Deviance as an Adaptive Strategy: A Grounded Theory of Ethical Climate and Employee Survival in a Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to exemplify ethical conduct and accountability; yet workplace deviance persists even in settings with formal ethical policies. This study examines how ethical climate shapes workplace deviance in a higher education institution, focusing on the personal and organizational motivations that underpin deviant behavior. Guided by Ethical Climate Theory and Organizational Deviance Theory, the study adopts a qualitative grounded theory design following Corbin and Strauss' approach. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with fifteen academic and non-academic employees from a non-sectarian HEI in Mindanao, Philippines, and analyzed using constant comparative methods. Findings demonstrate that workplace deviance is rarely driven by malicious intent. Rather, deviant behaviors emerge as adaptive, survival-oriented responses to systemic conditions, including job insecurity, fear-based compliance, burnout, weak leadership enforcement, policy–practice gaps, unmet professional needs, and economic strain. Behaviors such as minimal compliance, procedural shortcuts, silence, and withdrawal function as coping strategies that enable employees to manage institutional pressures and sustain employment. Over time, these adaptive responses become normalized through organizational tolerance and inconsistency. The study advances a grounded theory of deviance as an adaptive strategy, reframing workplace deviance as a rational response to ethical and structural vulnerabilities rather than individual moral failure. The findings offer critical implications for ethical governance, leadership accountability, and human resource interventions in higher education.

Keywords: ethical climate; workplace deviance; grounded theory; higher education institutions; employee motivation; organizational ethics

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, professionalism, and accountability, given their role in shaping future leaders and sustaining public trust. Beyond their instructional mandate, HEIs function as complex organizations where employees' daily decisions are shaped by institutional norms, leadership practices, and shared ethical expectations. Central to this organizational context is the ethical climate—employees' collective perceptions of what constitutes appropriate ethical behavior and how ethical issues are addressed within the institution (Victor & Cullen, 1988). A strong ethical climate reinforces adherence to institutional values and professional conduct, while a weak or inconsistent ethical climate may inadvertently normalize misconduct.

Despite the normative emphasis on ethics in academic institutions, workplace deviance persists across higher education systems worldwide. Workplace deviance refers to voluntary behaviors that violate organizational norms and threaten the well-being of the institution or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). In HEIs, such behaviors may manifest as time dishonesty, work avoidance, favoritism, misuse of resources, or interpersonal conflict—acts that, while sometimes subtle, cumulatively undermine productivity, trust, and organizational

legitimacy. Understanding why employees engage in deviant behavior therefore requires examining not only individual dispositions but also the ethical and structural conditions in which employees operate.

Research Gap/ Problem Statement

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, professionalism, and accountability, given their role in shaping future leaders and sustaining public trust. Beyond their instructional mandate, HEIs function as complex organizations where employees' daily decisions are shaped by institutional norms, leadership practices, and shared ethical expectations. Central to this organizational context is the ethical climate employees' collective perceptions of what constitutes appropriate ethical behavior and how ethical issues are addressed within the institution (Victor & Cullen, 1988). A strong ethical climate reinforces adherence to institutional values and professional conduct, while a weak or inconsistent ethical climate may inadvertently normalize misconduct.

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Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how ethical climate influences workplace deviance in a higher education institution, with particular emphasis on the underlying motivations and organizational conditions that give rise to deviant behavior. Guided by Ethical Climate Theory (Victor & Cullen, 1988) and Organizational Deviance Theory (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), the study adopts a qualitative grounded theory approach to capture employees' interpretations, experiences, and rationalizations of deviance.

Specifically, the study aims to:

Identify the underlying personal and organizational motivations that drive employees to engage in workplace deviance.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to theory and practice in several ways. For HEIs and administrators, it provides empirically grounded insights into how ethical climate and organizational practices influence employee conduct, informing policy development and ethical governance. For human resource management practitioners, the findings highlight how ethical lapses, unmanaged strain, and perceived injustice function as precursors to deviance, offering guidance for preventive and restorative HR interventions. For employees, the study amplifies their perspectives, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how institutional conditions affect behavior and well-being.

