does use qualitative data in an attempt to address the inherent weakness of using self-report data.

The finding from this study add to the public sector organisational behaviour literature by providing a credible explanation as to why the quality of LMX and information-sharing processes significantly affect police officers' ability to service the public in an efficient and effective manner. The contribution of this paper is that the findings suggest that the construct "LMX" significantly affects police officers' satisfaction with information-giving and perception of self-determination and these factors in turn provide a logical link to explain how the social climate affects officers' level of role ambiguity when serving the public. These findings suggest that the quality of social exchange relationships does significantly impact on these police officers' role clarity by affecting the quality of information-sharing in the work tasks, which in turn, affects their perception of choice (self-determination) in making decisions in the workplace. As such, the findings contribute to our knowledge about the importance of management promoting good quality relationships within the police hierarchies because it in turn, affects their ability to service the public efficiently and effectively and that is a stated aim of NPM.

The implication for police management charged with implementing NPM (and therefore achieving a greater client-focus) is that an effective social climate is a reflection of the types of relationships promoted, embedded and rewarded within the workplace. When high quality LMX is embedded in the workplace, then information-sharing and participatory decision-making aids problem-solving so as to achieve a strong client focus and at the same time achieve an increased perception of empowerment.

On the other hand, police management is at the mercy of government agendas and their budgets. The implementation of NPM resulted because of the emerging ascendancy of the right wing American public choice economists that argued that public sector organisations suffered from high levels of waste and inefficiency (Orchard, 1998). As a result, public sector organisations have implemented NPM aimed at improving efficiency and becoming more outcomes focused. However, because the NPM agenda had another aim – to reduce per capita funding, there have been some negative impacts on public sector employees and those who manage them. The findings from this study suggest that for police officers to be more effective in servicing the public they need a positive social environment, without which information-sharing is compromised and role ambiguity rises. Therefore, if it is a real goal of government to become client-focused, new management agendas must be explored.

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TABLE 1
Demographics

Details	Police
Sample size	180
<Less than 12 months	18
2>x<5 years of service	63
6>x<45 years of service	71
>16 years of service	28
Gender – males: females	129:51

TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. LMX	2.57	.7	1							
2. Communication Frequency	2.99	1.2	.61**	1						
3. Communication Mode	2.6	.94	-.04	-.05	1					
4. Communication Content	3.3	.98	.64**	.52**	-.06	1				
5. Bidirectional Communication	2.4	1.0	.86**	.59**	.008	.64**	1			
6. Customer Ambiguity	4	1.2	.27**	.19**	-.16**	.26*	.23**	1		
7. Employees' Self-Perception	3.01	.99	.74**	.44**	.04	.77**	.71**	.29**	1	
8. Years of service	2.6	.89	-.12	-.07	-.09	.09	-.13	-.14	-.015	1

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$, Two-tailed tests.

TABLE 3:
Results from Main Effects Regression Analysis on Employees’
level of Ambiguity in relation to Clients

Variable ^a	Employees’ level of Ambiguity in relation to Clients ^b	
	Column 1	Column 2
LMX	.46**	
Employees’ perception of self-determination		-.204**
R ²	21.1%	4.1%

^a Scale of 1=Strongly Agree and 6=Strongly Disagree

^b Statistically significant beta scores

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, Two-tailed tests.

TABLE 4:
Results from Main Effects Regression Analysis of Communication variables on
Employees’ level of Ambiguity in relation to Clients

Variable ^a	Employees’ Ambiguity in relation to Clients ^b
Communication Frequency	.009
Communication Mode	-.093
Communication Direct	-.057
Communication Bi-direction	-.341
R ²	15.6%

TABLE 5

Results from Main Effects Regression Analysis on “Employees’ Ambiguity in relation to Client”

Variable ^a	Employees’ Ambiguity in relation to Client ^b			LMX
	Analysis 1	Analysis 2	Analysis 3	
LMX	.352**			
Employees’ Perception of self-determination	-.041	-.096		.155**
Communication Frequency	.011	-.03		.038
Mode of Communication	-.059	-.083		.068
Communication Content	-.033	-.047		.229**
Bi-directional Communication	-.177**	-.317**		.398**
R ²	24%	16.4%		39.3%

^a Scale of 1=Strongly Agree and 6=Strongly Disagree

^b Statistically significant beta scores

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ Two-tailed tests.