

Beyond shared perceptions: climate as a configural unit property

Vicente González-Romá

University of Valencia, Spain

Abstract

At the unit level of analysis, climate is usually conceptualized as unit perceptions *shared* by unit members. Therefore, climate is considered a *shared unit property* (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Within organizations, several factors foster the sharedness of unit climate perceptions (e.g., socialization processes, leader-member interaction, and social interaction among unit members). However, we have observed that some units do not show this pattern of convergence in climate perceptions. In climate research carried out at the unit level following a *composition model of emergence* (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), generally these units have either been excluded from further analysis because they did not show a (shared) climate, or they have been analyzed as if they had a sufficient level of sharedness to allow researchers to aggregate unit members' climate scores to represent units' climates. Both approaches have clear limitations.

In order to overcome these limitations and conceptualize unit climate in a more realistic way, we propose considering unit climate as a *configural unit property* (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Therefore, we conceptualize unit climate as the *pattern* of unit perceptions held by unit members. According to this conceptualization, climate may also emerge at the unit level following a *compilation model of emergence* (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

In a certain sense, recent empirical research has begun to pay attention to the pattern of climate perceptions within work units. Some studies have investigated the role of climate strength (i.e., the degree of within-unit agreement of employees' climate perceptions) in the unit climate-unit outcomes relationship (Colquitt, Noe & Jackson, 2002; González-Romá, Peiró & Tordera, 2002; Schneider, Salvaggio & Subirats, 2002). These studies have shown that climate strength moderates the aforementioned relationship. But according to dispersion theory (Brown & Kozlowski, 1999), strength is one of the two dimensions of within-unit dispersion; the other one is uniformity. Uniformity refers to the number of groupings observed in the pattern of the phenomenon under study at the unit level. Uniformity is indicated by the presence of a single grouping. Non-uniformity is indicated by the presence of multiple groupings. To our knowledge, the role of uniformity in unit climate perceptions has not yet been investigated.

In the present study, we test a number of hypotheses about the relationship between uniformity in unit climate perceptions, on the one hand, and unit processes (task conflict, emotional conflict, and communication) and unit mood (optimism and tension), on the other. We used a sample composed of 193 bank branches. The results obtained by means of hierarchical multiple regression show that uniformity in climate perceptions and the interaction between uniformity and climate strength are related to unit processes and unit mood. The implications of these results for theory development, future research, and practice are discussed.

References

- Brown, K. G., & Kozlowski, S. W. J. (1999). *Dispersion Theory: moving beyond a dichotomous conceptualization of emergent organizational phenomena*. Paper presented at the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Atlanta, GA.
- Colquitt, J. A., Noe, R. A., & Jackson, C. L. (2002). Justice in teams: antecedents and consequences of procedural justice climate in teams. *Personnel Psychology, 55*, 83-109.
- González-Romá, V., Peiró, J.M., & Tordera, N. (2002). An examination of the antecedents and moderator influences of climate strength. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 465-473.
- Kozlowski, S. W. J., & Klein, K. J. (2000). A multilevel approach to theory and research in organizations. Contextual, temporal, and emergent processes. In K. J. Klein & S. W. J. Kozlowski (eds.), *Multilevel theory, research, and methods in organizations*, (pp. 3-90). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schneider, B., Salvaggio, A.M. & Subirats, M. (2002). Climate strength: a new direction for climate research. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 220-229.