Academically, the study extends ethical climate and workplace deviance literature by offering a context-specific, qualitative explanation of deviance within Philippine higher education—an area that remains underrepresented in international journals. The findings may also inform policymakers and labor organizations by identifying structural and ethical vulnerabilities that require institutional reform.

Scope and Limitations

This study is confined to a non-sectarian higher education institution in Mindanao Philippines and focuses exclusively on employee behavior. Using qualitative methods semi-structured interview and focus group

discussions the study prioritizes depth over generalizability. While the findings are context-specific, they offer analytical insights that may be transferable to similar institutional settings.

Research Question

Guided by the foregoing discussion, this study seeks to answer the following central research question:

What underlying personal and organizational motivations drive employees in higher education institutions to engage in workplace deviant behaviors?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory as articulated by Corbin and Strauss (2015). Grounded theory is appropriate for examining complex organizational processes where existing theories provide limited explanatory power, allowing theory to emerge inductively from participants lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in a non-sectarian higher education institution located in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. The institution employs academic, administrative, and support personnel and maintains formal ethical policies and human resource management procedures, providing a suitable context for examining ethical climate and workplace deviance.

Participants and Sampling

Participants included academic and non-academic employees such as deans, directors, coordinators, faculty members, administrative staff, and support personnel. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with at least three (3) years of institutional experience and direct exposure to ethical and organizational practices (Palinkas et al., 2015). Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, consistent with grounded theory standards (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Interview guides were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of ethical climate, experiences of workplace deviance, and organizational responses to ethical concerns. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, while focus group discussions ranged from 60–90 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Institutional documents, including codes of conduct and HR policies, were reviewed to contextualize participant accounts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the constant comparative method central to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open coding was used to identify initial concepts and categories, axial coding examined relationships among categories, and selective coding integrated these categories into a core explanatory framework describing how ethical climate shapes workplace deviance (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics board prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were

used in all transcripts and reports, and data were securely stored in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant Profile

A total of fifteen (15) participants contributed to the study, consisting of eleven (11) key informants from in-depth interviews and four (4) participants from focus group discussions. Participants held varied roles, including vice presidents, deans, directors, coordinators, faculty members, and administrative staff, ensuring representation across leadership and operational levels. This diversity allowed for a comprehensive examination of ethical climate across hierarchical positions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, following the order of the research questions and grounded theory procedures. Consistent with qualitative reporting standards, the results are presented descriptively, grounded in participant narratives, and organized into emergent categories and subcategories.

Category 1: Self-Preservation and Survival Instinct

This category captures the nuanced, often hidden behaviors employees adopt not out of malicious intent, but to protect their employment, avoid disciplinary action, or shield themselves from institutional dysfunction. Deviant behaviors are framed by participants as reactive survival strategies shaped by fear-based cultures, systemic inefficiencies, and unresolved organizational tensions.

1.1 Avoiding Termination or Reprimand by Compromising Rules

Participants described rule violations as defensive responses to perceived threats. Alan emphasized employment preservation, stating that harming the organization equates to personal job loss. Carl described a compliance culture driven by fear of management, where discipline is externally imposed rather than ethically internalized. Peter cited falsification of maintenance reports to avoid reprimand, while Sun likened institutional fear to parental discipline, reinforcing compliance through fear rather than ethical reflection.

1.2 Engaging in Minor Deviance to Protect Job Security

Low-level deviance emerged through silent disengagement, minimal compliance, and avoidance of confrontation. Jov described late submissions and reduced engagement as products of overload rather than unethical intent. FGD participants highlighted silence driven by fear of gossip and retaliation. Jade described discretion over transparency, while system loopholes were identified as normalizing procedural bypasses.

1.3 Acting to Preserve Employment

Participants reported bending policies to protect departmental performance, accreditation outcomes, or institutional image. Drey discussed helping students pass to avoid negative performance indicators. Others described fatigue-driven minimalism, humanitarian policy bending, and acceptance of excessive workloads to maintain legitimacy. Economic pressure and façade maintenance were also cited as survival-driven behaviors.

Category 2: Dissatisfaction and Demotivation

This category reflects psychological and emotional withdrawal arising from lack of recognition, unfair treatment, and perceived favoritism.

2.1 Emotional Disengagement Due to Lack of Recognition

Participants consistently reported emotional withdrawal when sustained effort was met with indifference. Jov and Blue described exhaustion from unacknowledged labor, while FGD participants emphasized conditional appreciation tied to accreditation cycles. Formerly engaged employees gradually disengaged when efforts were perceived as futile.

2.2 Disillusionment from Unequal Treatment and Favoritism

Perceived injustice in evaluation, promotion, and discipline emerged as a key source of demotivation. Participants described favoritism, scapegoating, and inequitable accountability, resulting in resigned compliance and withdrawal from initiative.

Category 3: Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

This category captures the physical, emotional, and mental depletion caused by prolonged overwork, multitasking, and institutional dysfunction.

3.1 Withdrawal from Duties Due to Overwork

Role overload was normalized as institutional culture. Participants described performative compliance, box-ticking, and gradual withdrawal from non-essential duties as self-protective responses.

3.2 Reduced Initiative from Prolonged Multitasking

Excessive administrative demands fragmented attention and reduced innovation. Participants reported reactive task completion and diminished proactive engagement.

3.3 Mental Fatigue, Withdrawal, and Absenteeism

Psychological absenteeism emerged through silence, selective participation, frequent leave-taking, and emotional disconnection, framed as escape mechanisms rather than misconduct.

Category 4: Cultural Misalignment

Cultural misalignment reflects the disconnect between employees' internalized values and the University's mission, norms, and expectations.

4.1 Failure to Adapt to University Values

Participants described employees who complied outwardly but failed to internalize institutional values, resulting in minimal participation and emotional detachment.

4.2 Resistance to Institutional Culture

Passive resistance manifested through skepticism toward reforms, adherence to outdated practices, and contagion of doubt within departments.

4.3 Pride from Former Affiliations

Lingering loyalty to previous institutions created symbolic and emotional barriers to cultural integration, leading to selective compliance and isolation.

Category 5: Weak Leadership and Policy Enforcement

This category reflects leadership practices that tolerate, enable, or normalize deviant behavior.

Subcategories included avoidance of confrontation, lack of clear enforcement mechanisms, unequal policy application, and poor role modeling. Participants described behavioral contagion, procedural ambiguity, and erosion of moral authority resulting from leadership inconsistency.

Category 6: Policy–Practice Gap

Participants consistently identified discrepancies between written policies and lived practices. Subcategories included outdated policies, informal workarounds, lack of policy awareness, inadequate onboarding, inconsistent implementation, absence of grievance training, HR bypassing, and perceived impunity. These gaps fostered normalized procedural deviance grounded in necessity rather than intent.

Category 7: Fear-Based Compliance

Fear-based compliance emerged as externally regulated behavior driven by surveillance, punishment, retaliation, and job insecurity. Participants described situational ethics, monitoring-dependent discipline, silence, and obedience rooted in fear rather than value alignment.

Category 8: Unmet Personal and Professional Needs

This category reflects neglected emotional, psychological, and structural needs, including absence of mental health support, weak grievance mechanisms, fear of retaliation, lack of union representation, and reliance on gossip as emotional outlet.

Category 9: Low Salary and Compensation-Driven Motivation

Economic insecurity was identified as a central driver of deviant coping behaviors. Participants framed theft, sideline work, disengagement, and withdrawal as survival responses to inadequate compensation and financial strain.

Category 10: Deviance as a Norm

This category captures the normalization and routinization of deviance through systemic tolerance, cultural acceptance, and erosion of ethical standards. Participants described cascading effects, ethical fatigue, and institutional silence that transformed deviance into everyday practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that workplace deviance in higher education institutions is not primarily driven by immoral intent but emerges as an adaptive, survival-oriented response to systemic dysfunction. Across all categories, deviant behaviors are shaped by contextual vulnerabilities, including job insecurity, administrative retaliation, emotional exhaustion, policy ambiguity, weak leadership, and unmet personal and professional needs.

The category of Self-Preservation and Survival Instinct positions deviance as a coping mechanism activated under threat, aligning with grounded theory action/interaction strategies. Dissatisfaction, burnout, and emotional exhaustion further explain how prolonged strain erodes engagement and ethical consistency, leading to strategic withdrawal rather than open defiance.

Cultural misalignment and weak leadership illuminate the symbolic and relational dimensions of deviance, where inconsistent modeling, favoritism, and resistance to institutional values undermine moral internalization. The Policy–Practice Gap demonstrates how structural ambiguity legitimizes functional deviance, as employees rely on informal systems when formal ones lose credibility.

Fear-Based Compliance reveals the fragility of surface-level discipline, where ethics collapse in the absence of surveillance. Unmet personal and professional needs, particularly the absence of mental health support and grievance mechanisms, show how silence, gossip, and disengagement become normalized emotional outlets.

Economic insecurity further compounds these dynamics, reframing deviance as livelihood preservation rather than ethical failure.

Collectively, these categories converge into the emerging grounded theory of Deviance as Adaptive Strategy in Higher Education Institutions. Deviance is revealed as processual, contextual, and relational produced through interaction between individuals and dysfunctional systems. Rather than pathologizing employees, the findings underscore the role of institutional structures, leadership practices, and cultural conditions in shaping deviant adaptation.

The normalization of deviance represents the culmination of these processes, where repeated tolerance, silence, and inconsistency erode ethical boundaries and institutional trust. Addressing workplace deviance therefore requires systemic repair strengthening leadership accountability, aligning policies with practice, ensuring procedural justice, supporting employee well-being, and restoring ethical meaning rather than solely punitive responses.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that workplace deviance in a non-sectarian Higher Education Institution (HEI) is primarily motivated by adaptive responses to structural, emotional, and economic constraints rather than by deliberate ethical disregard. Employees' behaviors are shaped by self-preservation motives arising from job insecurity, fear of retaliation, emotional exhaustion, policy ambiguity, weak leadership enforcement, and unmet personal and professional needs. Ethical conduct is therefore contingent not only on individual moral orientations but also on employees' assessments of risk, fairness, and institutional support.

The findings indicate that dissatisfaction, burnout, cultural misalignment, and compensation pressures operate as key motivational drivers that encourage behaviors such as minimal compliance, procedural shortcuts, silence, and withdrawal. These actions function as coping strategies that allow employees to manage excessive demands, navigate inconsistent systems, and maintain employment stability. Fear-based compliance further reinforces this pattern by producing externally regulated behavior that lacks ethical internalization and remains dependent on surveillance and sanctions.

Over time, motivation-driven adaptations become normalized, particularly in contexts where leadership responses are inconsistent, grievance mechanisms are ineffective, and accountability structures lack credibility. What initially emerges as individual coping gradually evolves into collective practice, embedding deviant behaviors into routine organizational processes. In this sense, deviance reflects rational action under constraint rather than moral deficiency.

From a grounded theory perspective, this study conceptualizes deviance as an interactional process shaped by contextual conditions and organizational meanings. Employees continuously negotiate ethical expectations against survival needs and emotional capacity. When institutional systems fail to provide consistency, protection, and support, deviance emerges as a functional response to organizational realities. Addressing workplace deviance in higher education therefore requires reducing the motivational conditions that sustain adaptive misconduct through consistent leadership, equitable policy enforcement, adequate compensation, and supportive institutional structures.

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